

Cooperative Conservation Improves Nevada Rangeland



rancher Agee Smith, co-owner of Cottonwood Ranch, worked with a resource management group assisted by NRCS to develop and enact a holistic plan that has improved the range and raised ranch profits (photo by Mona Whalen)

In an evolving project that truly demonstrates cooperative conservation, Nevada ranchers and Federal and State wildlife, forestry and rangeland conservation specialists are collaborating on an innovative team approach to manage sensitive habitats on public land. The team, assisted by Natural Resources Conservation Service rangeland management specialist Chuck Petersen, helped resolve an impasse between the Cottonwood Ranch owners and Federal agencies by developing and enacting a holistic plan that has improved the range, raised ranch profits, and brought new voices to the table.

“Federal land management activities are sensitive, and in northeast Nevada there’s a history of skepticism by landowners,” said Petersen, NRCS range specialist in Elko, Nevada, who now facilitates the group. The collaborative working group first formed in 1995 to help resolve a disagreement between the Smith family, owners of Cottonwood Ranch, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) over cattle carrying capacity. The Smiths had permits to run their cattle on 34,000 acres in a remote area in and near the Jarbidge Mountains.

The team, which calls itself the Shoesole Resource Management Group (after an old ranch brand), was launched with support from a [SARE professional development grant](#), and the Smith family was profiled in the SARE-supported book, [The New American Farmer, 2nd edition](#).

After evaluating the conditions of the natural resources on the 34,000-acre rangeland, the Federal agencies wanted to cut cattle numbers. The news was a blow to the Smith family, which was struggling financially through the 1980s. In response, Agee Smith, Cottonwood Ranch general manager, educated himself in Holistic Management® (HM), which asks students to take a whole-system view of their businesses. Many ranchers embrace HM because it encompasses setting goals – from family roles to environmental conservation strategies to profit enhancement – and defining clear methods to achieve those goals.

“At the classes, we heard how cattle don’t have to be abusers of the land,” Smith said. “They can be used to rehabilitate the land. That was a totally novel concept that was very exciting and changed my perception of how I look at this animal on the land.”

The new way of thinking paid off for the Smiths. HM helped them prioritize family members’ roles, and they launched new agri-tourism enterprises that bring paying guests to the ranch to enjoy hunting, riding, cattle-herding, and other recreational activities. Today, 50 percent of Cottonwood Ranch’s income comes from tourism.

To meet a goal to improve the rangeland, the Smiths initiated management-intensive grazing, in which the herd is moved frequently through the range based on monitoring. The family’s range management plan is guided by the Shoesole Resource

Management Group’s holistic management team.

With the team’s input, the family has overhauled its approach to range management, resulting in what Petersen calls tremendous improvements to riparian and upland areas, including better water quality in streams and more plentiful herbaceous and woody vegetative ground cover. The improvements convinced officials at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to allow about 400 cow/calf pairs on the landscape.

“Team members collect and evaluate riparian monitoring data, and improvements are definitely being made,” Petersen said. “The agencies concur and they’re satisfied with the progress.”

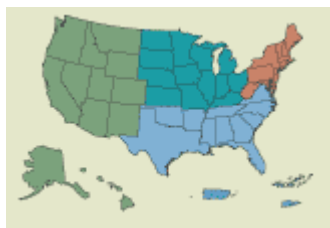
Cottonwood Ranch has become an educational resource for agency staff as well as other ranchers. Each summer, the team organizes a field tour featuring a specific habitat management strategy. Team participants from Nevada Extension developed a fact sheet evaluating the effects of HM on the landscape. Finally, part of the group’s recent efforts have focused on public relations and focusing on the collaborative decision making process in hopes that educating Nevada residents about the ranch’s progress and the group’s partnership approach will avoid citizen appeals to the BLM and the USFS about the Smiths’ grazing allotments.

“We want to solve problems,” Petersen said. “We’ve combined our working group concept – a multi-agency and public-represented group, with all affected interests invited – with Holistic Management® to guide the group dynamic. We look at the whole operation and what kind of impact it has on private and public land, ranch profitability and quality of life.”

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