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A West that works

Talking it out



Volunteers work on an 'induced meandering' project to restore riparian areas on Williams' N.M. ranch

– Courtney White photo



Courtney White

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.

A Catron County rancher goes against community sentiment, and saves his ranch through dialogue with the Forest Service

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

To this day, rancher Jim Williams is not entirely sure what motivated him to raise his hand.

He'll admit that a combination of curiosity and desperation caused him to attend a small gathering in Pie Town, N.M., in June 1998 to hear a presentation on progressive ranching from The Quivira Coalition, a nonprofit based in, of all places, Santa Fe.

"I wanted to know what those 'greenies' had to say to us down here in Catron County," Williams recalled with his easy smile. "My curiosity got the best of me."

"I'm a 'show me' kind of guy, so I was skeptical at first, but Kirk and Bill's ideas worked. It was just a whole new way of looking at the ranch, and I liked what I saw."

– Jim Williams, Catron County rancher



The meeting had been organized by three local women who despaired over the social and economic cost that constant conflict had brought to their communities. Over the years, Catron County had gained a notorious reputation as a hotbed of anti-federal, anti-environmental, anti-everything (it seemed) emotions – attitudes the women considered to be an ultimate dead-end. They were looking for another way.

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So were Jim and Joy Williams, but for a different reason. The Williams Ranch was in trouble.

In 1995, the Forest Service reviewed the Williams' grazing allotment and decided to cut the number of permitted cattle they could run on the forest. It was the first time the permit had been cut in the lifetimes of Jim OR his father, Frank, who had assembled the ranch, located a few miles south of Quemado, back in the 1940s.

"It wasn't the cut so much that bothered me as the choices they gave me," said Williams. "They only gave me two: a straight reduction in numbers, or less time on the forest. There was no flexibility in management or anything. It was their way or the highway."

As is too common these days in the West, communication, and trust, had broken down.

Williams took the option of less time on the forest, which had the consequence of causing him to graze his private ground too hard. Angered, he joined a class action lawsuit against the Forest Service. He also closely tracked another court case, this one brought by environmentalists upset at the government over cattle grazing on public land.

"I thought the only answer was to fight," Williams recalled. "Well, we lost both of those cases, and so I thought that was pretty much the end of everything."

One Ranch

Financially struggling, and with their up-and-down relationship with the Forest Service at an all-time low, the Williams family, the last full-time ranchers in the Quemado area, began to seriously contemplate the one option that remained: accept the offer of a subdivider to buy their private land.

Instead, Jim Williams raised his hand at the end of the meeting in Pie Town. If nothing else, he was willing to keep listening.

Two months later, he invited representatives of the Quivira Coalition for a tour of his ranch, and liked what he heard in their message of land health, progressive ranch management, and collaboration. When the Catron County manager, who was also on the tour, took Williams aside to talk him out of cooperating, Williams ordered the manager off his land.

There was something new in the air in Catron County.

If Jim and Joy were willing to try something new, so was John Pierson, the new Forest Service range conservationist on the district. Born and raised in rural New Mexico, with family roots in private and public lands ranching, John began his career with the Forest Service in 1988 as a biologist on the Cibola National Forest. He transferred to the Kiowa National Grasslands where he gained valuable experience in planned grazing methods, fire and watershed management, and wildlife protection.

He also picked up law enforcement training along the way, an important skill to have in Catron County, where a few years earlier the county commission had passed an ordinance requiring all citizens to carry a sidearm.

The third member of the team was Kirk Gadzia, a well-respected ranch consultant and holistic management educator from Bernalillo, N.M. Gadzia brought extensive experience from around the West (and around the

world) in designing and implementing progressive ranching programs to the table – literally Jim and Joy's kitchen table.

Before they sat down to talk, however, the first thing the team did was put the Williams Ranch on a map. By pinning topographic maps to a large sheet of plywood, Jim Williams had, for the first time in his life, a birds-eye view of his whole ranch, which is half public and half private.

Through a series of conversations, Williams, Pierson, and Gadzia set goals for the ranch and began to sketch out a new plan of cattle management. Using existing fences and natural boundaries, they divided the ranch into smaller pastures and planned rapid moves of cattle through them. One of the key objectives was to decrease the amount of time cattle spent on "cool" season grasses (spring and fall), which the Forest Service considered to have been hit hard over the years.

The moves were carefully plotted on a chart. "The idea was to give Jim much tighter control of the timing and intensity of the animals on the land and to give the plants sufficient recovery time," said Gadzia, "while also ensuring enough flexibility to make adjustments as conditions require."

