

# Working With the BLM

## BLM employee updates ranchers on range developments and how to improve relationships with the BLM.

Story & photos by **Paige Nelson**, field editor

**B**y a show of hands, how many of you hate the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) or the Forest Service?" asked John Reese, a BLM range conservationist from Kanab, Utah. Reese addressed a group of young ranchers at the Idaho Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers Leadership Conference Jan. 27, 2017.

A few timid hands rose.

"C'mon really," said Reese, "how many of you hate the BLM or the Forest Service?"

This time, hands shot up as the audience sensed Reese's own animosity for the agencies that govern grazing on public lands.

The range conservationist is also a registered Angus breeder, and his family a BLM permittee, so he identifies with both sides of the aisle.

"When I was a kid, my grandpa hated the BLM. He absolutely hated his range [conservationist], hated to deal with him. Because of all the policy and the regulations, they were constantly telling him what he could and couldn't do. So I grew up hating the BLM," said Reese candidly.

As a 16-year-old, Reese decided to put his dislike aside and took a BLM summer internship position. He wanted to learn more about the agency in hopes he could use his experience to benefit his family's cattle operation.

Several summers later, Reese concluded he could make a difference for the entire ranching community by taking on a full-time role with the BLM.

"My goal is to improve the rangeland in our country," said Reese. "I try and keep ranchers on the land."

### Making improvements

In southern Utah, where Reese's BLM field office is located, Pinyon-Juniper (PJ) woodlands have overrun the rangeland, choking out the forage. According to Reese, the rise of the PJ began with the removal of sheep bands from federal land. When the



► BLM Range Conservationist John Reese is hopeful during the Trump administration the NEPA process will be altered and more range improvements can happen. "It's a good time to bring up things that you need fixed," he said.

sheep left, the trees grew unchecked and overtook huge spans of rangeland. Depletion of perennial grasses led to erosion and rabbit brush infestation, as well as increased wildfire problems and decreased cattle numbers.

On the South Canyon Allotment that Reese oversees, the rancher's grazing permit allowed for 200 head. Due to the out-of-control PJ, the rancher had no choice but to reduce cattle numbers by 50%.

Not long after Reese was hired, he had seen enough of the problem. Armed with a college degree and passion for ranching,

**"My goal is to improve the rangeland in our country. I try and keep ranchers on the land."**

**— John Reese**

Reese aimed to improve the situation for local ranchers and the permittees with whom he worked.

The rangeland needed big improvements, but improvements require funding from Washington, D.C., and funding doesn't happen without *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) documents.

During the NEPA writing process, Reese and the other specialists in his field office sat down with every rancher in the area. They met with environmental groups, including the Western Watersheds Project and Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

"We took them out there and asked them what they wanted to see as we did our analysis," explained Reese.

"Well, when we put it forward, everybody thought we were on the same page and everything was going good. As soon as we put that proposal forward, guess what? We got sued. These environmental groups, I don't care what they tell you, they're going to sue you because their No. 1 goal is to get grazing off of public land," said a disgusted Reese.

The proposal went all the way to the Interior Board of Land Appeals in Washington, D.C., where it was upheld. In Reese's mind that decision was a huge win for the BLM, and he promptly pushed for two more proposals to be passed.

"We never got protested, never got appealed on [those two] because of our win just before. Had we lost, we'd been appealed on everything else. [These environmentalists] beat you like a dead horse when you get down."

Reese has been instrumental in ensuring major improvements are made on the rangeland he stewards. Those improvements include:

- Aerially flying a desirable mix of grasses, forbs and shrubs over an area;
- Running bullhogs or masticator

CONTINUED ON PAGE 148

## Working With the BLM CONTINUED FROM PAGE 146

machines through the PJ, creating a mulch layer in which the seed can germinate;

- ▶ Chaining, using an anchor chain between two bulldozers to level PJ; and
- ▶ Wet mowing rabbit brush, spraying an herbicide on freshly chopped/mowed brush to deter regrowth.

In almost all cases, no out-of-pocket expenses have been incurred by permittees for these projects, said Reese. On average

about 10,000 acres of rangeland per year have been treated, resulting in what Reese describes as “fantastic progress.”

“We went from producing about 30 pounds (lb.) of forage per acre to somewhere around 3,500 lb. of forage per acre,” he reported.

New and additional forage growth has made renewing grazing permits significantly easier and has finally allowed permittees to fill their permits.

