New Long-term Model for Grazing Federal Land?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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How 38 Utah ranchers created the groundbreaking Three Creeks LLC to improve their government grazing allotments

For many ranchers, the renewal process for federal grazing permits causes stress. Over a decade ago, in Utah's Bear River Valley, several US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) grazing permits were up for renewal. With several impaired streams and previous anti-grazing pressure, the ranchers knew they needed a new grazing plan. If they didn't improve grazing management, the sheep and cattle ranchers worried that their permits would be denied, or their animal unit months (AUM) reduced. The ranchers researched potential grazing land management options. Then, the 38 ranchers organized themselves into the Three Creeks Grazing Project.

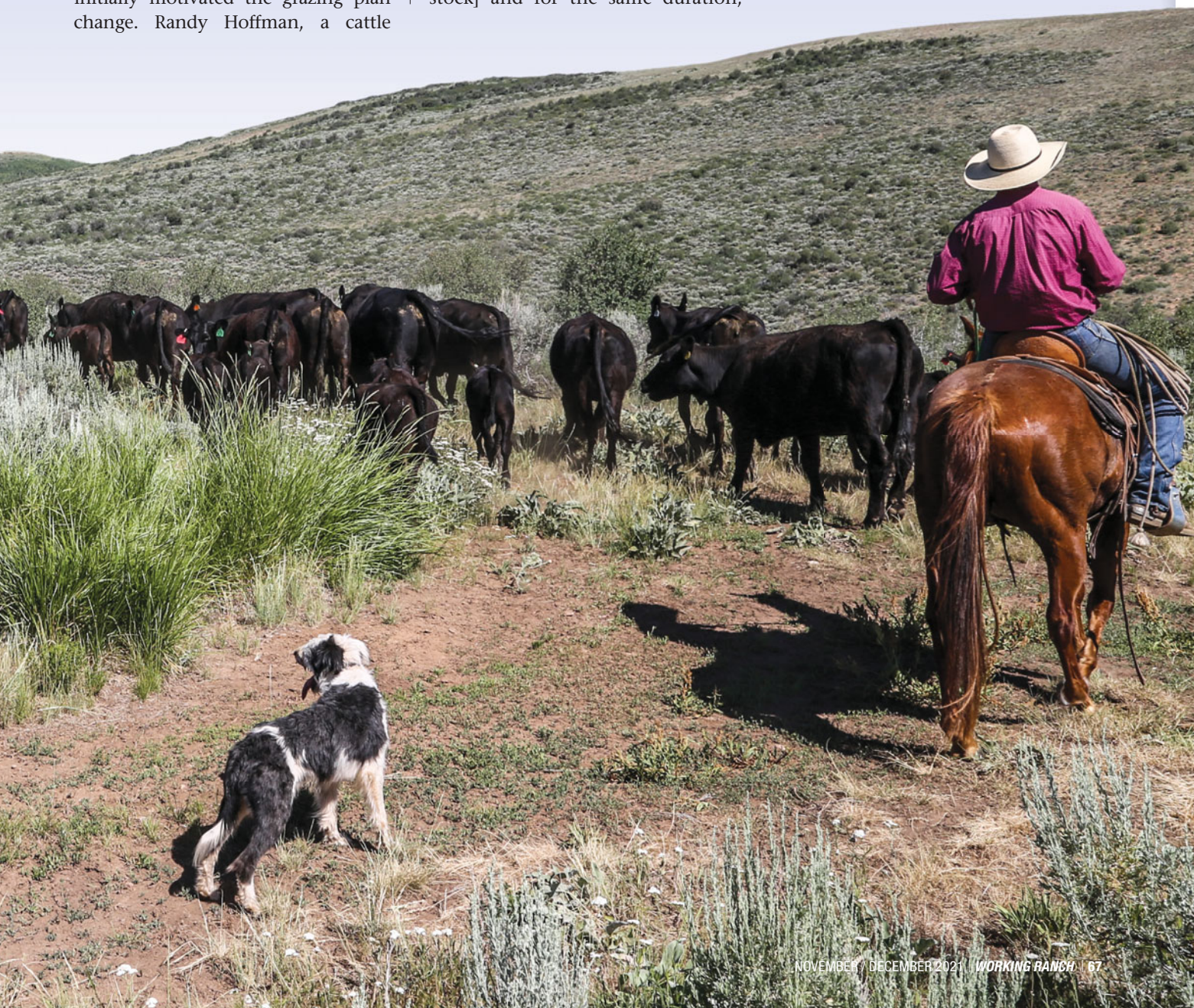
Impending grazing permit denial initially motivated the grazing plan change. Randy Hoffman, a cattle rancher from Randolph, Utah, and other ranchers had recently been forced to engage an attorney to retain a grazing permit. "Our opponents wanted the cows off government grounds," recalls Hoffman, now a Three Creeks Grazing Project director, "We wanted to prevent another fight like that."

