

NMCGA ON THE TRAIL

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Managing the land for livestock and wildlife at the Spur Ranch Cattle Company

Contributed by: Tom Paterson, NMCGA Wildlife Committee Vice-Chairman

Every day across New Mexico, ranchers care for their land and livestock. They protect and develop water resources that provide wildlife habitat and maintain the wide open landscapes that our state is known for.

Ranchers Tom and Callie Paterson along with their daughters Lindsay and Caroline, run a cow-calf operation near Luna and Alma, in the southwestern part of the state. The family founded Spur Ranch Cattle Company in Catron County two decades ago, but the ranch name and area of operation date back to the 1870s. Spur Ranch Cattle Company is a member of the NMCGA.

Lindsay and Caroline work alongside their parents, sharing in the hard work, the joys and the disappointments that are part of ranch life. "Show up early. Work late. Don't whine." Those are some of the lessons Tom and Callie have modeled to pass on to their now adult daughters.

Over the years, the Paterson family has initiated multiple land and water conservation projects on their ranch. Major undertakings have been riparian restoration projects. Riparian zone restoration includes habitats of streams, rivers, springs, lakes, floodplains, and other hydrologic ecologies. Working with local, state and federal agencies and with private groups, they have designed and installed multiple sediment retention structures on Centerfire Creek. By doing so, they have extended work the United States Forest Service did during the 1970s on upper reaches of the Centerfire Watershed further downstream. Addressing stream impairment issues that the New Mexico Environment Department identified, returning the Centerfire Creek riparian area to an historic level. These sediment retention have already retained many tons of sediment in the upper reaches of Centerfire Creek, which is part of the San Francisco Watershed.

In addition to riparian restoration, the Paterson family has stopped gully formation and erosion by ripping vulnerable areas of land to let otherwise flashy run-off penetrate into the ground with gully plugs. Ripping areas of land reduces the soil compactness allowing the soil to readily absorb water and nutrients. Flashy run-off areas, or areas of rapidly increased water flow, are also reduced by ripping.

The Paterson family has also seeded extensively with native grasses, and thinned wooded areas on the ranch that were no longer functioning properly by utilizing controlled burns in those areas. On their federal grazing allotments, the Paterson family has worked diligently with the United States Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop multiple fencing and water projects to keep cattle and wildlife off riparian areas during drought, spreading them across the landscape to achieve better utilization of forage resources.

The Paterson family's work has been recognized repeatedly for its positive impact on the environment. These restoration projects and their daily management have created and continue to provide open pasture, meadow, riparian and forest habitat for livestock as well as wildlife species. Frequent wildlife visitors to the ranch include: black bear, elk, deer, small mammals, coyotes, the Mexican Grey Wolf, eagles, ravens, crows, hawks, songbirds, waterfowl, and reptiles.

The Patterson family believes in multiple-use management. That as ranchers they are called to be good stewards of the land, and to return it in better condition than they received it. Like in Genesis 1, God tells man to be responsible for every living thing. Ranching gives the Patersons opportunity to practice that stewardship responsibility.

"Environmental stewardship is nothing new for New Mexico's ranchers," said Randell Major, New Mexico Cattle Growers Association President. "We love what we do and where we live. You would be hard pressed to find a rancher who isn't focused on sustainability on their operation, because we aren't just looking to keep our operations viable today but for the next several generations."

The NMCGA has represented the beef industry in New Mexico and the West since 1914 and has members in all 32 of the state's 33 counties as well as some 19 other states. The Association participates in venues necessary to protect beef producers and private property rights including litigation, state and federal legislation and regulatory affairs. You can visit or join the NMCGA online at www.nmagriculture.org.

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