

NMCGA ON THE TRAIL...

For immediate release: September 29, 2021

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Sawtooth Mountain

How the reinstatement of livestock grazing on the Cibola Forest allotment came about

By: Taylor Riggins, NMCGA

New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association (NMCGA) members Ron and Mahona Burnett recently shared their agriculture story with the Society of Range Management (SRM) and guests during the society's summer tour in Datil.

The Burnett's were awarded the permit to graze 22 sections of scenic Sawtooth Mountain. This particular allotment had been out of grazing rotation for several years. The couple was selected from a pool of five applicants, following critical review of detailed grazing and management plans for Sawtooth Mountain. With the addition of Sawtooth, Ron and Mahona run livestock on the Flying V and Sugarloaf allotments in the Datil area.

During the presentation, Ron highlighted benefits of working closely with officials such as Tina Cason, Rangeland Management Specialist of the Magdalena Ranger District on the Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands. Ron and Tina further discussed the Forest Service grazing allotment grant process, National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funding opportunities, impacts of the Mexican Grey Wolf, ecosystems of local wildlife and the importance of management practices.

"Well thought out decisions are required of a good land steward," Ron stated to SRM and attendees. "Long term permittees are key to the long term health of rangeland through adaptive management tools."

With Cason and her team, Ron and Mahona continually strategize ways to reinstate existing infrastructure to the allotment. This includes placement of watering sources to draw livestock towards areas with dense cover for better utilization of forage resources. Fencing to keep unauthorized cattle out of the Burnett's herd lends to a tightened calving window and herd health plan.

The couple credits the presence of a well-developed National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the timing of likeminded leaders in regulatory positions and the years they have ranched in Datil to the success of the Sawtooth Mountain allotment being placed back into grazing.

"The influence of people and proper documentation keep the lines of communication open for a successful permittee and permit holder relationship," said Ron.

With the goal of animal and range health at the forefront, open communication strengthens best management practices. Ranchers face challenges with drought conditions, wildlife depredations and fluctuating markets. For permit holders like the Burnetts, additional issues may arise with presence of heightened traffic due to hunters, woodcutters and recreational campers. There are also instances of bothersome and illegal littering. Yet they choose to embrace those differences, finding satisfaction in being right where they are doing what they enjoy.

“We choose to utilize permits to run our livestock and we treat each as if it was our own,” Ron said. “Putting our time and resources in each of the allotments, we treat everything like the business that it is.”