

RURAL CRISIS IN ARIZONA RANCH COUNTRY

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INTRODUCTION

The current drought has caused a tremendous upheaval in the range livestock industry and created an explosive situation relating to family well being. The drought has resulted in extreme economic pressure on these families. The conditions currently developing in Arizona mirror the situations encountered in the mid west and high plains during the 1980's farmland devaluation.

Cattle have been removed almost completely from the public land grazing permits. The Tonto National Forest is an example. On Sept 3, 2002 eighty-six grazing permits with an allotment of 25,733 head of cattle for Tonto Forest lands, only had 2012 head remaining representing 7.6% of the permitted capacity. In 2000, calves and yearling cattle sales in Arizona generated over \$600,000,000. It is estimated that only 1/3 or less cattle remain on the ranges; this reflects loss of \$400,000,000 in revenue. This is a \$400 million loss of creation of new wealth from the renewable resources in the state of Arizona. When one considers that one dollar of new wealth generates seven dollars, the total loss to Arizona is \$2.8 billion.

ISSUES

A number of issues need to be addressed in the near term. By identifying and addressing these issues, long range impacts can be minimized and alternative plans can be developed and implemented.

Range health is a primary issue; the impact of grazing, drought, erosion, and fire are of utmost concern by the land managers. This issue is the same, whether on public or private land. The health of the range is key to sustainable production. Riparian areas are always of concern, but during drought additional pressure is placed in these areas. Riparian usage by domestic and wild animals can cause severe resource degradation if allowed to occur unchecked. The riparian areas are utilized as key areas to assess the health of the overall range. However in Arizona,

many uplands exist that may be used without impacting to riparian areas. The massive removal of domestic livestock from public lands is an effort to protect rangeland resources.

In addition to the current situation, recovery has been estimated to be as long as two years for most of these lands. However the removal of livestock has minimized the range damage. The current drought has been compared to the drought of the late 1890's. Range recovery was slow following the 1890's drought. One of the primary reasons for this was the massive resource degradation that occurred with continual grazing of uncontrolled ranges. This occurred prior to the establishment the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. The situation today is much different, agency management utilizing range management principles including forage monitoring has prevented the range degradation that occurred in the 1890's. As a result recovery time will be considerably less. Some of the areas on the Tonto Forest already have forage production exceeding 1200 lbs per acre, the result of the 2002 monsoon.

Livestock enterprises are being severely impacted by the drought. A number of key items must be addressed during this period. Most ranchers do not have sufficient private lands to maintain their herds, necessitating herd liquidation. Rental of additional pasture is not a viable alternative because of the large area of the west impacted by the drought. Almost all the western states are impacted by this drought resulting in a tremendous demand for a limited amount of rental pasture. Some Arizona producers have had to ship their herds as far as Missouri to find feed.

Herd liquidation results in the loss of cattle genetically adapted to specific Arizona environmental conditions. Removal of all cattle acclimated to the allotments greatly impacts the replacement of the herds in the future. Cattle removed knew the range, trails, water supplies, and movement patterns. New cattle are going to take some time to become familiar with the range. This will result in less efficient utilization of the forage resources.

Family economic crisis is being generated by the liquidation of complete herds of cattle. The cattle are being sold for lower prices than replacements can be purchased in the future. The large numbers of cattle being sold from the ranges throughout the west has resulted in sharply lower prices. In some cases, replacements may cost over twice the selling price of the liquidated

herd. The family income, in many cases, has been interrupted. Many of these families rely solely on the sale of livestock for income. This loss of income creates many social issues that must be addressed.

Health and welfare issues. Family stress increases almost geometrically under these conditions. Money is not available for everyday necessities. The livestock producer feels like s/he is a professional failure and a failure to the family. Normally small issues become the center of major disagreements. The health and welfare of the family and community are adversely impacted. Child abuse, spouse abuse, elderly abuse increases. Alcohol and substance abuse often increases as well as the suicide rate. These problems know no age boundary. Families may range in age from late teens and early twenties to people in their 70's and 80's. Many of the elderly have no other sources of income. The general health of the producers declines because of limited financial resources and in many cases, no health insurance.

Impact on communities. The livestock economy impacts all the main street business, not only in the local community but in the major cities. Reduced income means reduced or postponed purchases of appliances, repairs, clothing, vehicles, and almost every commodity that impacts daily lives. The need for various social services is increased during these times.

Impact on the State of Arizona The rural economy is still a major source of income for the state of Arizona. In rural areas new wealth is created by harvesting renewable resources. Harvesting of energy from the sun in the form of forage and the conversion of this forage into a marketable form, beef, creates new wealth. Long term negative impacts on the state may result from the conversion of the private ranch lands into development properties, with increased human pressures on fragile environments.

SUMMARY

We have a very serious crisis facing rural Arizona that extends beyond the immediate impact of drought on the rangelands. It reaches the very heart of the ranching family, with the potential to have long lasting negative impacts.