That was back in 2001. At that time, several streams didn't meet the water quality threshold required by the State of Utah. The rangeland provides habitat for several threatened and endangered wildlife species, including the Greater sage-grouse. The ranchers asked themselves, "What have we done since the last permits were renewed? Have we improved the health of the range?"

"We realized that we needed a different management system to stay out with the same numbers [of livestock] and for the same duration," says Dale Lamborn, a cattle rancher out of Laketown, Utah, and a Three Creeks director.

THE ROAD TO CHANGE

The ranchers researched potential grazing land management options and found a successful model in the neighboring Deseret Land and Livestock Ranch in Woodruff, Utah. The Deseret grazes its 200,000 deeded acres with large cattle herds, 1,000-head plus, for high density, short durations. Rancher Alvin Shaul approached the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food's *Grazing Improvement Program* (GIP) for assistance in developing a similar grazing management plan for the contiguous 146,000 acres of public lands grazed by the Three Creeks ranchers — two-thirds managed by the BLM and a



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third by the US Forest Service (USFS).

The Utah GIP excitedly agreed to help the Three Creeks Grazing Project. "We began with a crazy amount of meetings in which we talked about big ideas for management change," says Taylor Payne, the GIP coordinator based in Randolph, "We talked about all of the worries that ranchers had, how to pay for the project, and who would manage it." The ranchers agreed to take a vote, and, if at least 75% of the AUMs represented were in favor, they would proceed with landscape-scale management. It passed.

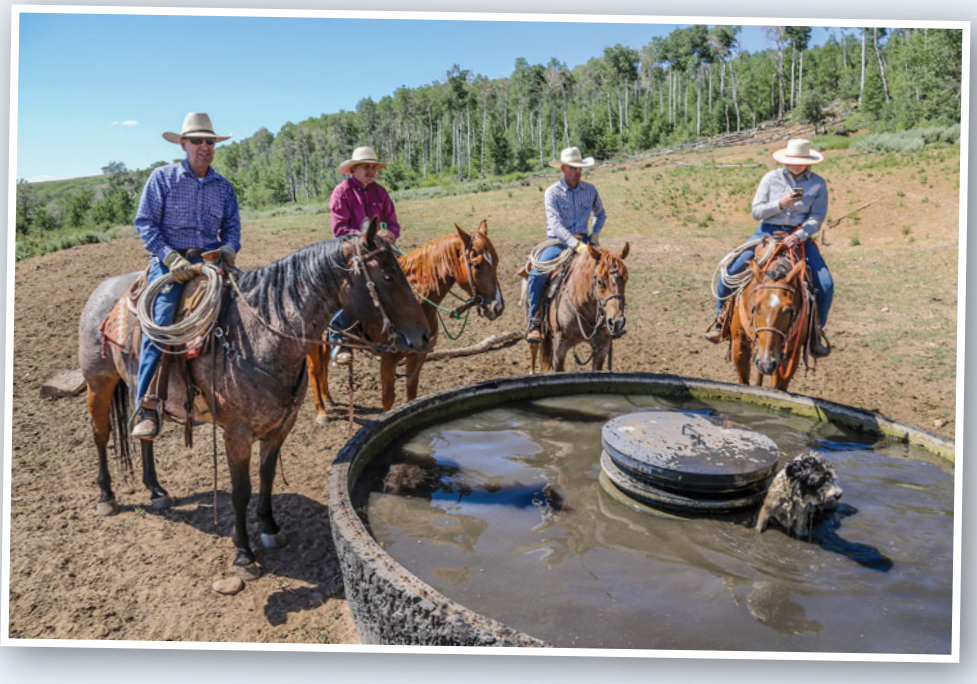
"Most of the lands weren't usually overgrazed," Payne continues. "They were just under-managed. We knew the streams that needed attention. Instead of spending dollars on fencing cattle off of water, we planned active grazing management. We requested the BLM and Forest Service that they let us do what was needed for healthy grazing management."

