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## A West that works

# United they graze



Twig and Shirley Winkle are among the eastern Arizona ranch families who have formed a nonprofit association to preserve their way of life.

—Courtney White photo

In remote Eagle Creek, Ariz., beleaguered ranchers soon realized they could join forces to care for the land or go under on their own

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

It is a sign of the times that a recent meeting in a one-room schoolhouse in a remote valley in the Blue Mountains of eastern Arizona featured a PowerPoint presentation.

Less emblematic, but more important, perhaps, was who did the presenting: members of the local grazing community. This fact didn't go unnoticed by the new forest supervisor of the Apache-Sitgreaves, who was visibly impressed not only by the presence of the technology in so remote a location, but also by the show itself.

She wasn't the only one impressed that day. As the show unfolded, detailing the group's ambitious goals and plans, it became clear that the eight families of the 220,000-acre upper Eagle Creek watershed have embarked on an unusual strategy to maintain livestock production on public and private lands in the area.

Their strategy? Stop fighting the future. Meet challenges with creativity. Turn adversity into opportunity. Learn, adapt and grow.

**"The challenges of drought, ever-increasing regulatory requirements, and the introduction of the Mexican gray wolf had just about ended livestock grazing. It seemed that we had reached the end of an era."**

— Chase Caldwell, Eagle Creek rancher

Their method? They've incorporated as a 501c3 nonprofit organization, called the Upper Eagle Creek Watershed Association.

Until then, they had been disorganized and reactionary to events they thought were beyond their control, especially on the national forest land



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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that comprises a large part of their watershed. They felt helpless as the winds of change began to blow.

Instead of getting angry, however, or giving up, the families chose to organize, organize, organize. And that's exactly what they have done, as their flow chart in their presentation demonstrated. But it wasn't easy getting started.

"We decided early that the board would be composed of landowners or people who live in the watershed," said rancher Twig Winkle. "But that caused a few rocky meetings in the beginning, as people got used to the idea of giving up their independence."

Sandwiched between the San Carlos Apache Reservation on one side, and Forest Service land on the other, the residents of remote Eagle Creek knew they didn't have many options.

"We knew we weren't going to make it by ourselves," said Winkle. "Forming a nonprofit association gave us a chance."

### **A future**

There was another reason to get together. "We didn't know our neighbors anymore," said association Secretary Darcy Ely, a resident and third-generation rancher. "There were some new people we didn't know, and even the old ones were kind of bunkered down. Some of us thought this wasn't healthy."

Fences in the valley were down or in need of repair. Homes were dark. The schoolhouse, which had 15 students as recently as 1990, had shut down four years earlier. Livestock had been removed from all of the ranches with public land but two. Paychecks were scarce.

"A once-thriving ranch economy was gone," says Chase Caldwell, a permittee on the forest and association president. "The challenges of drought, ever-increasing regulatory requirements, and the introduction of the Mexican gray wolf had just about ended livestock grazing. It seemed that we had reached the end of an era."

In April 2003, with the encouragement of Frank Hayes, the Clifton District Ranger, residents traveled to a Quivira Coalition conference in Tucson, where the idea of forming a nonprofit took hold.

"As I looked around the room," recalled Caldwell, "I recognized, maybe for the first time, that we had a huge resource of talent and experience gathered to work on our problem. Literally hundreds of years of experience in all types of business were there.

"This recognition of talent was an important revelation for all of us. These were friends and neighbors that I had known, but not really 'known.' It gave me a huge lift."

Back home, banking on this experience, and knowing that nonprofits have access to government and foundation money that would otherwise be unavailable, they filed their hopes with the IRS.

They decided on a simple mission statement: The association is "an organization that benefits the people and the land."

They crafted four purposes for the organization:

- To work together as a community to preserve our heritage and traditions in Upper Eagle Creek.
- To work together to improve and preserve our watershed and other valuable resources.
- To work together to protect, enhance and increase habitat for wildlife as well as domestic animals, especially in times of drought.

- To work together to find a sustainable method of economic survival for the community.

"It was an out-of-the-box approach to a variety of concerns on the district," said Frank Hayes. "It was a response to a challenge I made to them to come up with a solution that avoided confrontation. I told them the Forest Service wanted to be a partner in the community, and now we are."

The unity and diversity of talents in the community were the keys, he said.

"It is doubtful that any one ranching operation can survive economically or socially by itself anymore," said Hayes. "Together, they can make a difference among themselves and as a group."

### **The Tule**

The experience of Twig and Shirley Winkle, ranchers and association board members, encapsulates both the challenges and the opportunities found in the watershed.

In the mid-1990s, they gave up the city life and purchased the historic Tule Springs Ranch, 14,000 acres of rough country that had its own story to tell.

In the mid-1970s, the longtime owner of the Tule (Too-lee) became embroiled in a struggle with the federal government. Concerned about the effects of poor livestock management on public land, the Forest Service cut the ranch's permit from 300 head of cattle to 190.

