

The Growth Curve

The BLM and U.S. Forest Service cultivate staff members better than they protect the nation's natural resources. By Eric Grant

Not only are federal lands ranchers faced with increasing federal regulation and control over public and private land management decisions, they also have to deal with a substantially bigger bureaucracy than ever before. "I can remember 30 years ago when we had one ranger and two part-time people who built fence in the summer," says John Hill, a cattle producer who has ranched in western Colorado since the early 1920s. "Now, we've got nearly a dozen full-time people."

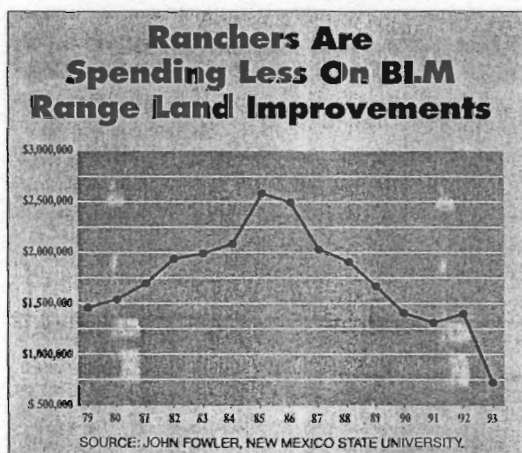
Hill's observation is shared by many federal lands operators, and they appear to be right on the money. In the last 20 years, the bureaucracy has burgeoned at both agencies: **U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff numbers are up 30 percent since 1975, while the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff has nearly tripled.** That's faster than the growth of the departments the two are part of. At the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, the Forest Service's parent, employment is up just 10 percent; at the U.S. Dept. of Interior, the BLM's parent, it's up 14 percent. For the federal government as a whole, the number of white-collar employees has risen 25 percent during the same time period. In short, USFS and BLM are stars at staffing. And of the two, the USFS—though it's grown more slowly—is the more heavily staffed. At last count, BLM had about 272 million acres under its care; USFS, about 40 million fewer. Yet, as the top graph on p.19 shows, the USFS has nearly three times the number of employees of the BLM.

The Forest Service also has a little more than twice the funding. But that's not the most interesting thing about funding for these two agencies. What's most interesting is that the two have grown like Topsy for two decades without spending any more money—adjusted for inflation, that is. Allocations for both agencies, if figured in constant 1975 dollars, are hardly changed in 20 years. There are more people with less money to go around.

Too many people? "Just because you see more people doesn't mean we're all just milling around," says BLM economist Chuck Romanello. "Part of the reason you're seeing more people is that the agency has moved employees from administrative positions closer to the ground. There are substantial amounts of work to do. In 1975, our horizons were a lot more limited than

they are today. Our tasks have been expanded and become more complicated. Today, we reflect what the national concern is. If that concern is endangered species and creation of conservation areas and habitat, then that's what the BLM does."

Romanello points out that since the mid-1970s, federal lands management has been changed for good by sweeping legislation: the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act, the National Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, wetlands legislation and more. During that same time period, population in



the West has risen sharply, and recreational demands on public lands have multiplied. It all adds up to mounting challenges for agencies whose first priority, says Romanello, "is to ensure the long-term health and sustainability of western ecosystems."

But is that what they're accomplishing? New Mexico State University economist John Fowler, who last year completed an analysis of economic characteristics of the western livestock industry, says one effect of all the changes in the last two decades has been to reduce the scope of action of those who know the ecosystems best.

"My biggest concern is that—because of all the additional paperwork and planning required by these regulations—range conservationists have become very limited in what they can do on the ground today," he says. "These professionals are no longer allowed to be professionals. We're trying to manage these lands by consensus, and you can't do that. The people in the agencies who have spent the better portion of their careers managing range have become gun-

shy, since environmental groups pressed for all the environmental impact statements in the late 1980s."

