Deon Reynolds

Ranchers sort calves at Martin Ranch in Antelope Valley.

Federal agencies using drought to deter ranchers

THOMAS MITCHELL
COMMENTARY

There is no doubt the lingering drought is devastating the cattle business across Nevada, but some ranchers say the problem is being exacerbated by inflexible federal land agencies.

Though the Nevada drought monitor shows 100 percent of the state under some level of drought, unchanged from a year ago, rainfall in specific locales across central Nevada have been near normal for the first months of this year.

"It is my perception they are using the drought to kick ranchers off the BLM (Bureau of Land Management)," said John Colby of the Santa Fe and Ferguson Ranch near Eureka. "Out in the open that makes the best beef there is. It's the highest quality known. It's a lot better for them than raising in a corral. Here in central Nevada they're using the drought as a vehicle to kick people off. The drought is a localized thing, because it can rain like crazy and two miles down the road they don't get a drop. You can't say we're all in a drought, because I think we're above normal with our moisture right now."

J.J. Goicoechea — veterinarian, rancher, chairman of Eureka County Commission and past president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association — also said rainfall had been near normal in the first two months of the year, though soil moisture was drying out in March.

"Foragewise we're going to be OK, stock water is going to be short. The national press and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration continue to talk about this ongoing drought in the West," Goicoechea said, "so the BLM has grabbed onto that. ... Of course, that is what they base everything on, the BLM. That's one of my problems, we're not doing a lot of on the ground stuff anymore."

The Department of Interior preaches adaptive management of the land but its agencies do not practice it, he said, but noted that the Elko district is more flexible than the Battle Mountain district.

Goicoechea explained that under the adaptive management approach the rancher and a BLM official would look at the range and work together. "We'll change our number, we'll change our turnout date, depending upon what the climate is doing. Is it wet? Is it hot? Is it dry? Did we have early green up? Late green up? That's adaptive management, being flexible."

He said the BLM is telling ranchers when and where to graze with no flexibility built into the permit and then telling the rancher they overgrazed.

Colby complained the BLM is using the drought, sage hens and wild horses as excuses to remove cattle and sheep from the range.

"Really a rancher is an environmentalist, because that is how we make our living, we raise cows," Colby said. "You don't want to tear it apart. They're being pretty unfair around here. They're kicking everyone off, pretty much for no reason. Everybody has taken cuts, voluntary cuts, because it was a dry year. I took cuts without them telling me I had to."

He noted that these are family ranchers who are having a hard time supporting their families. He said he has cattle out on the range now but he was told it might be only for a month. He said he is down about 1,500 AUMs (animal unit month) and because it was so dry he didn't graze any sheep this past year.

"In these dry years we don't have to be told," he said. "We don't want to put more things out there if there isn't feed for them. This year I kept no heifers."

Goicoechea estimates Nevada has lost half of its breeding cows over the past three years — approaching 300,000, down from more than a million in the 1980s.

He said Nevada needs to break the sue-and-settle cycle in which radical environmental groups demand protection of various species of plants or animals and get the federal agencies to agree.

"We're on a bubble right now. If we get this reversed and we get some moisture and we get what we need to get a green up, some of these guys can survive," Giocoechea said. "They can bring their cattle back and see over the next couple of years a rebuild. If they liquidate and go away that next generation isn't going to be there to fill their shoes. ... The next 12 months will be critical to the livestock industry in the state of Nevada, and that will dictate whether we're here in 10 years or not."

Other ranchers and the BLM agent designated to discuss this topic did not return calls.

Thomas Mitchell is a longtime Nevada newspaper columnist. You may share your views with him by emailing thomasmnv@yahoo.com. Read additional musings on his blog at http://4thst8.wordpress.com/.

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Colorado River begins flooding Mexican delta

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LOS ALGODONES, Mexico — Colorado River water has begun pouring over a barren delta near the U.S.-Mexico border, the result of a landmark bi-national agreement being celebrated last week.

The gush of water in Mexico is an effort to revive the last 70-mile stretch of the river into the Sea of Cortez. The delta dried up decades ago.

Conservationists hope the water will bring back trees, wildlife and aquatic life that were once abundant in the region when it was teeming with water decades ago.

The river's most southern dam — Mexico's Morelos Dam, near Yuma, Ariz. — on Sunday began unleashing 105,392 acre-feet of water, enough to supply more than 200,000 homes for a year. The one-time release is expected to last until May 18.

The flow was expected to intensify and reach a peak Thursday of an additional 4,200 cubic feet per second.

"You just see visually quite clearly a much larger volume of water in the river and there's quite a buzz about it," said Terry Fulp, regional director of the Lower Colorado Region for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

A handful of officials from the U.S. and Mexico governments were on hand to celebrate the flow Thursday just across the border from Yuma. An estimated 400 people attended the event, said Jack Simes of the Bureau of Reclamation.

"The pulse flow now underway is the first major step in a series of anticipated actions and cooperative measures outlined between our two countries," said Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Water and Science Anne Castle. "Today's event celebrates our shared vision to work together as partners to address the resources of the Colorado River and its parched delta."

Farms, businesses and homes in seven U.S. states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming — rely on the Colorado River, as do the Mexican states of Baja California and Sonora.

The return of water to the delta was a welcome sight in the Mexican town of San Luis Rio Colorado, where truckloads of families pulled up to the water's edge in an area that last week was bone dry.

As norteno music reverberated off a metal bridge, vendors sold coconuts and ice cream and kids flopped in the water.

"Last week it was dry down here. On Sunday there was even car racing down here, but now with so much water there's no way. And that's fine, this is much better," said 18-year-old Perla Leon of San Luis Rio Colorado.

In 2012, the two countries that share the river water agreed on ways to share the pain of droughts and bounty of wet years, a major amendment to a 1944 treaty. Part of that agreement called for restoration of the Colorado River delta.

"Today we are witnessing what appears to be a paradigm shift in the way we manage water," said Jennifer Pitt, director of the Colorado River Project, who helped negotiate the one-time flood. "Historically in the West, everyone has approached water with an 'us against them' mentality. Now we're talking about how we can share water, conserve water, and invest in new water projects and the health of the river itself. It's truly refreshing."

The release of water was aided through water conservation projects by the U.S. and Mexico, according to the International Boundary and Water Commission. Officials from those two countries were scheduled to be at the Morelos Dam on Thursday for an event to mark the restoration effort.

Experts will monitor the flood to determine its effects on the environment.

CATTLE CALL

Deon Reynolds

Cattle Rancher Pete Goicoechea on a cattle call in Newark Valley. Ranchers say the federal government is using the drought as an excuse to kick ranchers off BLM land. Read Tom Mitchell's take on this situation in his column on Page 12.