

# Joining Forces

The New Mexico-based Quivira Coalition is working to bring Western ranchers and environmental advocates together.

by Kindra Gordon



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE QUIVIRA COALITION

►“Our aim is to build bridges between all reasonable people involved in the grazing debate,” says Courtney White (right), one of the founders of the Quivira Coalition, shown here with Jim Williams.

It’s no secret that there’s been a decades-old debate between the ranching community and environmentalists. On one side, folks have argued that rangelands should be cleared of livestock to protect nature and wildlife. On the other side, ranchers say livestock is their livelihood, and grazing doesn’t create a problem.

While this dispute has played out on Western rangelands and in U.S. courtrooms, urban developers have stepped in and eaten up much of the open spaces that ranchers and environmental advocates had been bickering about. The loss of these grazing lands and wildlife habitats to urban encroachment has created new land-use concerns. As a result, the American West has become embroiled in a number of battles that have proved detrimental to the one resource that people were trying to protect — the land.

In 1997 a trio of forward-thinkers realized this plight and decided radical change was needed. Thus, the Quivira Coalition was formed in hopes of ending the ranching vs. environment debate and creating support for a sustainable Western community, which the Quivira Coalition has promoted as the “New Ranch.”

## New Ranch solutions

“Our aim is to build bridges between all reasonable people involved in the grazing debate. Cooperation, collaboration and new ideas hold the key to the future of ranching and rangelands in the Southwest. Ecological and economic health can exist simultaneously,” says Courtney White, one of the founders of the Quivira Coalition.

In essence, the Quivira Coalition’s New Ranch concept brings ranching and environmental interests together and teaches that, with management, wildlife and livestock can be compatible on the same parcel of land, he explains. “New Ranchers” manage holistically for healthy range and ecosystems and employ conservation-minded grazing techniques that consider the

land resource first and livestock second. This means that in some instances, grazing is key to rangeland health. And, in some areas — such as national parks or where there is ecological, historical or cultural concern — grazing livestock may be inappropriate.

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The New Ranch concept ultimately relies on ranchers and environmentalists devising suitable management solutions together in a collaborative, voluntary way, White says.

But if the thought of bringing ranchers and environmental advocates together sounds unconventional, consider the source. The Quivira Coalition’s founders include Jim Winder, a New Mexico rancher; and Barbara Johnson and White, who both have roots in the environmental community.

Fortunately for Western ranchlands, this unorthodox mix has found support and success on a larger scale. Today, the Quivira

Coalition’s 850-plus members consist of about one-third ranchers, one-third government land agency staff and one-third environmentalists — all of whom are interested in sustainable ranching and the environment.

“We are not trying to bring extremes together, because some folks don’t want to solve issues. They prefer the emotional debate,” says White, who serves as the Quivira Coalition’s executive director. Instead, the coalition aims to help ranchers and environmentalists understand one another through educational efforts, looking to science and sustainable solutions and finding a whole new position of common ground, he explains.

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### The Quivira Coalition's call for Radical Center promotes these tenets

- The ranching community accepts and aspires to a progressively higher standard of environmental performance.
- The environmental community resolves to work constructively with the people who occupy and use the lands it would protect.
- The personnel of federal and state land management agencies focus not on the defense of procedure but on the production of tangible results.
- The research community strives to make their work more relevant to broader constituencies.
- The land-grant colleges return to their original charters, conducting and disseminating information in ways that benefit local landscapes and the communities that depend on them.
- The consumer buys food that strengthens the bond between their own health and the health of the land.
- The public recognizes and rewards those who maintain and improve the health of all land.
- All participants learn better how to share both authority and responsibility.

For more information visit the organization Web site at [www.quiviracoalition.org](http://www.quiviracoalition.org).

White knows firsthand that the process works. In 1994 he was an environmental advocate and lobbyist active in New Mexico's Sierra Club. It was then that he met rancher Jim Winder, who served on the Sierra Club's board.

"Jim had joined this environmental group to find out what the other side was about. So when he invited me to his ranch, I decided to see what ranchers were about. I was surprised to see a lot of things that I, as an environmentalist, appreciated, such as preservation of open space and the use of science and grazing management," White recalls.

