

CHAPTER 10

AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

A. ISSUES

Despite rapid growth and subdivision, Jackson Hole is still ranching country, as it has been since the valley homesteading began a century ago. Ranching activity is crucial to the local tourist economy and enhances the experience of the visitor to federal lands. Ranching provides a colorful, interesting foreground to the magnificent mountain views. When one thinks of scenic vistas, one thinks of the view across the Walton Ranch, or Spring Gulch or out across the Porter Estate or Snake River Ranch. Scenery in the southern valley of Jackson Hole means ranching in the foreground and mountains in the background. It creates that informal, western atmosphere that separates Jackson Hole from other resorts and gives a context for the popular Jackson Hole Rodeo and County Fair. Even though Jackson Hole's ranches are highly visible to the visiting (and resident) population, even the less visible ones add to the overall feel of the valley and its community.

Ranching in Jackson Hole serves another critical function. It provides large blocks of open space for wildlife. In the winter, the most critical time for the valley's large mammals, the animals take refuge amid the willows, along the hillsides and in the open meadows of Jackson Hole's ranches. The livestock is concentrated in feeding areas. In the spring, a critical time for nesting eagles, for example, most of the cattle are still concentrated or utilizing nesting areas in the most minimal way.

During the rest of the year, the wide open spaces of undisturbed ground, without roads, without buildings, are a refuge for species large and small. Ranching minimizes human use which is the greatest conflict for wildlife by preventing poaching (of both fish and mammals) and trespassing which creates disturbances to sensitive species such as eagles, river otter, and elk; preventing de-watering that would occur if water rights are abandoned (water must be beneficially used, or the rights are lost), by managing historic water ways or by managing vegetation to prevent clogging of the streams or ditches, culverts in nearby subdivisions. Wildlife habitat can be degraded if vegetation management is not used, for example, to periodically burn willow stands, or to fence off tree stands (particularly aspen stands) from over-use by cattle and wildlife alike. The levees on the Snake River contributed to de-watering of riparian zones behind levees. Irrigation for ranching is a primary activity that continues to distribute river water to these riparian zones and mimics the natural flooding that occurred before the levee construction.

Jackson Hole ranchers run commercial beef cattle. Most ranches are traditional cow-calf or cow-calf-yearling operations where their cows are kept year-round, and the calves are sold each fall or held over one year and sold the following fall as yearlings. Calves are born on the ranch from March to June, then the cow-calf pairs are driven to summer range, usually on grazing leases in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. While the cattle are on summer range, hay is raised on irrigated fields on the ranch, then cut and stacked in late summer. Through the winter the cows are kept on the ranch and fed hay.

In addition to the cow-calf operations, some Jackson Hole ranchers have yearling steer operations. In this situation, the ranch buys or takes on yearling steers from outside the valley in the spring to pasture for the summer. The steers are then sold in the fall. In addition to cattle ranching, some ranches grow hay or pasture for horses.

Because of the availability of water, good summer range and good pasture land, Jackson Hole ranches are typically smaller in acreage than cattle ranches in much of the west. Most of the ranching activities--hay, grazing, winter feeding, cattle drives--are visible from the valley's roads and are still an integral part of the landscape and atmosphere of Jackson Hole.

In Alta, agriculture is practiced with greater variety. On the west side of the Tetons the climate is somewhat milder and the snow less deep, permitting such types of agriculture as farming wheat and potatoes and raising sheep.

Another form of Jackson Hole ranching is dude ranching which has an equally long history in the valley. In dude ranching, horses are grazed and quartered for the paying guests, and hay is often raised for horses. Dude ranching contributes much to the western flavor and rural landscape of the valley and provides a special visitor experience.

As Jackson Hole grows, more people and development bring increasing difficulties to the rancher. For the rancher, increased development means more trespassing, livestock harassment, fence destruction and difficulty in trailing cattle to and from summer range.

The rapidly escalating land values in Jackson Hole also bring problems to ranching. Ranchers cannot afford to pay the prices for neighboring land in order to buffer or increase their own ranching operations. Furthermore, ranchers' heirs, faced with estate taxes on land assessed at its value for development, will likely have to raise the cash by selling land for subdivision.

Ranching in Jackson Hole today is severely threatened. Ranches are concentrated in relatively few hands. If only one or two ranchers decide to subdivide, major impacts will result. It certainly becomes more difficult for neighboring ranchers who become increasingly tempted to sell their land. The domino effect prevails.

B. SUMMARY STATEMENT OF GOALS

Goals:

To encourage agricultural activities in Jackson Hole because:

1. It is productive use of land.
2. It contributes to Jackson Hole's unique community character.
3. It provides and maintains critical habitat for wildlife.
4. It is the primary foreground view for the scenic vistas so popular among tourists and residents alike.
5. It is a tourist attraction in and of itself and as well as providing a context for such attractions as the rodeo and County Fair.
6. It lends diversity and tradition to a rapidly changing area.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

Ranching will be encouraged by the following policies:

1. The adoption of a County policy on the significant public values of agriculture in Teton County.
2. The Town and County will work with the State Legislature to create a dedicated tax-based funding source for the Jackson Hole Land Trust, Teton County Scenic Preserve Trust, and the Nature Conservancy to acquire easements from ranchers.
3. Agricultural and ranching uses and activities will be exempted from many of the regulations contained in the Teton County Comprehensive Plan.
4. The Town and County will assist ranchers during spring and fall cattle drives, including traffic control and announcements not to jog or bicycle along routes.
5. The Town and County will provide information for visitors and residents about ranching operations and potential conflicts.