

Land, Water and People

Rangeland's Road to Recovery

By Lisa Van Amburg

The last grazing article discussed the first 80 years of grazing in the San Luis Valley, but as the 20th century began, the culture of grazing in the valley was about to change. As free-grazing began to alter the landscape, federal intervention loomed. The establishment of Forest Reserves was controversial among livestock owners in the San Luis Valley. DuBois in 1903 reported that sheepmen opposed the formation of the reserves because they felt that, possibly, the summer range would become closed to sheep grazing altogether, however cattlemen wanted the reserves to protect their ranges from overuse by sheep.

The Cochetopa Forest Reserve was established in 1905, and the first grazing permits were issued in 1906. The Cochetopa National Forest was established in 1907. On July 1, 1908, the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF) was officially created by Theodore Roosevelt. It was formed by combining the existing San Juan National Forest and the existing Cochetopa National Forest. This original area was within the Rio Grande drainage, excluding the Saguache and Carnero Creek drainages. In 1944 the west side of the Sangre de Cristo range and the Saguache Creek area were added, while the Mount Blanca area became an addition in 1954. Total land area within the RGNF is now nearly 1.9 Million acres.

The free-grazing era had left its mark on the landscape. Tiro Gallegos, Forest Ranger for the Cochetopa National Forest (from the San Luis Valley) wrote, *"It was like a boom in a mining camp. All rushed in to get rich quick. The range was soon overstocked, and a mutual strife and civil warring began among the users of the free-grazing land. There was no thought given to the perpetuation of the forage. Some places, the stock were grazed the year around, and sheep were lambled on the open range."* Tiro Gallegos, further reported, *"It would be difficult to visualize what the country would be today had Uncle Sam not stepped in when he did to fight the battle against injustice and abuse of the range."*

Additionally, the proposed Cochetopa Forest Reserve report compiled by J.H. Hutton in 1904 states, *"In some instances the streambed of the La Garita has been diverted, small bridges washed out, and portions of cultivated land carried away. The close cropping and tramping of the native sod has been the direct cause of this since the precipitation has had nothing to prevent its running off at once."*

However, by the mid-1930s progress had been made to break old habits. Over time, a better understanding and appreciation of the range began to emerge. Livestock owners made progress in cattle management with the construction of drift fences and pastures, development of watering sites, closer capacity estimates and range management plans. The study of range ecology began to emerge to better understand how to manage the impacts of livestock use in the west. However, the pressure on the land was not quite over yet. The war had created a demand for red meat, and the public lands were integral for providing the forage needed to grow more meat to provide for the American people.

It was not until the 1950's that the pressure on public lands began to ebb. Forage production was analyzed to better estimate livestock numbers in an attempt to better manage the land for the long-term. The public lands were forever altered by this grazing history and it cannot be undone. It is our history and it tells a story that we can learn from to those who get close enough to listen.

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