

DARK DAYS FOR RANGENET?

More from the get'emoff gang. Words and photos by Tim Findley

Courtney White of the Quivira Coalition struggles with his power point presentation. In this most politically updated historic hotel in Albuquerque, N.M., not far from Quivira's own turf in Santa Fe, White's presentation on behalf of the "Radical Center" is playing to a tough crowd.

"We call it the 'New Ranch,'" he says, "and we try to work in a process of collaboration that recognizes the value of biodiversity in rangeland."

There is a noise from the back of the audience—not a heckle exactly, just a loud, indistinct scoff. White knows in general that this RangeNet 2004 conference is part of an agenda to eliminate grazing on public lands, but he proceeds with an approach suggesting that confrontation alone will not solve the problem.

His laser pen works a dot over the screen showing interconnected economic values of ranching communities. There is a photograph of a little boy and his dad alongside a horse trailer. "We try not only to recognize the value of biodiversity," he says, "but cultural diversity in these regions."

From the back of the room there is a thump and what sounds like a half-shouted curse of "Bull!" It is Jon Marvel himself, grown physically impatient with the compromising images presented by the radical center he and the sponsoring Forest Guardians invited to speak at his confab.

Marvel suffers none he considers fools in the campaign he envisions to get rid of grazing on federal "public" lands. He would have cow pie found outside a private fence regarded like a land mine in a playground, and he seems infuriated by White's suggestion of management techniques or new technologies to offset the damage supposedly done

by grazing.

"If Quivira wants to deal with private land grazing, let 'em," he finally bursts out. "We're going to get the cattle off public lands."

White seems a little stunned by the attack from the leader of the conference himself. About 150 other people seated before him with Marvel at their back sit silent, even, perhaps, a little embarrassed. It has already been rigged anyway that White would be followed in positive approach to "An End of the Grazing Debate" by George Wuerthner, the activist and author of "Welfare Ranching," who Marvel recognized two years ago with the first of his "Edward Abbey memorial" awards.

Wuerthner is waiting to speak under the topic of "The Grazing Debate Continues," but it is clear he doesn't particularly mean to

waste much time in dialogue as he takes up a sniper's post just behind the still-standing White.

"Courtney deserves to be congratulated for his courage in coming here," Wuerthner says. "He wants us to understand that there is a human factor that can be successful in good management of grazing. But he doesn't understand that I don't want better range management. I want grazing eliminated."

White's "radical center," meant to encourage new techniques of rotation and fencing and feed on grazing ground is not at all interesting to Wuerthner. "I want it simply to end," he barks. "And I don't really care how much better the technique can be. I want it to be over."

A lanky, somewhat disheveled man with a purposely scrambled head of blond hair, Wuerthner presents himself as always the kind-hearted intellectual, who just, I'm sorry, knows better than anybody else about western ranching and farming. Two-thirds of the arid West's vital water supply goes to agriculture, he argues, and most of that is used to produce livestock or feed for livestock. "Ranchers don't create local economies," he says. "The local economy creates them, because nearly all of them need another job to survive." New methods won't change that bottom line in Wuerthner's view. Most ranchers, he suggests, are bound to go broke anyway, "and we just don't need them anymore."

Unlike Marvel, Wuerthner doesn't seem to take it all so personally, but he's convinced it will be cheaper for the government to just "buy out the grazers now," and save the cultural diversity arguments for later.



Jon Marvel (arms outstretched) is outraged at Courtney White's suggestion that grazing is an integral part of biodiversity.

"If Quivira wants to deal with private land grazing, let 'em," Marvel says. "We're going to get cattle off public lands."

"I don't think humans have the capacity to know how the land works," Wuerthner says. "We need to step back and watch how it heals itself."

Convinced already that grazing is the ultimate villain, no matter its "cultural value," the 150 or so participants in RangeNet 2004 warmly applaud their appreciation of Wuerthner's shot, and Jon Marvel calms himself with a smug smile.

This fifth of RangeNet conferences assembled each year in a different western city drew no more or perhaps even a few less participants than the 200 or so who met in Boise, Idaho, or Phoenix, Ariz., or Boulder, Colo., over the last few years; but substantially less than the 500 who kicked off the crusade in Reno, Nev., back in 2000 when many thought they were on the verge of a Gore administration that would lead them to victory. This time, the just-finished election of 2004 left them with what Marvel conceded as an "adverse condition" that may require "attorneys in phalanxes" to achieve their ends.

In five years, what they had imagined as a steady march of legislative support has become hardly a straggle of evidently confused opportunists working against the trend in the White House and Congress. Nevertheless, RangeNet and the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign remain doggedly determined to use federal funds to eliminate "public" grazing altogether and, by implication, to undercut most of the infrastructure support in feed grains and equipment for even private grazing in the West.

They met this time with the sponsorship of Forest Guardians at the historic La Posada Hotel in downtown Albuquerque, built in arching Spanish colonial style by Conrad Hilton in 1939, and host to such notables from Gregory Peck and Zsa Zsa Gabor to John F. Kennedy and Carlos Santana. Recently, it has undergone a sort of politically correct refit, eliminating parking spaces out front to make room for public transportation and banning all smoking except for one floor of the hotel.

Socially unacceptable smokers thus caught in off moments of the day's proceedings may find themselves looking guiltily at each other around the sand-filled vases just outside the front door. "Where you from?" my gregarious new companion asks. "Me, I'm from Tucson," he says, "born and raised." A neatly dressed and evidently hurried young man carrying two cups of special coffee quickly passed between us. The fellow from Tucson hesitates not a moment before jump-



ing ahead to open the door for the young man. I was impressed by what seemed such a genuinely nice guy.

