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## **The Case for Rangeland Preservation Areas**

*“ Rangeland Preservation Area is an alternative federal land use designation that allows productive utilization with appropriate limitations. It prescribes the allowable uses at a local level, which may be modified from ecosystem to ecosystem. It differs from Wilderness by recognizing the presence of human activities, past, present, and future, in a resourceful and positive manner.”*

*–Jerry G. Schickedanz, PH D Range Science, University of Arizona, NMSU College of Agriculture Dean Emeritus.*

The idea of Rangeland Preservation Areas (RPA's) came about through an effort that was undertaken by People For Preserving Our Western Heritage (PFPOWH) in response to community dialogue during the “REGIONAL LAND MANAGEMENT: A COMMUNITY RESPONSE” proceeding led by the City of Las Cruces and Dona Ana County in 2006 and 2007.

PFPOWH studied the reports written by the eight Stakeholder groups participating in the community response effort. This information was supplemented by talks with many business leaders and discussions with the boards and individuals of many organizations and government agencies that included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Dona Ana County Commission
- Las Cruces City Council
- Hatch Village Trustees
- Mesilla Town Trustees
- Elephant Butte Irrigation District
- Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce
- Las Cruces Hispano Chamber of Commerce
- Las Cruces Home Builders Association
- Las Cruces Association of Realtors
- Bureau of Land Management (District, State, and National officials)
- New Mexico State Land Office
- Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Border Patrol
- National Association of Retired Border Patrol Officers
- Dona Ana County Sheriff's Department
- NMDA
- NMCGA
- New Mexico Public Lands Council

PFPOWH had initially called for restoration of multiple use management and sustained yield requirements pursuant to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act for the eight Wilderness Study Areas (WSA's) in Dona Ana County. It became apparent, however, that population growth in the county would require disposal of public lands to accommodate that growth. Ranching alone would not prevent the encroachment of development into the open spaces of the county. It became equally apparent that Wilderness designations would forever revoke most vehicular access into those open spaces and severely limit utilization for grazing, hunting and other recreation uses.

PFPOWH identified nine community expectations for management of our public lands as follows:

**1. Retention of open space.**

Almost everyone is committed to the preservation of our open space.

**2. Provision for planned economic and population growth.**

“Smart growth” cannot be a buzzword for “no growth”. The population of this Dona Ana County is going to grow. That growth will require some federal and state lands to be used to accommodate that growth within the scope of land use planning. The prohibition of all sales of all public lands cannot be used as a tool to eliminate or hamper that growth. FLPMA promises that to us.

**3. Unrestricted application of Homeland Security and law enforcement activities.**

No prudent leader should tie the hands of law enforcement on or near the Mexican border.

**4. Prevention of unlawful use of off road vehicles.**

The ranchers were the first and foremost advocates of this, but they were not alone. Every group and every stakeholder representative supported the prevention of unlawful off road vehicular traffic.

**5. Continued access for all segments of the public.**

The USDA’s 2007 Forest Service “National Visitor Use Monitoring Report” indicates that Wilderness visits continue to decrease within the general population. Wilderness visits now constitute 3.1% of all visits and the visitors are 94.5% white. Furthermore, 66.4% of those visitors have incomes in excess of \$50,000 per year. When the word gets out that Wilderness areas are the domain of rich white folks, the greater population is not going to look favorably on wholesale Congressional action creating more Wilderness.

**6. Perpetuation of traditional ranching operations.**

There is a growing understanding that intact ranch operations are the best mechanism to maintain the viability of open space in the West.

**7. Access for flood control and water capture projects.**

Dona Ana County is part of a desert ecosystem. Future water projects must demonstrate the foresight and leadership to use off -basin storage and flood control projects to enhance water supplies. EBID has instituted a flood control-monitoring program that must have vehicular use and technological access to all watershed areas within the county.

**8. Enhancement of wildlife and rangeland health.**

Scientific study and the insight derived from ranching have made apparent the positive benefits of prudent livestock grazing on plant and wildlife communities. Of special significance, there is only one permanent natural water source in Dona Ana County west of the river to the Luna County line. Every other water source exists because a rancher has developed and maintained it as a part of a livestock operation. One only needs to visit those water developments to recognize their value to wildlife and livestock alike.

**9. Fidelity of Wilderness.**

An objective, current evaluation of the majority of the proposed Dona Ana County Wilderness areas don’t meet the fidelity standards of wilderness. William L. Rice, Deputy Chief of the Forest Service and NRCS (retired), wrote a column which best explains this issue. In order for Wilderness designations to remain significant, the original premise of Wilderness must be held inviolate (a copy of the Rice column is enclosed).

## **Why Rangeland Preservation Areas versus National Conservation Areas<sup>1</sup>?**

There are a number of reasons that PFPOWH vigorously recommend a new land designation, but two reasons stand apart.

The first is rangeland health and the need to acknowledge and benefit from the advancement of range stewardship and science. There is not a federal designation, administrative or legislative, that elevates “rangeland” health and improvement to the wording in the law. For too long, the antagonistic assault on the grazing of livestock and “extractive industry” endeavors on western lands has been unchecked and even advanced by Congressional action. Our country is on the threshold of a series of shortages promulgated by actions that threaten our security and our liberty. We must adopt a different approach. Rangeland health issues must be elevated to a new level of importance that preserves and enhances the natural health of the land.

The second point is the fact that there is not a single purpose or point of recognition in federal land management procedures and policies that relate to the social fabric of human endeavors. Humans have been tied to the stewardship of livestock in this county since 1598 when Onate crossed the river at what is now El Paso with several thousand head of domestic livestock. The West needs a land designation that engages rather than disengages stakeholder relationships with federal land management agencies. Social fabric issues must be elevated to points of the law. A new, different approach must be conceptualized and implemented.

It has been argued that BLM will not accept and Congress will not enact a new and unique land management designation such as RPA. That argument denies the fact that Congress has already created four unique land management designations that are a part of the National Conservation Area (NCA) category within the National Land Conservation System.

### **Why Rangeland Preservation Areas here and why now?**

Perhaps for the first time, a stakeholder group has conceptualized an idea that would engage and enhance federal land user relationships in the West. That idea of RPA responds to the plea that is coming from every corner of the West . . . to find some means to engage, rather than destroy, historic stakeholder relationships with federal land management agencies.

At the local level in Dona Ana County, NM, we believe it is possible to create a relationship among NMSU, the USDA (Jornada Range), the BLM, Homeland Security, New Mexico Fish and Game, the DOD, the ranching community, and the conservation community with the specific intent of creating a model that can serve as a world standard for sustainable rangeland health and productivity. The pieces are all in place. The results could be techniques and practices that improve native ranges in a way that allows for utilization of our natural resources while protecting our environment and the fabric of our culture. We have a rare opportunity to create a model the West and the world can emulate. Through this effort, our county could become one of the foremost destinations in the world to study and learn of substantive measures to maintain a robust and healthy balance in RPA ecosystems.

More than 775 organizations and businesses in Dona Ana County have joined a coalition of PFPOWH supporters who recognize the potential benefits of the RPA proposal as a viable alternative to Wilderness designations to preserve the federal lands in Dona Ana County. They recognize that the wholesale designation of Wilderness areas in this county would be dangerous, ill conceived, and not in the best interest of our citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Neither multiple use nor Wilderness designation can satisfy all nine expectations that came from this process. No existing federal land designation can satisfy all the expectations. RPA designation would exceed any other designation in meeting these expectations.