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## A West that works

# Forage for conservation



Jerry Elson, with the Santa Fe National Forest is shown here in 1997 with Bill deBuys, right, author and conservationist who created the Rowe Mesa Grassbank

—Courtney White photo

A New Mexico grassbank offers ranchers free graze while prescribed burns and thinning actions are done on their land

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

*[Editor's note: This column on The Rowe Mesa Grassbank is Part One of a two-part series. In November 2004, The Conservation Fund transferred the Rowe Mesa Grassbank to The Quivira Coalition]*

In 1997, author and conservation leader Bill deBuys had an idea - and a problem.

The idea was a novel one: to get natural fire back on the land using the tool of a grassbank -- to be located on a stretch of national forest land on top of Rowe Mesa, forty miles east of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

His inspiration came from the Gray Ranch, part of the Malpai Borderlands Group in southwestern New Mexico, which offered its grass to ranchers in exchange for conservation easements on their home property.

DeBuys' idea was to exchange the grass of an unstocked federal grazing allotment for restoration action -- thinning and prescribed burning -- on the home allotment. Cattle would come to the grassbank for a period of time, thus reducing conflicts between livestock and restoration work.



Courtney

White writes a monthly column for Headwaters News that focuses on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the approach to an ecologically healthy region.

Much of Quivira's emphasis is on ranching, but its principles of education, cooperation and innovation apply to many of the region's biggest issues.

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It was a quid pro quo: an exchange of forage for conservation. Everyone won, deBuys thought. Ranchers could have their grass and eat it too, the Forest Service had a bottleneck removed for restoration activities, and conservationists received, well, conservation.

The problem was his idea almost never became a reality. Opponents lined up like at a shooting gallery. Forest Guardians, an environmental group dedicated to ending public lands ranching, objected officially.

The New Mexico Cattlegrowers' Association protested too. Even the lieutenant governor of New Mexico at the time opposed the concept and worked aggressively, according to deBuys, to derail the project. Many others were lukewarm to the idea, including the region's mainstream environmental organizations.

The only partners that stood steadfastly with deBuys were the U.S. Forest Service, the Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association, and the Cooperative Extension Service.

It was touch-and-go until both the conservative Albuquerque Journal and the liberal Santa Fe New Mexican editorialized in favor of the grassbank. The opposition faded away, but the challenges were just beginning.

Why was there so much opposition to an idea that seemed to benefit all sides? Part of the answer can be found in the standard "taking sides" over livestock grazing on public land -- what some have called the "conflict industry." Part of it was resistance to the idea of a national environmental group -- The Conservation Fund in this case -- getting into the ranching business.

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But a lot of the opposition was due to the novelty of the grassbank idea. It was new, it was different, it was collaborative, it was proactive, and it solved problems.

Fortunately, deBuys, with strong support from The Conservation Fund and the other grassbank partners, prevailed over the skeptics. Eight years later, the grassbank has not only proved itself to be a useful tool, but it has, in turn, been an inspiration for other organizations and other grassbanks around the West.

### **What Is a grassbank?**

A grassbank is defined as a physical place, as well as a voluntary collaborative process, where forage is exchanged for one or more conservation benefits on neighboring or associated lands.

How that exchange takes place and what specific conservation benefits accrue is determined by the grassbank participants. On the Rowe Mesa Grassbank, the exchange is grass for prescribed fire and thinning. Other grassbanks leverage grass into protecting wildlife habitat, restoring watersheds, and maintaining "weed-free" zones. Whatever the benefit, both sides of the exchange must be strong for a grassbank to work properly.

Grassbanks are not fancy "swing" allotments, however -- where cattle are traditionally moved in order to provide relief from overgrazing, drought or

other management complications. Instead, they provide proactive, and long-lasting, conservation benefit to land and people.

But grassbanks are more than just grass and trees. On Rowe Mesa, for example, Bill deBuys set three overarching goals for the Grassbank, in his words:

- (1) To improve the ecological health of public grazing lands for the benefit of all creatures dependent on them -- from juncos to jackrabbits and curlews to cowboys;
- (2) To strengthen the economic and environmental foundation of northern New Mexico's ranching tradition, which is arguably the oldest in the nation; and
- (3) To show that ranchers, conservationists, and agency personnel can work together for the good of the land and the people who depend on it.

Grassbanks are a powerful tool because they can integrate environmental and economic goals, operate in harmony with local social and cultural traditions, encourage shared ownership, and meet environmental justice concerns. Best of all, perhaps, is a grassbank's flexibility.

"Our goal is to be consistently and continually adaptive," wrote deBuys. "If the land is changing, so must we. Our fundamental challenge is shared equally by both the conservation and ranching communities: how to respond to the constant dynamism of the lands upon which we all depend."