It was an almost unprecedented action for the time, and the rancher resisted mightily, taking the fight all the way to Washington, D.C.

The rancher lost. Eventually the permit was cut to 90 head. By the time Twig and Shirley bought the deeded property, including the historic homestead, the number of cattle allowed to run on the forest had been reduced to 14.

"It wasn't economical, to say the least," said Twig. "And the place was a mess too. But we were optimistic, or foolish, enough to give it a go."

Fortunately, Twig likes to fix things. His 20 years' experience as a heavy machinery mechanic in Mesa, Ariz., (where he met Shirley in Sunday school during the eighth grade), had created a set of problem-solving skills that he would need to make the Tule work.

In the meantime they need an income. They planted two gardens and began selling vegetables to folks in Safford. Shirley began raising purebred Airdales for sale via the Internet.

"Shirley makes more off her dogs than I do off my cows," said Twig with a smile.

They also remodeled one of the old buildings into a guest house for outfitters, vacationers and other folks interested in a remote ranch experience. But the process of trying to open a dude ranch for business has been sobering.

"We got clobbered by the insurance," said Shirley, "especially on the horses. It came out of the blue and kind of depressed us."

In the meantime, Twig began to earn an unusual type of paycheck for a rancher: by monitoring the land. Knowing the Forest Service was short-handed, and that his neighbors would need data in support of continued livestock production on public land, Twig went to school and became proficient at grasses, transects, photography and reading the signs of erosion.

"The great thing about monitoring is that you learn about limitations," said Twig. "You get a real good sense of exactly how far you can go, and no further."

His education took them all over the Southwest, from riparian monitoring training near Silver City, N.M., to a low-stress livestock handling clinic at Ghost Ranch, near Santa Fe. They absorbed new knowledge like sponges.

In fact, when they began to apply the principles of progressive ranch management to the Tule, in combination with the data from their own monitoring, the Forest Service responded with a proposal to raise their permitted number to 55 head – a proposal that pleased the Winkles, even if it didn't solve their financial situation.

"Even with the increase, the ranch is still not economical from a cattle standpoint," said Winkle, "but that's ok because what's important is I'm getting paid for good stewardship."

To that end, Twig and Shirley are taking the lead on the idea of a communal herd of cattle in the Eagle Creek watershed. Combining herds into one, they believe, is the key to the future.

"Ranchers always say that if they take care of the land, it will take care of them," said Twig. "And they're right. But today you've got to monitor to demonstrate it. And the cattle side of things has also got to be profitable. I know we can do both."

### **Making it work**

To date, the association has participated in the acquisition of three grants: one for \$40,000 from the Arizona Heritage Fund, through the Arizona Game and Fish Department; one from a group of wildlife associations for \$50,000; and one through members Jan and Will Holder from the Sonoran Institute for \$7,500.

The first two grants were developed in cooperation with the Forest Service to maintain and develop trail systems in the forest and to continue an ongoing ecosystem restoration project through prescribed burning and mechanical thinning of trees.

The third one, from the Sonoran Institute, is a planning grant. It has six objectives:

1. Create a community herding/grass banking program.
2. Develop a plan to address problems created by decades of fire suppression.
3. Develop a watershed-wide monitoring program.
4. Conduct research to develop ecologically compatible alternatives to cattle ranching.
5. Continue to share information and education of rangeland and forest issues.
6. Continue to develop an organizational structure that will enhance communications between the San Carlos Apache Grazing Association and the US Forest Service.

Not to mention the fundraising, education and outreach programs the association has planned.

"We are targeting projects that help us reform the economic base of the Eagle Creek community," said Caldwell. "Projects like riparian surveys and protection, stream classification and monitoring, upland vegetation monitoring, landscape modification through thinning and burning, and water development.

" We are making progress on all these projects and all would be extremely difficult to accomplish as an individual rancher."

Another presenter that day in the schoolhouse was Kent Ellett, a range conservationist for the Forest Service. He detailed an ambitious restoration program on forest land keyed to the reintroduction of prescribed fire.

That he had the support of his boss, as well as members of the local community, for this work was itself another sign of the times.

But it would be wrong to say that everything is rosy on Eagle Creek. The challenges are daunting, including the occasional "people problem" typical of any organization.

"It's easier to fix the land sometimes than it is to hold the human equation together," said Twig Winkle. "But we've done all right so far."

Another challenge will be the time it will take to see on-the-ground results. But members of association are patient people. In the meantime, Frank Hayes has detected a favorable reaction from the Forest Service.

"The association has already had a positive influence on how we, the agency, does business," he said. "It is being viewed as a potentially important entity that might result in a significant change in how livestock grazing is managed at a landscape scale to adjust and to address watershed-based issues. I'm hopeful."

So is Chase Caldwell. "We can see momentum building and we have hope for our future as a community and the future of ranching," he said.

"It's a testament to what a determined group of people can accomplish."

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