

Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands

The Kiowa and the Rita Blanca NGs are located within six counties in three states. The Rita Blanca NGs is located within portions of Cimarron County in Oklahoma and Dallam County in the Texas Panhandle.

The Kiowa NG exist primarily within Harding and Union counties in northeastern New Mexico.

The populations of the counties associated with the Rita Blanca NG vary substantially. Dallam County, Texas has a 2004 estimated population at about 6,175 persons with 4,554 in the community of

Dalhart. Cimarron County in Oklahoma has an estimated 2004 population of about 2,897 persons with about 1,900 persons in the county seat of Boise City.

Similarly, counties associated with the Kiowa NG also have substantial population differences. Union County in far northeastern New Mexico has an estimated 2004 population of about 3,827 persons. Clayton is the largest community in this county with a population of nearly 2,220. Harding County has the smallest population in New Mexico with about 774 persons; and, Mosquero (~100) and Roy (~250) are the population centers.



Table 5: Kiowa National Grassland

People QuickFacts	Kiowa NGL				
	Colfax County, NM	Harding County, NM	Mora County, NM	Union County, NM	New Mexico
Population, 2003 estimate	14,051	747	5,216	3,814	1,874,614
Population, percent change, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2003	-1.0%	-7.8%	0.7%	-8.6%	3.1%
Population, 2000	14,189	810	5,180	4,174	1,819,046
Population, percent change, 1990 to 2000	9.8%	-17.9%	21.5%	1.2%	20.1%
Persons under 18 years old, percent, 2000	25.1%	20.2%	26.7%	27.3%	28.0%
Persons 65 years old and over, percent, 2000	16.9%	28.3%	15.4%	17.8%	11.7%
White persons, percent, 2000	81.5%	84.3%	58.9%	80.4%	66.8%
Black or African American persons, percent, 2000	0.3%	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	1.9%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2000	1.5%	1.4%	1.1%	1.0%	9.5%
White persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin, percent, 2000	49.9%	52.8%	16.9%	62.7%	44.7%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2000	47.5%	44.9%	81.6%	35.1%	42.1%
Language other than English spoken at home, pct age 5+, 2000	26.6%	40.6%	68.6%	23.0%	36.5%
Median household income, 1999	\$30,744	\$26,111	\$24,518	\$28,080	\$34,133
Per capita money income, 1999	\$16,418	\$16,240	\$12,340	\$14,700	\$17,261
Persons below poverty, percent, 1999	14.8%	16.3%	25.4%	18.1%	18.4%
Land area, 2000 (square miles)	3,757	2,125	1,931	3,830	121,356
Persons per square mile, 2000	3.8	0.4	2.7	1.1	15
Agriculture					
Number Farms 1997 to 2002 % Change	-28.6%	-36.8%	-7.7%	-23.3%	-15.1%
Acreage in farms 1997 to 2002 % Change	-1.2%	-21.4%	-4.1%	-0.2%	-3.0%
Average size of farm 1997 to 2002) % Change	38.5%	24.3%	3.8%	30.1%	14.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2002 People Quickfacts and U.S.D.A. 2002 Census of Agriculture

Table 6: Rita Blanca National Grassland

People QuickFacts	Rita Blanca NGL			
	Cimarron County, OK	Dallam County, TX	Oklahoma	Texas
Population, 2003 estimate	2,961	6,100	3,511,532	22,118,509
Population, percent change, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2003	-5.9%	-2.0%	1.8%	6.1%
Population, 2000	3,148	6,222	3,450,654	20,851,820
Population, percent change, 1990 to 2000	-4.6%	13.9%	9.7%	22.8%
Persons under 18 years old, percent, 2000	27.6%	31.8%	25.9%	28.2%
Persons 65 years old and over, percent, 2000	18.6%	10.3%	13.2%	9.9%
White persons, percent, 2000	85.8%	82.6%	76.2%	71.0%
Black or African American persons, percent, 2000	0.6%	1.6%	7.6%	11.5%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2000	1.0%	0.9%	7.9%	0.6%
White persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin, percent, 2000	81.0%	68.4%	74.1%	52.4%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2000	15.4%	28.4%	5.2%	32.0%
Language other than English spoken at home, pct age 5+, 2000	16.0%	19.6%	7.4%	31.2%
Median household income, 1999	\$30,625	\$27,946	\$33,400	\$39,927
Per capita money income, 1999	\$15,744	\$13,653	\$17,646	\$19,617
Persons below poverty, percent, 1999	17.6%	14.1%	14.7%	15.4%
Land area, 2000 (square miles)	1,835	1,505	68,667	261,797
Persons per square mile, 2000	1.7	4.1	50.3	79.6
Agriculture				
Farm 1997 to 2002 % Change	2.8%	-8.6%	-0.9%	0.3%
Land in farms acres 1997 to 2002 % Change	3.4%	-5.8%	-1.2%	-3.0%
Average size of farms 1997 to 2002 % Change	0.5%	3.1%	-0.2%	-3.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2002 People Quickfacts and U.S.D.A. 2002 Census of Agriculture