"It worked," said Pierson of the strategy. "The public land under Jim's care has steadily improved through one of the worst droughts in memory."

The key was communication. "By talking we realized we weren't so far apart," said Pierson. "There'll always be disagreements, but Jim and I respect each other, and we're keeping in mind what's best for the ground. Putting the ranch together as one unit really helped. It helped the Forest Service, it helped Jim, and it helped the land."

Looking For Hawks

With good communication came greater trust, which had the collateral effect of opening new opportunities. The Williamses began to host tours and workshops on the ranch, which were well-attended, and they took advantage of Quivira educational activities around the state. And as trust grew, relationships were strengthened – slowly.

"The trouble with trust is that it takes patience," said Pierson. "And that's hard today because we're kind of an impatient society. But letting things develop is the real key to success."

In an example of trust-building, the Williamses opened their private land for a major riparian restoration project in 2001. Directed by Bill Zeedyk, and manned by numerous "greenie" volunteers from Santa Fe and Albuquerque, the project focused on restoring ecological function to degraded stretches of Largo and Loco creeks through a low-tech, low-cost strategy Zeedyk created called "Induced Meandering."

Jim and Joy Williams didn't have to do it. There was no financial incentive for them to get involved in a restoration project – it may have even cost him money, in time and labor. The didn't have to let Hawks Aloft, a nonprofit group hired by The Quivira Coalition to do avian monitoring on Largo Creek, on their private land, either. After all, who knew what they would find?

But they welcomed them. It wasn't just a matter of trust - Jim and Joy had become eager learners.

"I'm a 'show me' kind of guy, so I was skeptical at first," said Williams, "but Kirk and Bill's ideas worked. It was just a whole new way of looking at the ranch, and I liked what I saw."

He was having fun too. In fact, Jim Williams was so impressed by the folks from Hawks Aloft that he joined them on their surveys.

"I got a real kick out of looking for ferruginous hawks on my place," Williams said, referring to an elusive and sensitive species.

That's probably not something a Catron County rancher would have said a few years ago.

Benefits of Trust

Through all the changes, Jim, John and Kirk enjoyed the strong and steady support of the Forest Service. Again, the key was better communication.

"We're not good communicators," said Janice Stevenson, Quemado District Ranger. "Most folks in the Forest Service are natural introverts, that's why we go into natural resources in the first place. But this is changing."

"It wasn't the cut so much that bothered me as the choices they gave me. ... There was no flexibility in management or anything. It was their way or the highway."

For Steve Libby, whose tenure as Resources Staff Officer for the Gila National Forest stretches back to the "bad old days" of the lawsuits, the biggest lesson learned on the Williams Ranch was how to do a better job of understanding each other's needs.

"Through the work of Quivira and Kirk, we gained a better understanding of Jim's concerns," said Libby, "including his worry that we were out to ruin him, which wasn't the case. By working together we learned a lot about each other's motivations."

"We all learned we need to be more flexible, in management, in what we do on the ground, and in our relationships," he said. "By working together we do more than by acting independently."

"It's been great to work with Jim," said Stevenson. "He sees the positive in things, and is willing to take action. Jim has been a big help on the district. He's been the voice of reason at many meetings."

Dave Stewart, the "range boss" for the Forest Service's contentious Region III, which includes all the forests in Arizona and New Mexico, echoes their observations.

"We're starting to see more situations like we have in Quemado, where people are willing to talk and try different things," said Stewart. "It's encouraging and a hopeful sign for the future."

For his part, Jim Williams thinks the changes have been positive, too, though the severe drought set him back economically.

"I'm still here," he said, smiling again, "and I guess that counts for something these days."

Williams also maintains a bit of skepticism – a product, he will admit, of a long and rocky relationship with his federal neighbor. But for now, he's happy.

"The best thing that came out of this was reestablishing a good

relationship with the Forest Service," he said. "And that means a lot to me."

John Pierson's role in the improvement of the land and the re-establishment of trust on the district was acknowledged in 2002 when he won the Forest Service's national Chief's Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rangeland Management.

Pierson thinks it was a team effort.

"The best part of working with Jim and Joy is that our families have become good friends," said Pierson. "It's been an honor and a pleasure to work with them."

That's not something a Forest Service employee in Catron County might have said a few years ago, either.

Although he's still not sure why he raised his hand at that meeting in Pie Town all those years ago, Jim Williams is glad he did.

"We all learned something new," said Williams. "We learned what can happen when you stop fighting and start listening."

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