COMBINED GRAZING AT SCALE

The new grazing plan combined five BLM allotments and five USFS allotments where 38 ranchers formerly grazed in common as 10 separate groups. Some of the ranchers were pessimistic about the new management plan. "At the beginning, when we were unsure that the new plan would work," Lamborn says, "it was significant that everyone agreed — at varying levels of enthusiasm — and signed their name. The skeptics have now seen that, though it has been a long implementation process, it has enabled us to do a better job."

The ranchers credit the Utah GIP for advocating the Three Creeks Grazing Project throughout the federal bureaucracy required to shift management style. "Without Taylor's [Payne] willingness to go after funding resources,

Taylor Payne explains: "I added in a before and after grazing picture on just one stream that was grazed in the same summer (note dates on signboards). The stream is called Big Creek which is found on Three Creeks."



The Three Creeks crew, L to R: Randy Hoffman, Colt Johnson, Dusty Morse, and Cedar Johnson.

and lobby for us," Lamborn says, "Three Creeks wouldn't have happened. None of the permittees had the expertise, nor the time, to do it."

With Payne's guidance, the ranchers developed a grazing plan modeled on the Deseret's successful management practices. Next, they faced the daunting environmental analysis required for permit renewal under the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). "Three Creeks is a producer-led and producer-driven project," Payne says, "The BLM and USFS were initially reluctant to change. We utilized our Rich County commissioners to petition the federal agencies to begin the NEPA process for the new grazing plan."

The hurdle taller than NEPA, though, was the rapid turnover of federal employees. "It was an annual event to meet the new range conservationist and get them up to speed," Payne recalls. "Besides myself and a [Utah GIP] colleague, the ranchers were the only other people with this project from start to finish. It's why permittees' historical knowledge and experience are so important to the land and its management. Their input must majorly factor into management plans."

As the Three Creeks Grazing Project formed, not all elected state officials were keen on the Utah GIP's financial support. "Some disagreed that state monies should be spent to improve federal lands," Lamborn recalls. "I think it's a wonderful state expenditure. Here in the Bear River Valley, ranchers are dependent on grazing federal ground. There isn't enough private pasture for all of the livestock owned by ranchers that live here. We have the most cows per capita in the state. To keep agriculture viable here, our economy going, and our communities in existence it's vital that federal grazing lands be managed well."

HOW THEY DO IT

For the Three Creeks Grazing Project, the ranchers organized themselves. They created an LLC, translated their AUMs into equivalent company shares, and elected a board of directors. The LLC members meet twice a year. Before cattle are turned out in the spring, and again in the fall. The board of directors regularly meets as needed.

With BLM and USFS agreement, the member ranchers all transferred

To rotate between pastures, the gate is opened and a couple days later the range riders and ranchers sweep the pasture to gather any straggling cattle. Then, they spend a few days pushing cattle that drifted back down to the gate up to water wells until the herd settles.

Cattle drink at spring-fed water troughs that were improved through the new grazing plan.

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their individually held AUMs over to the LLC. In the shift, a few obsolete horse permits were changed to cattle. Now, the ranchers pay an assessment to the LLC. Grant funding, from partners including the Utah Division of Water Quality, the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, has also been awarded to the LLC to pay for grazing management, including range rider wages. The LLC handles the billing, contracts water maintenance and fencing repairs, and hires range riders. "This sounds expensive," Payne says, "but it's an overall reduction in cost because the ranchers themselves don't have to expend the time and labor."

