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Cattle grass bank stirs controversy

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POWELL - Cows at the Heart Mountain Ranch can't wait until for the next stop in their rotation - an ice-cream cone of a field of lush, long wheat grass.

It's fine eating for the 700 or so cows accustomed to foraging on the Bureau of Land Management's Sage Creek allotment, and the herd is "getting slightly spoiled," according to Heart Mountain Ranch manager Maria Sonett.

"They seem to know when it's time to rotate and act accordingly," Sonett laughed.

But, indicating a neatly sheared pasture of nutritious but less palatable brome grass, Sonett says cows at the grass bank also "eat their vegetables."

The grass is always greener at the Heart Mountain Ranch - that's the point. One of perhaps five operating grass banks in the United States, the Heart Mountain bank is situated on 600 irrigated acres on which the cows graze a pasture for four or five days, then travel to another.

This short-duration, high-intensity grazing preserves Wyoming's natural landscape and helps those who make a living on it, Sonett said.

"It's a quid pro quo. The ranchers get a spot for the cattle and are less likely to subdivide their ranches. Conservationists get improved public lands, and because the ranchers can stay in business, the private lands stay unfragmented for wildlife habitat," Sonett said.

"There is no giveaway here. It's an even exchange."

The "forage for conservation" exchange is the idea of the Heart Mountain Grass Bank, which is run by The Nature Conservancy as part of the 15,000-acre property the nonprofit organization bought in 1999. Nature Conservancy administrator Laura Bell got the grass bank off the ground in 2001 with funding from foundations and local backers. Pilot projects included a critical elk winter range project on Sheep Mountain on the Shoshone National Forest, and a fuel reduction burn project on the Bald Ridge allotment of the Forest Service in 2002.

The Sage Creek allotment is the third project to date, Bell said, and will allow prescribed burning, drought and water development to take place.

"This time, we got 3,000 acres of improved sage grouse habitat out of the deal," Bell said. "We can leverage our 600 acres of irrigated pasture to put conservation practices on thousands of acres of grasslands and forests. It's very effective."

Wyoming Game and Fish Habitat Supervisor Gary Butler calls grass banks a "relief valve" and said the state agency would do what it can to nourish the grass bank movement.

"We recognize the need for grass banks and are doing what we can to promote them," Butler said. "We are really encouraging the BLM to start their own."

Based on the BLM's work with the Heart Mountain Grass Bank, that idea is beginning to take root, said Tricia Hatle, BLM range and wild horse specialist. Not only does it allow the agency to rest or improve the public lands, but it can also improve grazing opportunities, she said.

"Before we were only using 50 percent of the AUMs (animal unit months, a standard measure of grazing activity), but a grass bank allows for ranchers to run full numbers out there," Hatle said. "It's a great opportunity to help the

environment all the way around."

The grass debate

Opponents of the movement say grass banks are a waste of taxpayer money and don't really accomplish conservation, because the animals are eventually returned to the land.

"The fundamental problem grass banks seek to remedy are created by the basic incompatibility of livestock production with the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the West," wrote George Wurthener, author of "Welfare Ranching - The Subsidized Destruction of the American West."

"There is also a flawed presumption that agriculture - specifically ranching - can preclude or prevent subdivisions. Ranchers are all too happy to sell to developers if there's a demand - there is, however, not a demand everywhere."

Grass banks also may encourage poor grazing practices, according to the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign. Though arid Western conditions call for environmentally sustainable practices, having a grass bank "security blanket" may inspire ranchers to increase herd sizes instead of reducing stocking rates.

"Ranchers should buy their own grass banks," reads an online editorial by the organization. "Rather than having taxpayers buy out grazing allotments for use as grass banks, privately owned grazing operations, even those using public lands, should purchase private land to be grass banks, engaging the capitalist/market system to solve for their needs like any other business."

Grass banks beg for more discussion, according to Stephanie Gripne, who is studying the economic viability of grass banks for her doctoral work in conservation at the University of Montana.

"People get so impassioned about the land, conservation and grazing that it is important to talk about what the real costs are and who are the people winning and losing on either side," Gripne said.

Her research found that starting a grass bank requires a significant capital outlay for land purchase and maintenance. The potential benefits have sold many people and are taking root in both public and private grazing culture, along with similar concepts of custom grazing and swing allotments, Gripne said.

Though grass banks were unheard of a decade ago, several have already run their course, accomplishing goals they just set a few years past, Gripne said

"We had grass banks in California and New Mexico close down, while new ones are springing up in Oregon and Nebraska," Gripne said. "Grass banks are not necessarily a permanent solution. They can be used as needed."

Meanwhile, on the Heart Mountain Grass Bank, Sonett is looking forward to putting her experience on the well-established Valle Grande Grass Bank to work. She and co-manager Skip Eastman moved from New Mexico a few months ago and are concentrating on growing grass, improving the soil environment and figuring out how to track the weight gain on the cows they care for.

"This is a showcase for trying different types of management - not that we have all of the answers, but we do have the flexibility to try different things," Sonett said. "Then the ranchers can evaluate our operations and perhaps try it out on their own place."

For more information on the Heart Mountain Grass Bank, call Laura Bell at (307) 587-1655, or visit Gripne's Web site at www.compatibleventures.us.

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