### **How It Began**

With his partners and goals in place, deBuys and his colleagues at the Conservation Fund raised the funds necessary to purchase 240 acres of deeded land on top of Rowe Mesa. The property came with a federal grazing permit for 36,000 acres of national forest land -- and no cattle.

Rather than stock the ranch with Conservation Fund cattle (they didn't own any), the Conservation Fund and its partners, including the Forest Service, crafted an agreement under which the grass of the Valle Grande allotment would be offered as a "bank" to national forest permittees in northern New Mexico in exchange for restoration work on the home ground -- principally forest thinning and prescribed fire.

In northern New Mexico, as in most western forests, historic fire suppression and overgrazing by livestock has led to dense, unhealthy forest conditions, often resulting in catastrophic wildfires.

One researcher has determined that due to rapid tree growth we are losing upland grass cover at a rate of over percent per year to tree encroachment. This declining productivity has led to conflicts between cattle, wildlife, recreational users, and restoration activities.

DeBuys thought a grassbank would relieve some of this stress by encouraging those who wish to improve the health of large landscapes to work constructively with the people who occupy and use those landscapes.

"In the case of northern New Mexico, we believe that the best hope for ecologically sound, fire-wise stewardship of public land lies within the ranching community," deBuys wrote. "If ranchers, working with environmentalists, become advocates for prescribed burns, wildfires, and related treatments, political leaders and public agencies will respond accordingly -- to the lasting benefit of the land."

Grassbanks are also a living exercise in the "radical center" -- where people of diverse backgrounds can meet and work effectively together.

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**"The familiar conflicts** of range management will recede to the background and the radical center will have prevailed when individuals and organizations from across the political spectrum jointly commit themselves to accepting and encouraging the continuous renewal of the land."

– Bill deBuys,  
Author and conservationist

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"For ranchers," deBuys wrote, "this means accepting a higher standard of environmental performance; for environmentalists, it means approaching conservation by working constructively with the people who occupy and use the land; for bureaucrats, it means focusing on producing tangible results, not merely defending procedure, and for all it means the sharing of authority and responsibility."

### How It Works

After surviving the usual rocky start, Bill and his partners found a formula that works.

From their experience, for the Rowe Mesa Grassbank to run smoothly, all five "cylinders" of its engine need to function properly: the Steering Committee; strong participation from permittees; ranch operations; finances; and the exchange.

**Steering Committee.** The Rowe Mesa Grassbank has four partners on its steering committee: the U.S. Forest Service, the Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association, the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, and The Quivira Coalition (which has replaced the Conservation Fund).

Although various roles for each partner are spelled out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the principal job of the committee is to review applications to the Grassbank from grazing associations around the region and to make recommendations to the supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest.

**Participation.** Without clients -- the ranchers -- there would be no Grassbank. Fortunately, support has been very strong. To apply, groups of grazing permittees work with their local USFS Ranger District.

To be ranked high, an application should:

- have a detailed restoration plan in place;
- demonstrate significant ecological need;
- have the NEPA requirements completed, and;
- have a viable monitoring plan. If accepted, a grazing group's cattle (the Grassbank tries to take the whole bunch) will likely graze on the Grassbank for one or more seasons.

**Running the Ranch.** When the cattle come to the Grassbank they are watched over by a full-time ranch manager. In addition to the usual duties of fixing fence and repairing the 30-miles of pipeline (there's only one well!), he must herd the animals through multiple pastures, work with the permittees when they visit, implement an animal health program, coordinate activities with the Forest Service, help monitor, and take many, many notes.

**Finances.** Since the Grassbank does not own any cattle, it loses THE

source of financial capital that keeps other ranches in business. To boot, the grazing fees paid by the grazing associations to the Forest Service stay in the home districts.

All of this makes the finances of running a Grassbank a first-class challenge. The answer, so far, has been to seek the assistance of various foundations and government agencies. But grants are not forever. Which means for the model to be sustainable over the long run, grassbank's must create a new financial model too.

**The Exchange.** The heart of the Grassbank idea is the quid pro quo, or exchange, of forage for tangible conservation benefit. In other grassbanks around the West, the conservation benefit has included conservation easements, prairie dog habitat restoration, forest thinning, riparian recovery and weed control. In the case of the Rowe Mesa Grassbank, the principle objective is the restoration of fire to the landscape.

Grassbanks are an experiment -- but one that that holds huge potential for everyone. Bill deBuys sums it up this way:

"The familiar conflicts of range management will recede to the background and the radical center will have prevailed when individuals and organizations from across the political spectrum jointly commit themselves to accepting and encouraging the continuous renewal of the land."

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