Social Environment

A noteworthy feature of this social environment is the scale, composition, and population trends. County populations are small as exemplified in Harding County with a total population of less than 800 persons; and, the trend over the past census decade is for population decline or only slight increases. Population density is low with less than four persons per square mile, indicating the large areas of open land and distance between communities and neighbors. Caucasians are the majority in most counties with Hispanics constituting the next largest group. The median age is higher than the state averages and it shows an increasing trend between the 1990 and 2000 census. The demographic character of the region is well expressed in the following statement:

This is an extremely rural place. My closest neighbor is five miles away. I am twenty miles from town and maybe 400 people live in town, maybe less than that. There are only 800 people in the county. ... People are leaving too. Most of the people left here rely on agriculture to make a living and our schools rely on that. Our population is probably 60% over 60. There is no way to make a living here. Remember that the grasslands came into existence because of the population loss of people moving to California when they couldn't make a living here.

The lifestyle of these rural counties is based in ranching and farming. The majority of county lands are used for agricultural purposes. The grasslands of the region provide the forage for either “cow-calf” or “stocker” type ranching operations. Cow-calf ranchers have a resident herd that is used to produce calves sold at auction or to cattle buyers. “Stocker” operations buy younger cattle in the late winter and early spring and then graze the animals until early fall. These animals are then sold to feed lots or to other markets. Feed lots are also major employers in this region. There is also some dry land farming for grains and other crops as well as some carbon dioxide gas production in Harding and Union. In Dallam County, Texas there is also oil and gas production. These are alternate sources of income in this agricultural-based economy, but ranching gives local communities their lifestyle and values.

This ranching lifestyle values self-reliance, individual property rights, mutual support for one's neighbors, and hard work. Participants suggest they perceive their culture and way of life as threatened by multiple factors, including:

- Declining economic opportunities resulting in the out-migration of younger persons who cannot find local jobs.
- Declining population resulting in fewer school enrollments and the movement of older persons from the rural areas to towns as the costs of living rises and they require different services.
- Sale and consolidation of ranches. Ranches and agricultural land is often owned by absentee landowners who may not participate in the community. Some suggest associated with these absentee owners is a rise in recreational ranching that is not based in the way of life and values of the local communities, including the land ethics and values of the longer-term residents.
- Recent drought has increased the costs of ranching and farming and threatens operators who have limited financial resources.

The perception of a threatened way of life is a strong theme in the information about the social environment of this region. It influences some of the values and the beliefs residents have about

the grasslands and how they should be managed. Despite this sense of threat, there remains a dedication to this lifestyle:

I like living here. I came back here after I moved away and went to college because I like this place and the people. It has a place in my heart that drew me back. I like the wide open spaces and quiet times. Ranching can be pretty slow paced, but you work from dawn to dusk. Most ranchers have to have a side-job to make it work or someone in your families has one. You do this because you love it. It is something in your blood.

The perceptions of threat to a way of life also influence how residents perceive the future and what is defined as an asset to help preserve a way of life. This has direct implications for how residents view the grasslands as part of their community.

Residents of this region use the grasslands primarily for grazing cattle, hunting, and some other recreational pursuits, especially in Mills Canyon. The Canadian River flows through the canyon creating opportunities for fishing, camping, and other recreational activities. Mills Canyon is also a destination for tourists because of the dramatic change in scenery offered by the transition from grasslands to canyon floor. Yet, the majority of the uses of the grasslands appear to be instrumental and related to grazing. Yet, there is some diversity in views about the values and beliefs associated with the grasslands and how they should be managed in the future. These are summarized in the following sections.

Results: The Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands

Our land is just so flat that you will never really have much but grass

The participants from counties surrounding the Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands have some diversity in their attachments to and evaluations of the grasslands. For example, Dallam County, Texas is more farming oriented than Harding and Union counties in New Mexico. Cimarron County in Oklahoma has a limited amount of grasslands, but it is important for some ranching operations. The differences among the counties are socially and culturally important, but there are shared themes about values and beliefs associated with the grasslands that are the focus of this discussion.

