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A West that works
Good fight



Tweeti and Linn Blancett

New Mexico ranchers unite traditional antagonists in a battle over the damage coalbed methane drilling is doing to their land

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

AZTEC, N.M.— Sometimes it takes a brawl to break down barriers and unite former adversaries against a common threat. In fact, a good fight can sometimes lead to positive change as much as any collaboration or "common ground" peace process.

And a good fight is exactly what's happening on Tweeti and Linn Blancett's ranch in the northwest corner of New Mexico. The rumble isn't focused on water, cows, or endangered species, for once. It's over oil and gas development, coalbed methane exploration to be specific, and the damage it is causing to the land and the people who live there.

The struggle has created an unlikely alliance of environmentalists, sportsmen, and ranchers – with collateral effects that have pleasantly surprised nearly everyone.

It only takes a minute to understand what is at stake in this fight. Walking into the parlor room of the Step Back Inn recently, which is owned and operated by the Blancetts, I saw a map of their ranch projected onto a large screen. It looked like it had the measles. Blue dots covered the ranch like a rash, or a cancer.

"It's the West's next boom-and-bust. But this time, it's the boom that is really killing us."

They were drilling sites, not measles, but the health metaphor is not far off the mark. Tweeti stood in front of the screen and told her visitors that after six generations on the same land, the Blancett Ranch had been destroyed by the disease of oil and gas development. The ranch was finished.

"We're down to eight cows," she said, "and we only keep them to make the BLM clean the cattleguards and do their job."

Making the BLM do its job has become a personal crusade for the 5-foot-3-inch grandmother, who, with a sparkling laugh and considerable charm, cuts an unusual



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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image for an activist. Add her political background into the mix – a lifelong Republican, she served in the state Legislature, worked for the re-election of Sen. Pete Domenici, and was San Juan County chair for George Bush in 2000 – and you have a dynamic recipe for action. Just ask the BLM, or the oil-and-gas industry.

For example, in the fall of 2001 Tweeti, her husband, and two neighbors, made headlines when they locked oil and gas workers out of their private land.

"We did it because we have a right to," she said. "And if you don't exercise your rights, no one else is going to do it for you."

It was action, among others, that landed them a major award from the New Mexico Community Foundation in 2003.

It wasn't the first time Tweeti's combination of charisma, drive and political heritage put her in the spotlight. She's been on the NBC Nightly News, and featured in such diverse publications as People Magazine, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the monthly magazines of the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society.

Recently, she made a brief appearance on cable's Comedy Central. "They paired me with an industry representative," she said with a deadpan, "and believe you me, I was a lot funnier."

It's not hard to believe. She worked the room that evening like a pro – leavening slides of her ranch's devastation with wry bits of humor and indefatigable good manners.

The destruction of the Blancett Ranch, however, is not something she takes lightly.

Accountability

"This is not a Democrat issue, and it's not a Republican issue," Tweeti told the gathering. "We in San Juan county have been treated the same by both of them, and that isn't good. Clinton drilled just as many wells. The difference is, now we are standing toe-to-toe, arms locked, liberals and conservatives, on this issue."

The next 20 slides were a catalog of abuse to land, animals and people by an uncaring industry. According to Tweeti, more than 1,000 miles of poorly designed and maintained roads crisscross the 32,000-acre Blancett Ranch, 90 percent of which is BLM land. That doesn't count the 1,550-plus miles of pipelines in the ground. There are more than 500 active oil and gas wells on the ranch, and each pad averages three acres in size. That's 15,000 acres of disturbed land, at a minimum.

And what a disturbance it is. The catalog includes salt water spills that sterilize the soil; a stinky black gunk that spews from well sites, coating trees and grass; antifreeze spills that can poison a cow to death within minutes; toxic lagoons that are death traps for birds and other wildlife; airborne pollutants that are contaminating the basin's air quality; and a noxious weed infestation that has followed the roads and pipelines like an invading army.

"This is the overgrazing of the 21st century," she said of the damage. "It's the West's next boom-and-bust. But this time, it's the boom that is really killing us."

What I'm trying to tell every one of you is that the Rocky Mountain West is next. What happened to us is coming your way.

