

VISTAS



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NEW MEXICO
LAND CONSERVANCY

Conserving Land. Preserving Heritage.

Land & Watershed Alliances—the New Wisdom of the Southwest

No ranch is an island. Even the biggest ones have neighbors, and together they're part of a larger geographic or watershed area. This is especially true in northeastern New Mexico, where the scenic short-grass prairie landscape spreads out for miles along the front range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Water is especially scarce in these parts, making it all the more critical to conserve and protect, not just for ranchers but for a host of interested parties, including hunters and fishermen, wildlife and bird lovers, and those local area residents who directly depend on a healthy watershed for their own drinking water.

This shared interest has spurred diverse groups in the area—and throughout New Mexico and the West—to think outside their own boundaries or concerns to develop alliances that can benefit each participant willing to collaborate with others.

Resilience in Numbers

One such alliance was initiated in 2011 by the Fort Union Ranch (FUR), located just north of Watrous in the northeastern part of the state. The nearly 100,000-acre historic ranch dates back to 1885, when Civil War general, Benjamin Franklin Butler, acquired the property, which is owned and managed today by his heirs and descendants, as representatives of the Union Land and Grazing Company.

Prolonged drought in the Southwest had dramatically affected the northeastern rangelands and the pressure was on ranchers to find innovative solutions and practices to build resilience and thrive under changing climate conditions.

Recognizing that ecological and economic forces function beyond the boundaries of the individual ranch, FUR reached out to other local landowners and ranch managers in the area with the intention of forming an alliance to improve

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Pronghorn on the Fort Union Ranch near Watrous in northeast New Mexico.

(photo courtesy of High Plains Grasslands Alliance)

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communication and provide a forum for sharing experiences, testing ideas and incorporating science into everyday management. Together with the Piojo and Wind River ranches, they formed the High Plains Grasslands Alliance (HPGA). Since that time, Twin Willows Ranch, Black Willow Ranch, and DeHaven Ranch/Preserve have joined the Alliance as members.

“Probably the biggest issue to ranchers in the northeast is ground water—its importance to sustainability, particularly in drought management,” said Katie Meiklejohn, HPGA’s Coordinator and board member. “The Alliance members bring a level of curiosity and openness and they listen to each other to support innovation and learning that’s practical and applicable across that particular landscape.”

HPGA meets roughly once a quarter, usually bringing in speakers or hosting workshops on relevant topics, such as a recent one-day workshop on the financial elements of drought planning. Meetings are open to any interested party. In addition, HPGA is currently engaged in two collaborative research projects created to address the ongoing issue of long-term water availability and ecological and

economic resilience.

Initiated in 2013, HPGA’s Hydrology Monitoring project basically measures how the draw-down is affecting the agricultural activities on the member ranches, to help land-owners better manage and plan for future water use and development. Alliance partner Ziegler Geological Consulting, LLC, is conducting the groundwater monitoring.

“They can date the age of the water through carbon dating and tritium dating [tritium has a half-life of little more than 8 years,]” Katie explained. “If the water is younger, it’s new recharge water; if it’s older, it’s not. They measure static well levels—in the summertime when draw-down is the highest, and in the winter when it’s probably the lowest.”

The Climate Monitoring project was launched in 2014 to track soil moisture, precipitation, and weather patterns across the member ranches, to inform range management—planning for forage, supply and demand, etc.

For more information on HPGA or its upcoming events, contact Katie Meiklejohn at Katie@ranchadvisory.com or visit www.highplainsalliance.org.



(Photo courtesy of High Plains Grasslands Alliance)

A Conservation Easement Runs Through It



When Kimberley and Scott Sheffield bought the Forked Lightning Ranch in Rowe, NM near Santa Fe in October 2015, the property came with nearly four miles of the beautiful Pecos River running through it, along with two large conservation easements which had been granted to the New Mexico Land Conservancy for the previous owner, well known actress Jane Fonda.

Fonda implemented several conservation and restoration practices on the Forked Lightning after purchasing the ranch in 2000, owned previously by Buddy Fogelson and his wife, Greer Garson—another famous actress whose signature pepto-pink stucco for years has covered every building and fence-buttress along the boundaries of the roughly 2,300-acre ranch, making the ranch itself a kind of colorful “celebrity” among folks in and around Santa Fe.

Quiet Enjoyment

The Sheffields aren’t ranchers by trade and they have no plans at present to run cattle on the ranch, though the conservation easements allow for agricultural production if they choose later. They were building a house in nearby Santa Fe at the time, with no intention of buying a ranch. “We weren’t even looking,” says

Kimberley. But when her husband Scott learned that Forked Lightning was for sale, he began investigating the potential.

Both Sheffields are avid fly fishermen, so seeing the magnificent stretch of river running through the property was probably more than they could resist.

Few roads run through the ranch, and river access can be challenging. “We’re having fun exploring ways to float the river, to find the best fishing spots,” Kimberley says.

A Conservationist’s Dream

The Forked Lightning is a conservationist’s dream—and a haven for wildlife. The two easements cover 80 percent of the 2,300-acre property. The terrain is a choice mix of high, rocky pine-covered cliffs and lower river valley land. In the past two years, warm-season native grasses have been replanted and both annual and perennial plantings are being established, which help support non-game and game species such as elk, mule deer, turkey, mountain lion and black bear. There is also an active program to control noxious weeds.

Historic sites and artifacts pepper the property, including remains of two stone homesteads, a church and a cemetery, all dating back to the 1800s when early settlers began moving West and establishing homestead communities near rail road tracks like those near the Forked Lightning. “We keep





Nearly four miles of the Pecos River runs through the Forked Lightning Ranch.

finding more sites every time the archeologist comes out," Kimberley reports.

Past and Future Preservation

The Sheffields are committed to the highest standards of stewardship, starting with the hire of ranch manager, Ken Young, who relocated to New Mexico from Texas with his wife Sherrill to oversee the property.

Ken manages the ranch by three tenets: "Make it a safe place—for employees and contractors to work and for people to recreate; use the right tools/materials/processes for everything—no cutting corners; and ensure everything we do enhances the reputation of the ranch in the community."

It's a big job just to manage the river portion of the property. "Improvement and restoration techniques had been used in the past, but a fire and then a big flood in 2013 changed the river, so some of those improvements no longer exist," Ken explains. Willows that had overgrown the riverbanks, are now systematically thinned or removed.

One of first actions Ken took as ranch manager was to bring in an archeologist to find out how to start preserving the historical remains—something previous owners hadn't been concerned with.

The archeologist recommended keeping people at least 45

feet away from the buildings, especially downhill where the historic artifacts tend to migrate over time.

Making it their own

"This first year on the ranch has been a transition year," Kimberley reflects, adding that Scott just retired this past January as CEO of Irving, Texas-based Pioneer Natural Resources, so the couple expects to spend more time now enjoying the ranch with family—their five children and 10 grandchildren, ages 3-15.

The Sheffields have renewed the stucco throughout the ranch with a deeper, cherry-red hue, and they're making some changes to the original ranch house, now an office, and to their residence which Jane Fonda built to reference both the downtown Santa Fe Library building and an old Spanish monastery. "Jane's lifestyle was more formal than ours," says Kimberley, who wants the home to be comfortable and practical for her many young grandkids to run around in.

Other than that, the couple has no major plans to change the property.

"There is a tremendous amount that goes into maintaining and preserving this ranch—now and for the future," ranch manager Ken adds. "Perpetuity is a long time."