

Indian group uses modern tools to raise animals

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LAGUNA PUEBLO, N.M.—Members of the Sedillo Cattle Association at Laguna Pueblo have for decades used ancient traditions and modern practices to successfully raise livestock on 100,000 acres of wind-swept tribal land in central New Mexico.

Working as a group with delegated duties, they work to preserve pastures and scarce water resources using the traditional knowledge of elders and up to the minute technologies that now include solar power, Global Positioning Systems and video marketing.

They offer traditional prayers in the native Keresan language before branding and rounding up cattle for shipment to buyers, a way of giving thanks for the land, the animals and remembering elders who have passed.

And while the tribe appreciates new technology, members still rely on ancient "seasons of use" knowledge passed down through the generations to manage rangeland and cattle.

"We are proud of the fact that we are working to be stewards of the land and taking care of what Mother Nature has provided for us," said Sedillo association president and tribe member John Romero. "We're trying to get other tribal members back into agriculture and livestock as a way of life again."

Their efforts pay off twofold.

The association's grazing techniques and management style brings in good money for cattle while working to keep the cultural beliefs and traditions of the Laguna people intact for the younger generation.

Association members recently showcased their efforts during a tour organized by the New Mexico Society of Range Management, drawing more than 65 participants from New Mexico and Arizona—including government agency specialists, university researchers, ranchers and American Indian rangeland specialists.

A cattle association is similar to a cooperative or communal group, where all members own and sell cattle as a group and share their ideas and experience to make it profitable.

The idea of cattle associations is not new, but the Sedillo group has been effective in making it work, said Andres Cibils, professor of rangeland science at New Mexico State University and president of the state's range management chapter.

"Their whole concept of making stock rate decisions (for cattle) based on range land monitoring is impressive, as is the cooperation between the members and how they get things done in a cooperative manner," Cibils said.

Hopi Representative Studies Process

Robert T. Adams, a range technician with the Hopi Office of Range Management in Tewa, Ariz., attended the tour to learn how to bring the Sedillo practices to the Hopi tribe.

He said Hopi livestock producers work individually and are scattered, making management more difficult.

"I'm just asking a lot of questions, and I mainly want to know 'How did you get everyone to work together in one unit?'" Adams said. "This is a proven method that I can take back to the Hopi and show them how you can get things done."

Romero said the pueblo purchased two land grants in the 1930s to relieve overgrazing. Tribal members were allowed to relocate their livestock onto the land, located about 40 miles west of Albuquerque.

'We are a family'

About 4,000 people live at Laguna Pueblo, and the 24 members of the Sedillo association work a weekly rotated schedule to care for 600 head of cattle. Members who fail to work when assigned or neglect to honor bylaws can be removed.

"We are a family. We're all related," Romero said.

Romero said the group elects both younger and older board members.

"It's a good learning experience in management for the younger members, and we want the older members because we rely and depend upon their experiences and wisdom," Romero said.

Mike Henio, range specialist with the Navajo Nation Ramah Chapter's Department of Natural Resources, said he runs cattle near Pine Hill and attended the tour to learn more about the association from a native perspective.

"Not a lot of tribes have associations, and this one is probably the most successful one," Henio said.

The association also has spearheaded efforts to stay progressive.

Group Also Sells Cattle Online

Over the last 20 years, the group has used federal grants and guidance to use solar power and electricity to distribute water for livestock and create a GPS-assisted pasture monitoring system, Romero said.

Last year, the group sold calves through national video livestock auctions to buyers in Texas, Oklahoma, California and Florida.

Alisha Antonio, a Laguna natural resource specialist, said the association focused on ways to preserve surface water quality, including removal of invasive species, wetlands restoration and erosion control.

"We also have to restrict the amount of livestock in certain areas to protect the natural berms along the Rio San Jose," Antonio said. "We use old historic photos of the area to try and recreate what was here, especially near our cultural and religious sites."

Wilbur Luis, a Bureau of Indian Affairs and Laguna range specialist, said the association has fine-tuned pasture rotation and uses cattle grazing to improve plant growth.

"I've seen this rangeland come from bare ground to what it is now," said Luis, looking over a vast green pasture.