The grazing project began with ranchers assigned to repair designated fences. "It didn't work," Hoffman says, "because some people wouldn't fix the fence in a timely manner. Then, cows were where they weren't supposed to be. The contractors work well because I don't have to leave the hayfield to address problems up on the allotment. I communicate with the range rider assigned to the area where my cattle graze. I occasionally ride with him, if I have the time. We have three range riders, and they often work together."

The cattle are combined into two herds of over 1,600 head each. They follow the grass through 33 different pastures from the BLM lands down in the valley up into the Cache Mountains onto lands managed by the USFS. Five bands of sheep graze the valley BLM lands in winter and move up onto the Forest ahead of the cattle in the summer.

"The larger herds evenly distribute grazing across the landscape, assisted by water development and herding practices," Payne says. "Additionally, by combining cattle numbers, we increased the pastures between which to rotate the cattle. Though the cattle graze at a higher density, they are in the pastures for a shorter period and we're able to rest pastures for up to 18 months. This rests range plants that have not received any since the pioneers arrived in this valley."

The ranchers began the grazing project expecting it would take a few years. Twelve years later, the grazing plan will be fully implemented in 2022. "What we've been able to do has visibly improved the range and the health of our livestock," Lamborn says. "That keeps us motivated."

Years of persistence rewarded the Three Creeks team with a joint memorandum of understanding between the BLM and USFS to recognize a combined NEPA document. The NEPA process alone dragged over a decade. "Both agencies are federal," Payne says, "but they have different regulations and had to concede whose rules would take precedence. Now, the entire environmental permitting process is finalized. We're down to the nuances of water rights, the last remaining new water pipelines and troughs."

ALL AROUND IMPROVEMENT

The BLM and USFS allowed the ranchers to continue grazing throughout the permit renewal process. Also, as components of the new grazing

plan were approved, the Three Creeks ranchers were able to implement them. "The forced slow adoption of this huge change in grazing management has been helpful," Payne reflects. "As each step was taken, we were able to see how it improved wildlife habitat and water quality."

The Three Creeks LLC hires a third-party biodiversity monitor, and partners with a non-profit research group, to measure and track rangeland health. Water quality improved quickly when Three Creeks decreased the amount of time cattle spent in a pasture, increased the drinking capacity at the upland troughs that provide water off of the creeks for the cattle, and with the hired range riders' effort to prevent cattle from loitering in riparian areas. Data shows that Greater sage-grouse now initiate more nests than under the previous management style. Additionally, grass regrowth recovers more rapidly after a grazing period and with increased yield.