Andy Kerr could never leave that sort of a favorable first impression. The self-proclaimed architect of the spotted owl strategy against old-growth logging and now the full-time director of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign is not the type to be opening doors for yuppies carrying Starbucks coffee.

"You remember Leon Trotsky?" Kerr sug-

Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) offers a buyout to ranchers who are "under siege" from drought and federal regulations and failing prices due to "global economics."

gests during another panel on the "Dark Days" presented by a Bush victory. "You know how it's got to get so much worse before the revolution really comes?" That's Kerr's way of encouragement, but surprisingly it is spoken as a sort of introduction to the conference keynote speaker, U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.). Only then do I recognize him as the fellow smoker from Tucson who seemed like such a naturally nice guy.

Grijalva is one of only two members of Congress whom Kerr and his campaign have convinced to introduce legislation that would

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devote federal money to the elimination of grazing. The other is Connecticut Republican Christopher Shays (see *RANGE*, Summer 2003).

Grijalva's legislation, limited so far to Arizona, would make it possible for the federal government to pay ranchers as much as \$175 per AUM (Animal Unit Month) to retire their herds from grazing allotments on Bureau of Land Management or Forest Service lands. It is an enticing offer that could bring multiple thousands, even millions of dollars, in a one-



time windfall to ranchers willing to accept the buyout. Grijalva says he views it as an entirely "voluntary process" offered to ranchers in his state who are "under siege" from drought and federal regulations and failing prices due to "global economics."

He cites ranches he knows of in his own region that in recent years have failed to succeed and been sold out to new development that quickly covered the land in the sprawl of growth common now in the Southwest. Buyouts, he suggests, could save those ranches as private property and yet preserve the public



Jon Marvel talks with RangeNet poster cowboy, black-hatted Arizona rancher John Whitney, who agrees with the buyout. "I think I know what's best for me," Whitney says.

land. All that assuming, of course, that the federal government would appropriate sufficient funds to buy back its own land leased for what policy still says is highest and best use.

Talking to him later on the strength of our small smoker's friendship, I learn that Grijalva himself is the son of a cowboy Bracero brought from Mexico in 1945 to work on the vast Canoa ranch near Tucson. It was his father who witnessed the great ranches being broken up after World War II, and who passed his worries on to his son, who rose from work in the Community Service Center and the school board of Tucson to earn a seat in Congress.

"The West is changing," he says. "I wish it weren't so, but it is, and there must be new options."

But did Grijalva not see that he could be being used by Kerr's grazing campaign to create a condition that would force more people off the land?

"I assure you," he says, sincere and nearly insulted, "I will not be used by anyone. This program would not be for everyone. Only for those willing and in need. It is meant to help them, not harm them."

In "need" is just a part of the issue. Kerr, who first conceived of the scam to offer buyouts at a vastly inflated price of \$175 per AUM, says later in the conference that others suggest the federal government could be convinced to offer double that, or even more, up to \$800 per AUM, in order to lure ranchers to

retire their allotments. According to Kerr, buyouts, once underway, could trigger a wild seller's market: "I'd rather it not come to that kind of crisis."

Is it extortion on behalf of such legislation seeking "willing sellers" put under pressure by lawsuits and "habitat" regulations? Or could it be turned around to be extortion by those who hold grazing rights demanding more

"Remember Leon Trotsky? You know how it's got to get so much worse before the revolution really comes?" Andy Kerr, Director of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign to remove cattle from federal land.

than the government could afford to retire them? Either way, the cost of the buyout program to the federal government would be in multiple billions of dollars.

"Affordable, compared to the long-term cost of subsidies," insists Wuerthner, whose real aim seems to be the capture of water resources and vast wilderness zones that would resettle people in comfortable community zones appropriate to their interests,

but apart from the wildlands. Unlike most of his compadres, Wuerthner has no big problem with "sprawl" in the equation. "It's insignificant in comparison" to grazing by what he defines nearly universally in the West as "hobby ranchers."

In the conference at La Posada, Sam Hitt of Forest Guardians takes great relief in noting that at this gathering, unlike the first in Reno, he does not have to look out across "a sea of cowboy hats. That," he says sarcastically, "was a frightening experience."

True enough, there is only one visible cowboy hat at La Posada, and that belongs on the head of the rancher eagerly talking to Jon Marvel at the back of the room. John Whitney, of the Circle Bar Ranch in Tonto National Forest outside Phoenix, wears it like a dusty crown. Whitney may be the poster cowboy for RangeNet if ever the unlikely happens to assure federal funds for grazing buyouts.

"We have a lot of recreation issues," says Whitney, who seems to dislike loose hikers and fence breakers as much as Marvel hates loose cows. He owns the first ranch east of the ever-extending sprawl of Phoenix. And his attention to the grazing buyout was first focused, he said, when he read a series of articles in *RANGE*, including techniques and scientific conclusions on grazing benefits by Allan Savory and other solutions as presented by Kerr and Marvel for buyouts.

"If it gets down to that, I think I know what's best for me," says Whitney, resting the 10-gallon on the floor as he enjoys the catered lunch that is part of the hotel convention service. The \$175-per-AUM buyout, as pointed out by Kerr and others, could mean a cool six-figure or even million-dollar windfall for some lease holders, if Congress appropriates the funds.

RangeNet times five isn't kidding anybody. The group has achieved little since their first meeting in Reno. But, aside from a few cautionary words by Kerr himself, the organization apparently goes on. The only noticeable difference this time from the previous four was that after the concluding remarks in Albuquerque, nobody announced where RangeNet '05 will be meeting next year.

Tim Findley has been to them all. Nobody else in the media can say that, even if Jon Marvel still doesn't like him.