Badly Scattered Cattle

Babbitt Ranches Battles Extreme Drought and Record Snow

With much of northern Arizona experiencing one of its top five driest years of all time, Babbitt Ranches' cattle were sent to greener pastures from Holbrook to Texas in 2009.

With a series of March windstorms whipping the moisture out of the land in spring, higher than normal temperatures creating a record growing season, and half the normal precipitation during the summer, ranch managers were faced with less than desirable range conditions.

National Weather Service meteorologist Brian Klimowski says the Flagstaff-area monsoon season yielded only three inches of rain, less than half of the normal seven inches. "The year was shaping up to be the driest on record, following nearly 15 years of drought; however, an unusually wet December caused by an El Niño weather pattern bumped Flagstaff to its fourth driest year on record."

As Winslow and Bellemont marked their second driest year ever, Babbitt Ranches experienced challenges keeping the grass green, the water tanks full and the cows fed.

Normally, the steers would have spent the year on the Espee Ranch, but by fall, conditions made it necessary to move a thousand of them to rangeland near Lubbock, Texas.

Also, cattle that were too light to sell in the fall went to the Ford County Feeders feed yard in Dodge City, Kan. The Certified Hereford Beef Program proved to be a success as the cattle sold in April for nearly $1 a pound.

Meanwhile, the decision was made to take some 500 head to an irrigated pasture south of Holbrook.

The cattle have since returned to Babbitt Ranches.

The unusually wet December 2009 and January 2010 resulted in more challenges for the ranch. By late February, Flagstaff had beaten most U.S. cities with its amount of snowfall for the year, almost 10 feet thus far. This was already three feet more than the area averages in an entire winter.

The National Weather Service noted another record: 78 consecutive days with six inches of snow on the ground during the 2009-2010 winter.

"With the early snow, cowboys worked hard to break trail to get feed to the cattle," said Cordasco. "It was clear the country was going to have a fair year on grass growth but snow pack didn't melt in a way to run water into dirt tanks leaving many dry."

Following a very wet winter, Klimowski says spring 2010 was dry again. "In February, March and April we were well below normal with less than half the usual precipitation."

As Babbitt Ranches looks to forecasters for clues about the coming seasons, Klimowski is projecting normal precipitation for summer 2010.

Article VI
Sustainable Community Principles
Section 2.

Babbitt Ranches is a community that:

Appreciates that growth occurs within some limits and is ultimately limited by the carrying capacity of the environment.

Northern Arizona Weather Forecast

With the drenching effects of last winter's El Niño ebbing, the National Weather Service predicts a near-normal monsoon season for northern Arizona, expecting some seven inches of precipitation for the Flagstaff area. Meteorologists are calling for a normal fall, seeing no major climate signals in the forecast. However, they say La Niña conditions could result in a cooler and drier winter.

Holistic Management Promotes Connection with Land and People

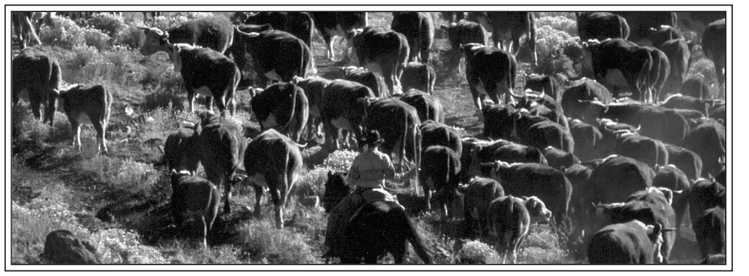
Like Babbitt Ranches, Holistic Management International believes the way to rangeland health and productivity is through relationships with both biotic and human communities.

The Albuquerque-based nonprofit enterprise has been helping thousands of families around the world restore degraded agricultural and range lands using a management framework that addresses ecological, economical and social concerns.

"Businesses usually zero in on specific parts of an operation, but don't take into account the whole of the land, the family and the community around them," said HMI Senior Director of Programs and Grants Jutta von Gontard. "Effective Holistic Management practitioners observe what is going on on the land. They make decisions based on knowledge, but also are tuned in to what's happening on the ground."

In the early 1990s, Babbitt Ranches was experiencing a shift in how it articulated its way of doing business, involving a conservation ethic for learning, understanding and participating with ecological processes.

Animal impact is a method for adaptive management first developed more than 30 years ago by HMI founder Allan Savory to stimulate grasses. Along with environmental activist Dan Dagget, Babbitt Ranches tested the planned grazing model on a five-acre cell near Wupatki National Monument. Range conservation consultant Norm Lowe monitored the grazing trial for 14 years to determine if high intensity stocking for a short amount of time would improve the land.



"One hundred seventy three cows were brought in for 48 hours in the spring of 1993. They grazed the grasses to the ground. After the monsoon rains, the grasses had grown in pretty well," said Lowe. "Then we hit it again with 400 cows for 20 hours in the fall. They grazed it down and by the next spring the land was really dense and green. We treated it again in 1995 with 175 cows for 28 hours, then again in 1997 with 860 cows for four hours, and then a final time in 1999 with 1,077 cows for four hours."

Lowe's study emphasized the animal effect of cycling minerals to produce fertilizer. "The key indicator for success was how far apart the perennial grasses were spaced. In the test cell area, grasses went from 5.4 inches apart to 3.8 inches, effectively increasing density by 55 percent. The same thing happens when you mow a lawn. By stimulating the grasses, you're keeping the lawn tight."

Meanwhile, the adjacent Wupatki land was getting ever more rest. Lowe's 14-year studies showed the spacing going from 4.0 inches apart to 10.4 inches, or a decreased density of 760 percent because the grass was dying.

Article V
A Land Ethic
Section 2.

A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such.

"While HMI provides a total framework for effective land-based decision making, an important piece of what we do continues to be planned grazing," said HMI CEO Peter Holter. "Our concern primarily is the health of the soil. If we improve the biodiversity of soil, richer soil improves water retention, it can reverse desertification to a certain extent and it sequesters carbon. We really are talking about building an asset."

Babbitt Ranches President Bill Cordasco says Holistic Management broadened the agricultural community's way of thinking. "It moved the community beyond simply grazing cattle or land management to a more regional perspective based on values."