



The Oregonian

The Northwest Sustainable ranching Bureaucrat, cowboy swap jobs to learn how each helps the land

Bryan Arroyo spends a few days on a ranch in southeast Oregon, and Stacy Davies will go to Washington, D.C.

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ROARING SPRINGS RANCH -- Bryan Arroyo pauses to examine a woodpile at the lonesome Skull Creek cabin in southeastern Oregon's sun-baked high desert. The top of the woodpile is decorated with grisly, bone-white cow and elk skulls.

Stacy Davies, foreman of the million-plus-acre Roaring Springs Ranch, leaves the shade of his pickup and strolls over, scuffing puffs of dust with his cowboy boots.

"This is rattlesnake country," he cautions. "You don't want to go stirring in a woodpile here."

Arroyo, an assistant director of endangered species with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C., endured the specter of unseen rattlesnakes and clouds of all-too-visible mosquitoes for four days last week to get a taste of life in Oregon's rugged cattle country. The visit to the Roaring Springs Ranch included Wednesday's side trip to the lonesome buckaroo line shack at Skull Creek.

Arroyo and Davies are taking part in a "Walk-a-Mile in My Boots" program, organized five years ago by Fish and Wildlife. Davies will reciprocate by traveling to Washington, D.C., the second week of August, when Arroyo will guide him through the bureaucratic thickets of the nation's capital.

Davies will meet with congressional leaders and get a look at daily operations at the national headquarters of the service, the nation's principal fish and wildlife conservation agency.

"The exposure both of us get to each others' way of life and line of business is critically important," Arroyo said of their participation in the Walk-a-Mile program. "We both want a healing planet and a way to make a living off the land."

Arroyo has almost 20 years of agency experience at the national level, ranging from field biology to policy and budget development. He's a former assistant regional director of endangered species in Fish and Wildlife's Southwest Region where he managed an average of \$20 million a year in appropriations and oversaw more than 200 employees.

Davies, on the other hand, grew up on a small, 300-head cattle ranch and studied beef production management at Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho. He and his wife, Elaine, are bringing up their six sons, ranging in age from 9 to 20, in a horseback and cowboy hat environment at Roaring Springs.

Roaring Springs takes its name from the peculiar grumbling noise the water makes as it gushes from nearby basalt rimrocks. The original frontier-era buildings were burned in an 1878 uprising of the Bannock Tribe when the operation was part of cattle baron Pete French's 4 million acre, 20,000-head "P" Ranch.

The vast cattle operation changed hands six times between 1960 and 1992, and now is owned by the Bob and Jane Sanders family of Portland, owners of RSG Forest Products. Roaring Springs encompasses 260,000 deeded acres and 800,000 acres of federal grazing allotments, overshadowed by 9,773-foot

Steens Mountain.

The ranch employs 14 buckaroos, the local term for cowhands, who wrangle 6,000 cow-calf pairs. Hay crews harvest more than 200 tons of alfalfa annually from 20,000 acres of irrigated meadows.

The ranch's boundaries extend 70 miles in a diamond configuration from the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge to the Oregon-Nevada boundary. Thirty miles wide at its broadest, Roaring Springs supports 1,050 wild mustangs plus uncounted pronghorn antelope, Rocky Mountain elk, cougars, coyotes, bobcats and thousands of birds, among them raptors, cranes and migrating waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds and song birds.

But this is a livestock operation with a business plan that some environmentalists would say attempts the impossible. It focuses on the health of the rangeland and wildlife.

Davies has developed a "high-intensity, short-duration" grazing schedule that keeps his cattle fed while safeguarding the range grasses, including the willows along 140 miles of streams and rivers where rare, native redband trout and tui chub swim. Willow thickets shade and cool streams and rivers, he said.

The grazing regimen is designed so cattle don't get the chance to munch grasses more than once in 18 months over a particular area, he said. It also protects fragile groves of quaking aspen and the nesting sites for sage grouse and other species. Aspen, with their gold and scarlet leaves and gigantic, shared root systems, make up about 3 percent of Roaring Springs' acreage but 80 percent of the ranch's wildlife habitat, Davies said.

To illustrate, he took Arroyo on a series of horseback rides on which they saw pronghorn antelope, nesting shore birds, sage grouse and their chicks, fields of colorful wildflowers and countless butterflies.

Roaring Springs initiated the Catlow Valley Fishes Conservation Agreement, a nationally recognized pact, about eight years ago to re-establish redband trout and tui chub in the rivers and streams. Signers included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management, among others, said Amy Gaskill, spokeswoman for Fish and Wildlife in Portland. The agreement allowed for cattle grazing on parts of the Malheur refuge while conservation strategies were under way on the ranch.

Gaskill said redband trout populations were crucially low when the pact was signed. "They are rebounding," she said.

Ranch buckaroos regularly set fire to rangeland in controlled burns to rejuvenate the grasses, Davies said. And with fire and chain saws, they control a juniper invasion that plagues much of southeastern Oregon. That prevents the gnarly, aromatic trees from sucking too much moisture from grasslands and causing erosion, he said.

Neither Davies nor Arroyo places much stock in the widespread notion that livestock must be banished from federal rangelands to preserve the environment.

"Look at the condition of the grassland," said Arroyo after dismounting from a 19-year-old gelding named Buck. "Look at the sagebrush. Look at how fat those cattle are."

The notion that cattle ranching can co-exist with a healthy landscape is likely to be a hard sell among environmentalists. Brent Fenty, executive director of the 1,200-member Oregon Natural Desert Association environmental group based in Bend, said Roaring Springs Ranch has resources to do things many smaller ranches can't.

"It is not a ranch run by a small family; it is a corporation," Fenty said.

He said only 2 percent of the nation's cattle spend time on public lands, and several studies demonstrate that desert areas with less than 10 to 12 inches of annual rainfall -- which includes much of southeastern Oregon -- aren't viable for livestock grazing. He said cattle in arid climates trigger invasions of weeds and tend to damage riparian areas and fish populations by congregating in streams when not properly managed.

"It really begs the question whether we should be grazing those areas at all," Fenty said.

But Arroyo believes some in the environmental community are coming around to the notion that properly

managed cattle don't devastate rangeland and streams. That realization is dawning because ranches that can't turn a profit often become residential developments, which can devastate wildlife habitat and migration routes, he said.

Environmental groups in Texas are spearheading efforts to preserve endangered species, Arroyo said. "And they are doing it hand-in-hand with the ranching community," he said.

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