But it didn't have to happen. "The companies could have fixed all these problems if they wanted to," said Tweeti, "but they didn't. They know how to. I'll show you the 'model' well sites tomorrow, where they take the VIPs when they want to whitewash what they're doing. Then I'll take you to what's really doing on."

"It's not like the industry doesn't have the money to do the reclamation. Last year they took \$4.1 billion, that's right, billion, out of the county in royalties. And they tell me they can't afford to clean things up. ..."

She let the words hang in the air for a moment.

"Let me say quickly that I'm not opposed to the drilling," she said. "What I'm opposed to is the horrible damage that's been caused. Back in the 1950s, '60s, and

'70s, the oil companies were our friends. They were good neighbors, and we got along. It's only in the last 15 years or so, especially with coalbed methane, that's it's become so bad."

She placed some of the blame on the culture of corporate greed that has gripped the nation, but she also spread the blame to the BLM.

"They have very specific regulations that protect the land," she said. "They have noise controls, water controls, erosion controls and they're good – as long as they force the companies to follow them. But they don't. There are 35,000 wells in the San Juan Basin, and only two BLM inspectors who work on the ground. The industry knows it can get away with murder – and it does."

Things, she said, are about to get worse. In 2003, the BLM issued a Resource Management Plan for the basin that called for 10,000 new wells on federal lands, with another 10,000 planned for state, tribal and private ground. The number of roads will likely double, as will the overall deleterious effects to the land.

"It's going to be approved despite the 12,000 negative responses it received," says Tweeti. "I was proud. It was the first time San Juan county ever stood up and said 'No more.' Thank goodness."

Making Friends

We reassembled the next morning for a tour of the ranch. The goal was not simply informational – Tweeti intended to put us to work. Despairing of the BLM's lack of proper oversight, Tweeti and a friend, Kris Dixon, had composed a seven-page "Citizen's Monitoring Form" to be filled out at each of the well sites we would visit. The idea is to gather credible data on the wells and use the data to press the companies and the government to do their jobs.

The day was a classic exercise in grassroots citizenship – which might explain why so many people turned out to help "test drive" the forms. Significantly, on the tour were representatives from the San Juan Citizen's Alliance (an environmental group), the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, the Oil and Gas Accountability Project, the Western Slope Environmental Resource Council, the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, Republicans for Environmental Protection, ranchers, retirees and others.

A month or so earlier, Tweeti had electrified a theater full of environmentalists in Albuquerque, gathered to stop oil and gas development on Otero Mesa in the southeastern section of the state, with a call to arms. In fact, the Otero Mesa fight has prospered precisely because of an alliance between former antagonists – ranchers and environmentalists.

Her message that day was the same one she delivered on our tour: "What I'm trying to tell every one of you is that the Rocky Mountain West is next. What happened to us is coming your way."

Judging from what I saw as we drove from well site to well site, taking notes and photographs, Tweeti's message needs to be heeded. As do her methods.

"It was really hard the first time I went to D.C. and sat in the office of the National Wildlife Federation with people who had been, and probably still are, anti-ranching," she said. "But the thing we all learned was that we had more in common than that which previously divided us. And the other thing we decided was if we didn't start working together, we wouldn't have anything to fight about. The land was going to be gone.

"And you're talking to a member of a family that has been ranching for six generations and has absolutely hated environmentalists," she continued. "But here they are today, and they're helping me. I'm involved with three lawsuits against the industry, and environmentalists are on my side on all three.

"What people have to understand is that ranchers are the watchdogs of our public lands. We're the first line of defense when the government is allowing damage to happen. If we go, so goes our eyes and ears. It's something to think about."

Near the end of the day, I asked Tweeti if she is bitter about the destruction of the ranch. "I'm not," she replies, "but my husband is getting there. Linn's family homesteaded here in the 1870s, and so this is really hard for him. He's slow to anger too, a lot slower than me. But now he's mad."

What keeps her going?

"Maybe I'm naïve and stupid enough to believe that one person can make a

difference. But each one of these 'one-persons' must learn to think differently. And the key is to listen to people who are different than you."

And then act.

"Don't hesitate to step up to the plate and say how you feel," she concluded. "Don't hesitate to disagree with the person next to you. And don't hesitate to try to form alliances that can make it better for everyone."

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