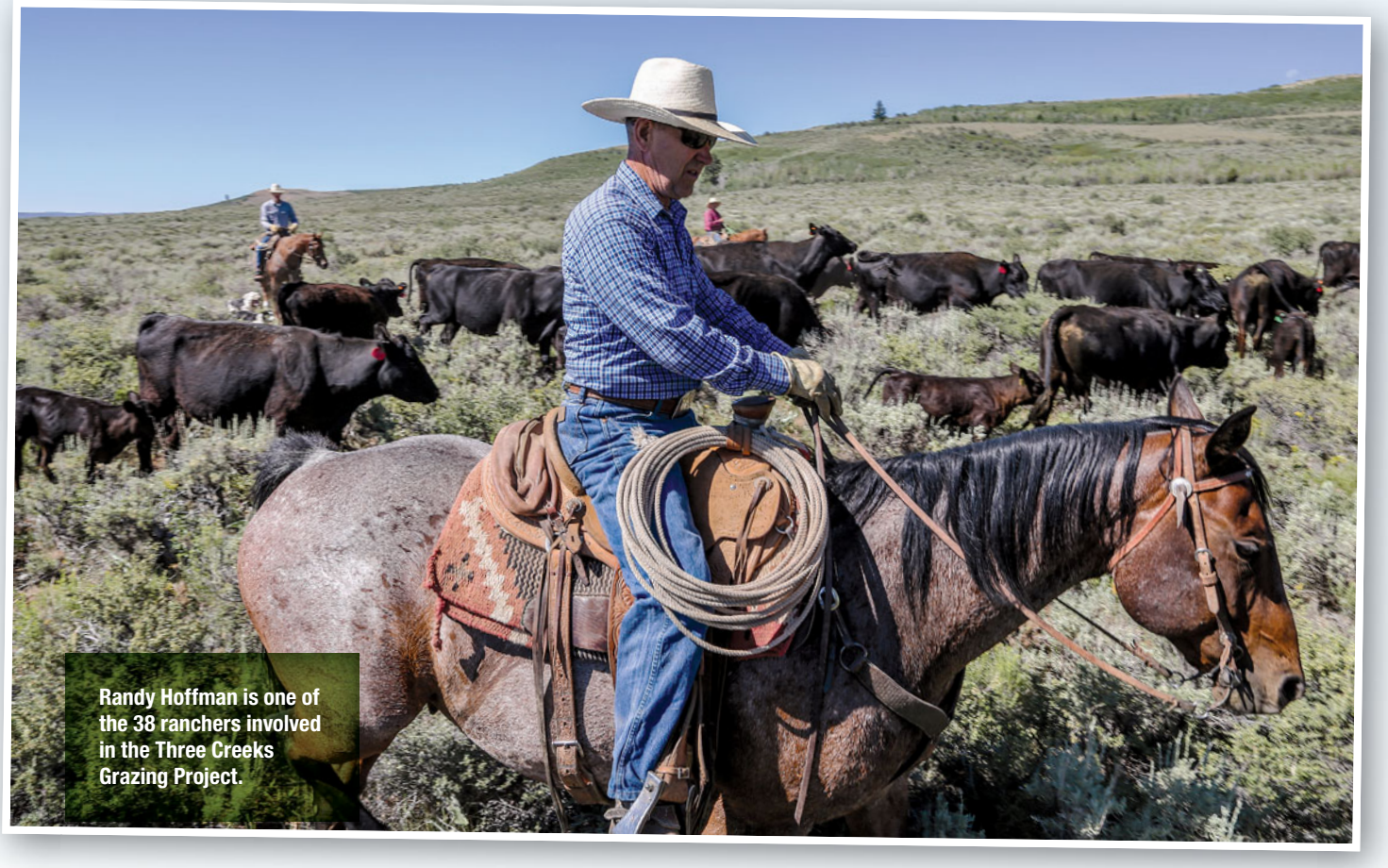
"The small, intermediary changes to the grazing plan quickly met the federal standards and objectives of the grazing permits," Payne says. "Because of these results, and the landscape scale of the Three Creeks project, the BLM and Forest Service allows the LLC to manage their AUMs over a longer period of time. The ranchers have the same amount of cattle grazing for almost an entire month longer than previous. A third of Rich County's ranchers are involved in Three Creeks. That month equates to a whole heck of a lot in feed savings in winter for them. And, it's because they're able to manage the range more sustainably."

Besides extended range turnout, the ranchers have observed benefits to their cattle's health. "I think the changes improved weaning weights," Lamborn says, "because the cattle are constantly on fresh feed. Before, they'd hang on the water where the grass was all grazed off. The range riders immediately spot sick cattle and doctor them, which increases cattle health. Also, now that we meet regularly for Three Creeks LLC, we've talked about bulls and improved genetics."

Three Creeks showcases that 38 ranchers grazing adjacent, yet separate, federal allotments managed by two different agencies can consolidate their sheep flocks, cattle herds, and pastures to achieve a high density, short-duration grazing plan across an entire watershed. The ranchers' requests for grazing management change, based on a successful model, gained them technical assistance, funding, and advocates that resulted in bigger and better results than they anticipated.

"There are so many people extremely excited about the Three Creeks Grazing Project, from extension agents to wildlife advocates," Payne says. "They look at what Three Creeks has accomplished as a way to support grazing on federal lands and improve land health across an entire watershed. These potential partners wait for other such projects, across the West, to help through technical assistance and funding."

Three Creeks combined the ranchers' voices to give them weight in requesting grazing plan changes. Now they consider selling, on the carbon market, their capacity to sequester carbon through their active grazing management. "We're not global warming alarmists," Payne says, "but we do need help paying for ongoing management expenses. We want to implement good grazing management and seek financial encouragement for it." WR



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