What worries westerners most is that growth of these agencies and the increase in environmental pressure has coincided with increasing regulation and falling economic activity. Many are uneasy about the future of their communities. It's a fact that by some measures, economic activity in the West is waning. For example, from 1980 to 1991 patents and certificates (in thousands of acres) for mining on public lands has dropped from 2,495 to 476—an 81 percent reduction. The number of mineral leases, permits and licenses fell from 106,125 to 83,259—a 22 percent decrease. Grazing leases declined from 7,700 to 7,185—a seven percent reduction. Permits fell from 14,471 to 12,312—a 15 percent decline. Over a longer stretch, the volume of timber cut from the National Forest Service System fell 27 percent, from 11,527 million board feet to 8,475 million.

Fowler has found a couple of even more dramatic measures: since 1986 the number of animal unit months (AUMs) has plummeted by nearly three million, and private investment by ranchers for improving BLM rangelands has fallen substantially as well. In 1985, ranchers invested \$2.75 million in improvements on BLM rangelands. That figure has fallen every year since, to just above \$670,000 in 1993.

"The real story is the transfer of equity from the West to Washington, D.C.," says Fowler. At \$54 apiece in permit investment value, those three million lost AUMs add up. Combine that with the \$14 in value that each of the remaining AUMs has lost, and he figures there's been an equity loss of \$390 million.

The agencies' own bookkeeping won't show that, because when a rancher buys land, the permit value is capitalized into the value of his property. Fowler explains that the federal government's accounting doesn't recognize that, and his analysis shows that—because of reductions of federal lands AUMs and ranches—the 11 western federal lands states have lost nearly \$337 million due to the decreases in expenditures in local communities and taxes paid by federal lands operators.

Research in Nevada points to the same conclusion. Recent analysis by Resource Concepts, Inc. (RCI) of Carson City, Nev., shows that within three BLM grazing districts in Nevada, AUMs have been reduced by nearly 200,000 since 1986—with only 43 percent of the evaluations

being completed in those three districts.

"At a total value of \$21 per AUM," says RCI's John McLain, "the direct impact of economic activity to the livestock sector within the study area is a loss of \$3.9 million."

The total decrease in economic activity to rural Nevada as a direct result of the lost income from the drop in the number of AUMs is \$7 million. Add to that the loss in market value of the affected ranches, which is estimated at \$6.8 million. Since 1965, McLain estimates active preference AUMs have been reduced by 518,824, or 29 percent, in the same three districts.

Figures like that make McLain wonder why Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt thinks it necessary to propose the mammoth changes to rangeland management that he has. Current rules seem to be doing a more than adequate job of stemming economic use of federal lands.

But there are signs the direction may be changing. Property-rights Republicans have swept into Congress. After two years of battling, Secretary Babbitt has backed off his effort to raise grazing fees. And the federal government's unending budget crisis has led to staff-cutting efforts that may make the agencies more responsive to the needs of federal lands users.

Even though the Department of Interior proposed the far-reaching Rangeland Reform '94 regulations last year, both USFS and BLM continue to push to reduce their staffing levels. In 1994, the agencies offered lump sums of \$25,000 and pensions to encourage many of their employees to take early retirement. To date, about five percent of BLM employees have taken the deal, say agency sources, and the plan, or hope, is to reduce numbers by two percent each year over the next five years. "We're expecting to see a 50 percent reduction in administrative overhead," says BLM acting personnel director Bob Hosenfeld.

Meanwhile, USFS is consolidating districts and hopes to cut approximately 4,000 employees by the end of the decade. Most budget analysts expect even less money for the two agencies in the future.

