

The New Ranch: A Definition

“Healthy land is the only permanently profitable land.” – Aldo Leopold

During the past thirty years, while the debate over public lands grazing has grown increasingly shrill, a small number of people have quietly worked to resolve problems where it counts: on the ground. They have come together at the local level, where their knowledge and concern are strongest, to learn from each other and from the lands they share. Their work has been neither fast nor easy, and many questions remain to be answered, but they have produced results: grasslands that are more productive and diverse, where erosion has diminished, where streams and springs that were dry now flow, where wildlife is more abundant. As a result of these changes, they are also ranches that are more profitable for their owners.



Kay and David James own and operate a 'New Ranch' near Durango, Colo.

The Quivira Coalition has coined the term The New Ranch to refer to these places. Founded in 1997 by two conservationists and a rancher, the organization's mission is to foster

ecological, economic, and social health on western landscapes through education, innovation, collaboration, and progressive public and private land stewardship. Central to this goal is spreading the word that the natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat, biological diversity, and functioning watersheds are the same processes that make land productive for livestock.

The key concept is land health which the National Research Council defines as “the degree to which the integrity of the soil and ecological processes of rangeland ecosystems are sustained.” In other words, before land can sustainably support a value, such as livestock grazing, hunting, recreation, or wildlife protection, it must be functioning properly at a basic ecological level. The New Ranch, therefore, is a grassroots movement that literally starts over where it matters most: at the grass and the roots.

Elements of The New Ranch include:

1. Implementing innovative land management practices that succeed in improving both the conservation values and the economic sustainability of ranches across diverse landscapes. These practices do not add up to any single blueprint or recipe for successful management. Indeed, one of the lessons of The New Ranch is that management must be flexible and attentive to the particular circumstances of each ranch's ecological, economic and social conditions.

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Cattle on the James Ranch.

2. Documenting the success of these land management practices with scientifically credible monitoring protocols and articulating their results to diverse audiences.

3. Helping to create a common vocabulary for ranchers, scientists, agency officials, and conservationists to use in addressing rangeland and other land health issues. These groups share a concern for the land, but all too often they lack a common language to communicate their views and resolve their differences.

4. Educating various audiences about the complexity and difficulty of managing rangelands well. While no single person or group – public or private, commercial or non-commercial – has the “answer” to good stewardship, many have parts of

the “answer.” The key is to put the parts together collaboratively. This means respecting “old” knowledge, especially local knowledge, and integrating it into current practices. The New Ranch does all of this through a willingness to share one’s knowledge, to look, listen, teach, and be taught in turn.

5. Restoring damaged land to health. Many landowners are engaged in an effort to restore and maintain the basic ecological processes and functions that support rangeland health, including: soil stability, watershed function, nutrient and energy flows, and resilience to disturbance. At the same time, many are exploring the economic potentials of restoration – a financial payback that some consider the next significant new frontier for The New Ranch.