While ranchers love seeing new grass in new places, cattle will only travel so far from water. However, Reese has an answer for that, too. He works with ranchers to develop or fix watering sites. Though sometimes ranchers have to pay for the pipe, Reese continually seeks funding from sources like the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to help his ranchers as much as possible.

Additionally, Reese has used federal funding to build corrals and fences on BLM ground.

“A lot of our corrals and facilities and fences were dilapidated and run down. They were just junk. [The ranchers would] haul panels out there or take a piece of baling twine and tie up what they could and try and get their cattle loaded,” said Reese. “We’ve worked with them to build corrals or rebuild old corrals. In most cases we buy the lodge pole, and we’ll go cut the posts with the ranchers, and then we’ll have a work project to fix these corrals.”

### Pride in progress

To say the least, Reese and those in his field office are proud of what they’ve been able to accomplish in just a few years. To showcase their efforts and the resulting consequences, Reese commonly offers horseback tours of completed projects.

“The ranchers come out, and they like to talk about [the projects]. They like to show people. It’s gotten us a lot of attention from Washington,” said Reese.

“This year, I think we’re looking at somewhere around \$4 million for projects we’re going to do next year, and I’m not even really going to have to fight for that money. They’re just sending it our way from the Washington-level BLM because of the success that we’ve had.

“We’ve taken rangelands that were virtually worthless, and we’ve made them worth something not just to livestock but watershed health. Our flooding is significantly reduced. Our washes are healing up.”

According to Reese, wildlife health and numbers are on the rise, too. Before these improvements, the average mule deer in Kanab, Utah, weighed 140 lb. In 2015, wildlife biologists captured and weighed mule deer that averaged 180 lb. Reese has also seen an increase in elk numbers during the last few years.

“In most of these areas our sage grouse numbers are up 40% in the last five years. It’s a lot easier to renew that grazing permit when numbers are going up than when they’re



▶ In an effort to document grazing’s impact on the range and establish stronger relationships between permittees and the BLM, BLM Range Conservationist Juley Smith and rancher Cindy Miller, spend the day documenting range health on Miller’s BLM allotment.



▶ Brooke Jacobson, Idaho State Department of Agriculture, shows Miller how to assemble a 3-foot-by-3-foot photo plot frame and facilitates a photo-monitoring project between Miller and Smith.

**“In most of these areas our sage grouse numbers are up 40% in the last five years.”**

**— John Reese**

going down. As soon as they're going down, they're pointing fingers at everything they can. A cow gets the first blame every time," Reese said.

He described a water hole in one of the allotments that had the sagebrush cleared off to make room for a storage tank.

Smiling, he added, "That's where the sage grouse like to lek."

### Getting proactive

In today's "advocate-centric" ag community, the phrase "If we don't tell our story, who will?" is almost cliché, but Reese says that philosophy rings true for BLM and Forest Service personnel.

"As bad as we hate the government, the BLM, the Forest Service, we need to encourage our brothers, our sisters, our kids, to go get educated and go to work for them. If they don't work for the NRCS or the BLM or the Forest Service, then who does?" he posed, then answered. "Some kid from back East, who grew up hugging trees, and now he wants to tell you how you should run your cows."

Furthermore, Reese offered cattlemen five tips for improved relations with local BLM and Forest Service offices.

