

Ranch program stirring debate

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A new program that earmarks conservation funds for ranchers who hold grazing permits on federal lands hasn't pleased everyone.

For the first time in New Mexico, federal money is being made available to ranchers through a cost-share program designed to enhance agricultural production and optimize environmental benefits.

About \$1.5 million is being made available to those with federal ranching permits in New Mexico this year, although the main area of emphasis by the Bureau of Land Management will be the Upper Gila-Mangus Watershed, which is eligible for at least \$750,000 in funding.

The money comes from the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which is managed by the NRCS State Office.

Greta Anderson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz., works on the nonprofit conservation organization's range restoration campaign and forest planning for Southwest forests. According to the Center's Web site, she tries to balance the multiple-use mandate of federal agencies with the need for ecological protection of federal lands and the species that depend on them.

"We're concerned that livestock grazing is being managed on public lands where it may not be suitable without millions of dollars in improvements," Anderson said Thursday. "If taxpayers need to put millions into range improvements,

maybe livestock production is not the best use."

Anderson said she is always concerned about the ecological impact of livestock grazing on public lands, including degraded wildlife habitat, water and air quality, the spread of non native species, erosion and changes to watersheds and riparian areas.

Gary Garrison, district conservationist for the NRCS in Silver City, said EQIP funding has been used for private and state ranch and agricultural lands since 1985, but 2005 was the first time the funding was extended to people holding permits for federal BLM or Forest Service land. Last year's funds from the newly expanded program were used in Arizona, but this year's focus is on southwestern New Mexico.

The contracts can range from 2-10 years, depending on the scope of the projects and the length of the permit-holder's lease.

Such conservation projects, which are funded through a 50/50 to 75/25 cost-share program, include erosion control structures, water development, brush management and prescribed burns.

But Anderson doesn't believe the program is necessary.

"Taxpayers are already subsidizing public lands ranching to the tune of \$123 million a year," she said. "And that comes out of a General Accounting Office report. We're already paying for them to be running livestock and now we're giving them even more money. I think it's up to the taxpayers to decide if this is something we really want to be doing, considering there are huge ecological impacts."

Grant County resident Donna Stevens has similar concerns about the program.

"Expanding the EQIP program to cover public lands not only gets more taxpayer money to the overly subsidized western ranching industry, but it also bypasses the public involvement process for public lands," she said. "When the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management spends money to mitigate the damage done by ranching - such as in erosion control, or blocking a creek to create a stock tank - they have to disclose their plans and consult the public. If a rancher gets the money directly, the public gets shut out, and that serves as one more incremental step toward privatizing the public lands."

Anderson also complains that the cost for managing grazing on public lands far exceeds related revenues.

"They spend \$144 million managing range land and they only recover \$21 million through grazing fees," she said.

She added that the Center hired economists to study the issue and they concluded that the real cost of administering permits, paying for range conservationists and other ancillary expenses was probably closer to \$500 million annually.

"Maybe we should cut our losses and remove livestock from places where grazing is inappropriate," Anderson said.

But Ralph Pope, range land management specialist for the Gila National Forest, said it's too early to judge the program.

“The whole federal EQIP program is kind of being developed and the rules are slowly coming out on how it’s to be used,” he said. “We’re not really able to determine how effective it will be or how it will fit in with our Forest Service programs.”

Pope added that he believes the agencies involved in the program are trying to build a little equity between what the private land owner can do versus a federal grazing permit holder.

“I think that was the whole intent,” he said. “We’re not focused on fixing destroyed lands, we’re trying to help facilitate good management and help these guys do a good job on the land. With economic times getting tougher, it’s harder for them to reinvest in their operation.”

Pope said profit margins for ranchers are on the decline and the cost of doing business is going up tremendously.

As to Anderson’s assertion that federal agencies spend far more on public lands for grazing range management than they take in, Pope had a succinct response.

“We’re not here to make a profit,” he said. “We’re here to protect land and resources and a lot of it is not in the condition we’d desire, so we’ll continue to work. Even if there were no livestock, we’d still be spending money to repair what was done back in the 1800s.”