Out of that experience, White realized the power and understanding that education can create. Today, the Quivira Coalition utilizes ranch tours, workshops, conferences, seminars, a newsletter, a Web page, outdoor classrooms, publications, videos, collaborative management demonstration projects and scientific research, to inform and educate anyone with an interest in land management.

### Making it work

White reports that, in their effort to work toward ecological, economic and social health on Western lands, the Quivira Coalition has taken a three-prong approach that includes innovation, collaboration and restoration. Innovation means implementing science-based research in grazing management. Collaboration includes working with a number of partner organizations. Restoration involves actively working with partners to implement land restoration projects, such as grass banks, mine reclamation and riparian improvements.

One glimpse of the coalition's success can be found at Macho Creek in southwestern New Mexico. With the cooperation of the New Mexico State Land Office, a rancher, Quail Unlimited and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Jornada Experimental Range, this once devastated creek is being rejuvenated. All that was needed was an electric fence to keep cattle out of the creek bed until a determined period of time in the dormant season. This change in management has restored vegetation to the

streambanks and has helped attract wildlife, especially a diverse population of birds.

A notable example of the Quivira Coalition's New Ranch concept can be found on the U-Bar Ranch along the Gila River in southwestern New Mexico. Here, ranch managers have utilized controlled grazing to balance livestock use with habitat needs of several endangered or threatened species, including the least Bells' vireo, Gila Woodpecker and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. White reports that the Quivira Coalition often hosts tours at this unique ranch because of its successful management. For instance, the Flycatcher, which is an especially rare bird, is thriving on the U-Bar Ranch because controlled grazing keeps cattle out of treed areas during the Flycatcher's nesting season.

As land management scenarios such as these become increasingly common, the Quivira Coalition promotes the need for strong working relationships among ranchers, scientists, government personnel and environmentalists to implement solutions.

"We are really a grassroots group trying to pull folks together to deal with riparian issues, management of threatened and endangered species, fire, etc., and come up with plans to help rural landscapes be sustainable in the long run," White says.

Looking at the past six years since the coalition's inception, White says he has seen progressive change — both in the program's goals and the public's perceptions. "Over time, we've moved from dealing with the grazing debate to a broader focus of land health and rural economic health." He says he believes that the Quivira Coalition's efforts have helped create public awareness and have reduced the number of lawsuits related to grazing issues. "The tone of the debate has changed," he says. "Politicians and the media seem to have a better understanding of the issues."

### Something radical

With their eyes toward the future, the Quivira Coalition's most recent effort aims to step up the initiative to take back the West from urban and ranchette development and the land fragmentation it causes. To create awareness, the Quivira Coalition has been urging people to pledge their support to the Radical Center, a place of neutral ground between ranching and environmental communities where people can work together toward restoration of landscapes.

"This is a campaign that will be in progress for a long time," White says. "It

involves long-term planning and peering deep into the future to develop active stewardship that will preserve biological diversity for future generations.”

And, it's an effort for which future generations will certainly thank the Quivira Coalition.

The Quivira Coalition was scheduled to

have its annual conference — themed “Ranching in Nature’s Image: Fostering Social and Environmental Health in the West” — Jan. 15-17 in Albuquerque, N.M. For more information visit [www.quiviracoalition.org](http://www.quiviracoalition.org).



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## The ‘Walk a Mile in My Boots’ program

A new joint program between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) takes a similar approach to the Quivira Coalition’s educational efforts. The recently implemented “Walk a Mile in My Boots” program is designed to give ranchers and FWS employees an opportunity to learn more about the other’s work.



“Over the years, many NCBA members have brought up concerns that their local FWS officials do not understand the priorities and challenges of cattle producers,” says Myra Hyde, NCBA director of environmental issues.

Thus, a new exchange program is being implemented, allowing participating ranchers to visit any FWS office to learn about policy and procedures. In turn, FWS employees can visit a cattle operation and shadow producers in their daily activities.

To learn more about the program or to sign up, call Hyde at (202) 347-0228 or e-mail [walkamile@beef.org](mailto:walkamile@beef.org).