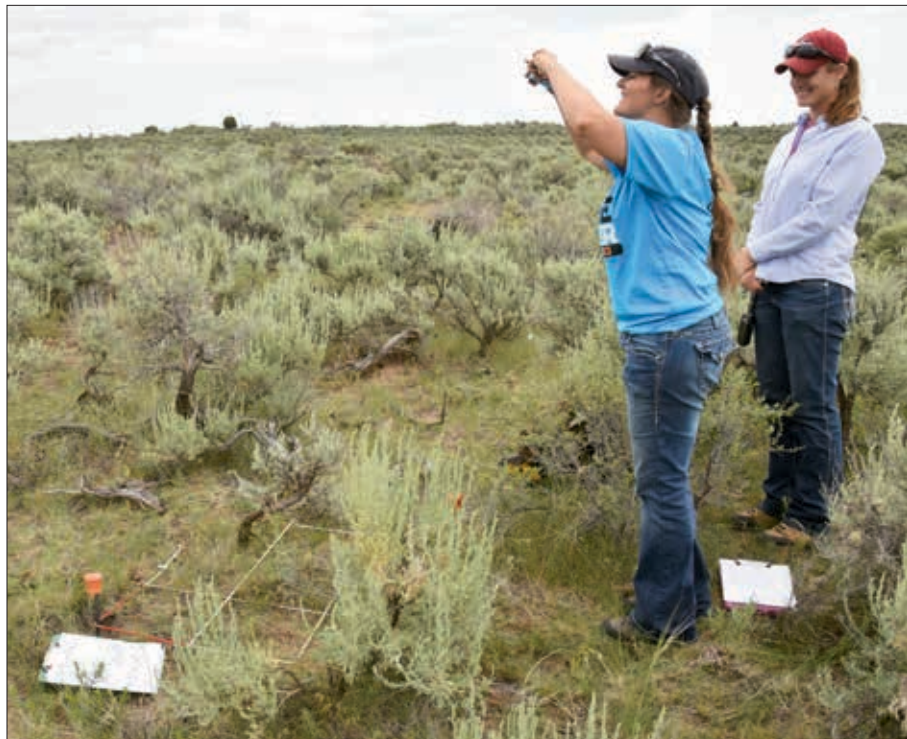
**1. Enlist help from local and state officials.** "It's all about who you know and how well you know them to get stuff done," Reese affirmed. Get your elected officials on the phone and build a relationship with them, he counseled, adding, don't ever underestimate writing your representatives.

He spoke of a county commissioner in his area who would come running to his ranching constituents' aid when they called on him.

"However he got it done," said Reese, "Leland Pollock had our state (BLM) director on speed dial, and he had our former BLM director on speed dial. He knew those people. He'd been back to Washington and had sat down with them.

"If a rancher needed something done and they called him, he'd call our district manager. If our district manager gave him the rigmarole, he'd call our state director and say, 'Hey, this is a problem I'm having. What can we do about it?' and if he didn't get satisfactory results there, he'd call the BLM director himself.

"Pretty quick, when the BLM director calls your office manager and says, 'Hey what's



►Juley Smith tries to aerially capture a photo of the biodiversity found within a 3-foot square frame to assess range health.

going on down there?' Heads start to turn, and they start to listen."

The same thing applies to the Forest Service, Reese added.

"I promise you, when that Forest Super gets a call from the governor of the state, someone is going to listen. Someone is going to pay attention. We've got to get back to the point of contacting our local officials if we're not getting the satisfaction we want," he admonished.

**2. Get to know the range conservationist.** Go into your local office and build a relationship with your range conservationist and the area manager, said Reese. Be sure to visit with them. Make sure they know who you are.

**3. Recruit organizations like Farm Bureau.** "Farm Bureau across America, especially in Utah, carries a lot of clout," said Reese. "When the Farm Bureau president calls up the governor, it's amazing what can happen out there on the land."

It always helps to have a group of people on your side, said Reese.

**4. Make comments.** The BLM is required to take public comment anytime they renew an allotment permit or submit a NEPA document, Reese explained.

"Make sure you comment!" he said. "We get hundreds, sometimes thousands, of comments from Southern Utahs Wilderness Alliance or Western Watersheds Project. They comment on everything.

"One thing that you have that they don't is you have a vested interest ... You as the

rancher hold a lot more clout than that environmental group does," he said.

However, ranting about a terrible range conservationist or saying that a proposed idea is "dumb" isn't a comment; it's an opinion, cautioned Reese. Write legitimate things that the BLM will have to address.

**5. Keep documents and photos.** Make sure you keep a copy of your current permit, said Reese; that's your contract to be out on the land. Also, take pictures of the range before you turn out and after you come off. If a herd of elk comes in and grazes the grass down to the dirt two weeks after you come off, you want to be able to prove that to the range conservationist, Reese explained.

In optimistic fashion, Reese concluded his presentation with the following insight:

"In the next four years, with the Trump administration, it's a good time to bring up things that you need fixed ... My hope and prayer is that this Trump administration will look at the NEPA analysis, the whole way we have to do NEPA, and bring it back down to what it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be that we disclosed the impacts that were going to happen on the land, not as a tool for every environmental group to shut the project down, which is what it's become."

Above all, Reese encouraged his audience to stay engaged. Change can happen, he said, but not without effort.



**Editor's Note:** Paige Nelson is a freelance writer and a cattlemaster from Rigby, Idaho.