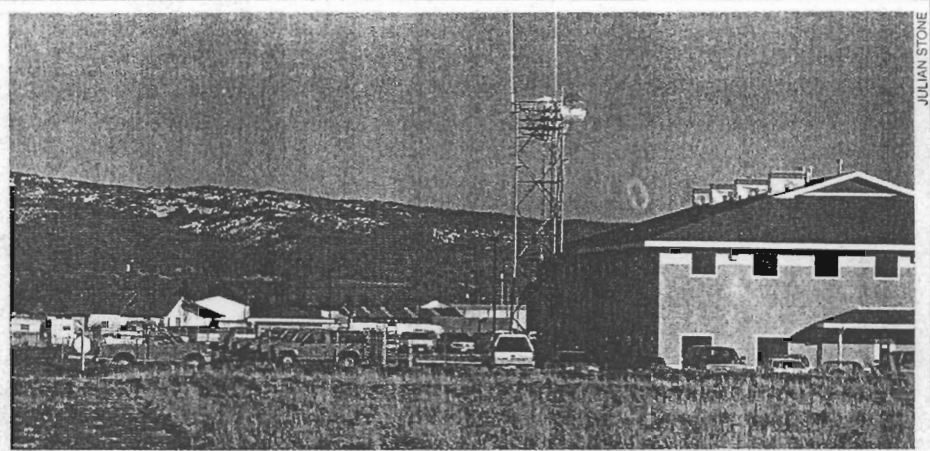
"I see the cutbacks as being both good and bad for the agencies," says Fowler. "The problem is that there continues to be an erosion of rangeland expertise. Range conservationists now have triple responsibilities: range, wildlife and watershed. We now find that the agencies have people who look like they fill the same old range slots—they're paid out of the range portion of the budget—but their expertise is no longer in livestock and range management."

Western ranchers shouldn't expect staff

reductions to affect their local USFS or BLM offices, either. While some offices will be closed and many districts consolidated, both agencies will continue moving more people to the ground level. "More than 90 percent of BLM employees are in the West," remarks BLM's Hosenfeld. "You will find that the numbers of people in the

West will increase marginally, but the composition of the numbers in the West will be different." ■

Freelance writer Eric Grant lives in Denver, Colo., where he covers western natural resource issues for a number of regional and national publications.



Alturas, Calif., population 3,021, altitude 4,300 feet. In 1994, the new 21,000 sq. ft. Modoc National Forest Headquarters was completed. The building, which cost \$2 million and houses 93 bureaucrats, scientists, specialists, and support staff, dwarfs everything else in town. Not owned by the government, the Forest Service pays a lease of \$260,000 per year. This photo was taken in Alturas on Tuesday, Feb. 21, at 2 p.m. On the following day, around 1:30 p.m., in two parking lots of the USFS in Lakeview, Ore., 56 miles away, there were 52 parked government pickups (mostly full-sized 4x4s), plus nine Blazers and Jeeps. Because of the horrendous amount of paper chasing done by the government, partly because of environmental pressure, the employees who use these vehicles can spend little time actually helping the wildlife and resources. Many federal employees readily admit, "We are seldom out on the ground anymore."

Staffing Goes Up At BLM & USFS...

	BLM Budget (In thousand \$)	BLM Employees	USFS Budget (In thousand \$)	USFS Employees
1975	\$ 399,931	4,530*	\$ 828,467	25,805
1980	877,912	6,214*	1,514,844	40,626
1985	799,605	10,146	1,602,819	31,900
1990	1,025,340	10,170	2,543,844	32,894
1994	1,161,295	11,963	2,480,297**	33,481**

*Excluding seasonal and part-time employees, who today comprise approximately five percent of total.

**USFS numbers are for 1993.

SOURCE: BLM, USFS.

...As Animal Unit Months Go Down

	BLM AUMS	USFS AUMS	TOTAL
1985	11,331,883	8,467,816	19,799,699
1986	10,564,200	8,852,018	19,416,218
1987	11,290,531	8,169,418	19,459,949
1988	10,212,258	7,174,582	17,386,840
1990	9,438,910	7,832,649	17,271,559
1991	9,712,559	7,116,303	16,828,862

SOURCE: JOHN FOWLER, NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY.