

Border Wilderness IN THE Potrillo Mountains?

by CAROL COOPER, Ranch wife and member of
People for Preserving Our Western Heritage

“It would pretty well put me out of business,” rancher Dudley Williams uttered in the film documentary. The documentary was produced by the New Mexico Farm and Livestock Bureau and the statement was Mr. Williams’ assessment of how wilderness would affect his border ranching operation. To a Doña Ana County citizen who wonders what such a comment means, a trip up close and personal would be enlightening.

Bouncing along in his ranch pickup, Mr. Williams could pass as Hollywood’s version of the original Marlboro Man. With his piercing blue eyes, his neatly trimmed mustache, his sunburned complexion and his weathered hands gripping the steering wheel, it doesn’t take much imagination to suggest “rancher”. “When I came here I had looked all over the United States for a ranch that fit the things that I didn’t like about (ranching in) California and Oregon”, he related. “I found it here, or, at least I thought I had.”

Growing up in southern California, attending college at Cal Poly, and ranching on the Pacific Slope, Dudley Williams is considered a “Californio” by those who know what that implies. It implies ties to the way of life of old California with all of its rich traditions of horses and cattle. It also implies an ever decreasing number of active participants in a culture and a heritage that is fast disappearing in a wave of all things modern and human. “I came

here because I thought it was one of the last great places to ranch.”

The concern in the minds of Mr. Williams and his colleagues is the proposal to designate 302,000 acres of wilderness in Doña Ana County. The Williams family ranch would take the brunt of the proposal in that over 150,000 acres covers their West Potrillo Mountain operation in extreme southwest Doña Ana County. The “why” of the concern is the reality of dealing with federal land agencies and the aftermath of wilderness designation. “I have lived within the collision of the BLM, the public, and the environmental movement in Oregon. It is a calamity that destroys ongoing ranching and the living heritage that is connected to it.”

To the north of the Williams outfit is Butterfield Trail Ranch. Rancher Steve Wilmeth comments on his friend and neighbor. “Dudley is the guy who is going to take the biggest hit if wilderness is designated”, he said recently. “And, he is the

best example of why we need to be looking at something different from this controversial designation.”

In Wilmeth’s point of view, the West Potrillo segment of the proposal best highlights the other side of the story. “The public needs to go make a big circle on that ranch”, he continues. “They need to pay particular attention to the abandoned vehicles, defined (illegal) migration routes, and the expanse of isolated country.” He talked about the lessons that Arizona has learned about border wilderness. Places like Organ Pipe National Monument have become free flowing corridors of human migration to the point that portions of them are closed because it is too unsafe for visitors. “As the border fence is built and illegal crossing at Juarez becomes more difficult, the lonely expanse of the Potrillos will become the haven for entry just like the Arizona wilderness stretches when similar efforts took place in Tijuana and Calexico. When that happens, that border ranch will become the doorway and we (Butterfield Trail Ranch) will become the door mat. That’s why, in part, the Hatch village trustees rescinded their resolution supporting wilderness in this county,” he concluded.

Retired Border Patrol Chief of Flight Operations, Hank Hays, who now lives in Deming, agrees. “Don’t be fooled by talk of some MOU and how great the BLM and Homeland Security will get along when they start negotiating on access in border wilderness. That MOU can not supercede any law. I can talk about many different examples, but the best one is the sensor repeater that was placed on Big Hatchet Mountain. I flew it in. Because of threats by environmental groups, the Border Patrol backed off its use even though the MOU was in place! For several years, the United States had no sensor transmission in the New Mexico Boot Heel because of radical demands of the environmental community.”

I think I speak for the southern NM ranching community in maintaining that the loss of ranchers like Dudley Williams, operators who ultimately can’t continue operating under restrictions imposed with wilderness designation, poses reciprocal risks. The “Californio” model begs to be studied. As the old generation of California ranchers were taken off the land, all things modern and human filled the void. Don’t think this situation will be any different. If we want permanent open space, we need to retain these stewards of the land even if they don’t always fit the modern-world vision we are constantly reminded of by the prevailing progressive voices. □

HELP PROTECT YOUR INDUSTRY AND YOUR PROPERTY!

Join with the NM Stockman, NM Cattle Growers, NM Wool Growers, NM Dept. of Agriculture, NM Farm and Livestock Bureau, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, La Union Soil and Water Conservation District, NM Federal Lands Council, Assn. of AZ/NM Counties, Nat’l. Assn. of Retired Border Patrol Officers, and hundreds of farms, ranches and other businesses, which are members of the Coalition in support of the Doña Ana County Planned Growth, Open Space and Rangeland Preservation Act of 2008 (HR 6300), introduced by Congressman Steve Pearce.

It is critical that we stand together against the radical statewide wilderness agenda!

Visit www.PeopleForWesternHeritage.com and click on “Take Action”.
From there, signing up is easy - and it’s important!