

Advocates promote 'grassbanking' as way to improve rangeland conditions

April Reese, *Land Letter* Southwest correspondent

Land managers, ranchers and conservationists hoping to restore rangelands are often faced with a daunting question: Where will the cattle go while the land is rested?

For some, the answer lies in a relatively new tool called grassbanking. Loosely defined as the exchange of forage for conservation benefits, grassbanking is credited with allowing thousands of acres of public and private land to be rehabilitated while keeping ranchers in business.

Grassbanks work by allowing a rancher to run cattle on someone else's land, sometimes for a small fee, so that the "home range" can be rested and restored.

Land managers and some environmentalists say such exchanges can help solve the problem of figuring out how to do conservation work on federal grazing allotments or private lands -- which can take years -- without hurting ranchers financially. Most ranchers do not have enough land to sustain their cattle operations without using federal grazing allotments and depend heavily on public land. If an agency removes cattle from an allotment to restore the land, ranchers can be left with no alternative but to go out of business. By arranging to use a temporary grazing site, ranchers are able to avoid that fate, and land managers can carry out multi-year restoration projects without pressure to allow cattle to return to the land.

Grassbanking has been used to improve water quality through the restoration of riparian areas, reintroduce fire to rangelands, and restore wildlife habitat. A grassbank can be used for as long as several years or as briefly as one month during the growing season.

Although no one is sure exactly how many grassbanks exist, Stephanie Gripne, a Ph.D. student who is studying grassbanks around the West, says there are at least eight established operations, and another dozen or so are in the works.

One of the earliest and best-known is the Valle Grande grassbank in northern New Mexico. In 1997, the Conservation Fund purchased a 36,000-acre grazing allotment on Rowe Mesa from the Forest Service, and the organization began running cattle on it the next year. The grassbank is used for temporary grazing to allow land managers in Carson and Santa Fe national forests to carry out large-scale prescribed burns on grazing allotments. Agreements typically last two to four years, said Bill deBuys, project director for the Valle Grande grassbank.

The operation is governed by a steering committee made up of representatives of the Forest Service, the Northern New Mexico Stockmen's Association, the cooperative extension service -- an arm of New Mexico State University's Agriculture Department -- and the Conservation Fund.

The Nature Conservancy's grassbank on Heart Mountain Ranch, near Cody, Wyo., takes a slightly different approach. For a small fee, the organization allows ranchers whose federal grazing allotments are being restored to run their cattle on the ranch.

While the grassbank allows federal land managers to improve rangeland conditions, it also keeps ranches running and provides an alternative to selling to developers, leaving more of the state's open spaces intact, said Joni Ward of TNC's Wyoming chapter.

A costly enterprise

While the benefits of providing temporary grass reserves are well established, grassbank advocates face several challenges. A major concern is finding enough money to support the operation over the long-term. Typically, costs are shared by the grassbank partners, and some grassbanks receive grants from foundations and government programs. But the banks can be expensive to run -- operation costs range from \$5,000 to \$260,000 a year -- and it is sometimes difficult to find consistent funding, said Ward. The Heart Mountain Ranch grassbank, which uses irrigated pasture, costs about \$60,000 a year to operate, she said.

"I think over the long-term, [grassbanks] won't survive without some kind of funding mechanism," Ward said. "The reality is that TNC can't afford to disperse grassbanks throughout the West. It's too expensive." Ward said she'd like to see more financial support from federal land agencies, especially since they benefit from private grassbanks.

Federal land managers have considered setting up forage reserves on public lands, but in many areas, a lack of alternative grazing sites hampers those efforts. Bill Coulloudon, state range conservationist for the Bureau of Land Management's Arizona office, said the agency considered creating grassbank-like "reserve common allotments" as part of its sustainable working landscapes initiative, but dropped the idea because it could not find enough vacant land to move cattle onto. BLM plans to address grassbanking in the revision of its national grazing rules, a process that is currently under way, he said.

Conservation groups looking for grassbank lands sometimes find it difficult to locate suitable rangelands as well, and purchasing or leasing those lands can be expensive, particularly in fast-growing areas. Also, winning acceptance from the ranching and environmental communities can be difficult, grassbank advocates say. Some environmentalists feel that grazing is not environmentally sustainable in many ecosystems, and that in some cases grassbanks reward ranchers for degrading their allotments. And some ranchers are wary of running their cattle on lands managed by a conservation group.

"It takes the good will of many parties to produce a positive outcome," deBuys said.

Despite those challenges, word is spreading about the success of grassbanks like the Valle Grande and the Heart Mountain Ranch, and the idea appears to be gaining favor among some land managers and ranchers, deBuys said.

"It's a very important tool in the toolbox, because it does provide greater flexibility," he said. "I think it also helps people see that they can find partners in places they didn't expect to."