Landscape Character and Resource Values

Several assessments of the grassland's character are expressed in the statements of participants in this project. One view describes the landscape as having the highest value as grazing lands; a second perspective views the grasslands as having value as a "safe haven" and unique habitat for wildlife; and, the third point of view describes the grasslands as "reclaimed" government land. The first perspective is expressed in the following statement:

The grasslands, well they are our livelihood. Ranching and farming is what we do and that is what the grasslands are for. We use it for grazing our cattle and our neighbors do too. Ranchers are always trying to piece (land parcels) together. That is really what it is good for. I can't think of much else. There is some recreation out there, but when you go out there you don't see much but land for grazing, or that is all I see. What else could you use it for?

This perspective emphasizes that grazing is central to the history and character of this region. One participant expressed this observation in comments about Environmental Assessments (EAs):

When they do an EA the “no action” alternative has “no grazing” as the status quo when this land has been grazed for over 400 years. These lands have always been grazed by one type of ungulate or another and it is misleading when the “no action” alternative is listed to be non use or no grazing. No action should mean leave things as is ... It is not just word play because when it gets to the public it is more than that.....

This is a focused perspective on the instrumental and utilitarian value of these lands. This perspective is based on long-term affiliation with these lands; but, it also entails respect and pride in the ranching way of life. The same participant quoted above described this pride and its relationship to these lands as follows:

We are ranchers and it is our way of life. I like being a cowboy and being out on the grasslands because it is peaceful work. You work on a piece of land and it creates a lot of pride to see it do well. Places like this get into your heart. We want them to be healthy and do well. It gives me pride when I know we are doing a good job on the land.



The second assessment of the grasslands is one emphasizing its character and value as wildlife habitat. For example,

This area is not just cactus and rattlesnakes. That is what a lot of people think it is. But it is short grass prairie, the last remnants of what it used to be in the days of buffalo and before. We need to value it for what it is and not dismiss it as only good for cattle grazing. It is really high priority habitat that is a safe haven for waterfowl and other birds that nest here. The plants are important too, maybe as important as the wildlife. We need to stop treating the grasslands as stepchildren. They (USDA Forest Service) started to change for the better when they hired a biologist here.

This perspective acknowledges the landscape has value as grazing land “as long as it is not overgrazed.” But, it emphasizes the need to acknowledge the habitat values of vegetation, water, and wildlife as equally important.

The third perspective is less consistent, but the central theme is the transformation of the grasslands from damaged lands of the dust bowl era. Participants describe the grasslands as having a character based in this historical damage:

The droughts and the dust bowl made the land fragile. The grass is maybe not as strong as it should be because the wind blew away most of the top soil and I am not sure it has recovered to the way it was before.

And,

When people came here they planted wheat, corn, and pinto beans. It wasn't the best thing for the land. Then when the dust bowl came and they wanted to move to California, they (the government) gave them a dollar or two per acre. So, there are a lot of smaller pastures spread out. We don't have large areas of federal land, it is smaller pastures, and it is not always the best land because it was damaged back then.

And,

There was a time when people treated their federal land as more like a stepchild. They treated their federal land less well, but that has turned around. You see good fences, good gates, the windmills are taken care of. There was a time when it was not well taken care of ... but it has changed

A sub-theme is that although these lands were damaged, some units are perceived as having some of the best grazing in the United States because of current management practices. This perspective emphasizes that these healthy units produce high quality grass because both ranchers and the Forest Service are using sound grazing practices.

Social Values

Two types of social values are expressed in statements about the grasslands: (1) the grasslands enable some ranchers to continue their way of life and operations because of access to reasonably priced grazing; and (2) the Santa Fe Trail as well as “historical ranches” associated with the grasslands are valued because of their linkage to the traditions and ways of life of areas residents. The first social value is expressed in the following statement:

There is a lot of state land, not very many people, and it is getting more problematic as we lose people. As far as the federal land goes, it has let me become a rancher. I couldn't be a rancher if I did not have the federal land. You can't buy a ranch and have it work on its own. If you are a doctor or a lawyer and you have money you could dump in, then you can make it work. And that is maybe even more so today than it was in the past. People who buy grasslands or ranches, they lawyer somewhere and say they have a ranch in Cimarron County. But the people who are trying to make a living out there, they have a harder time If you have neighbors that don't have children, then you can slowly gather up enough to make a living. I don't know if I have gathered up enough for my own son. It gets pretty interesting as to what you tell your children if they want to come back....

The relatively high price of private land combined with increasing operating costs and the unpredictability of cattle markets is perceived as constraining who can and cannot afford to ranch. The perception is that new operations are those funded by “lawyers and doctors” who can afford what the sons and daughters of existing ranchers cannot. However, access to grazing permits on the national grasslands enables assembling enough grazing lands for traditional ranchers to maintain their lifestyle and perhaps involve their children in this way of life. In this sense, the grasslands enable continuing valued traditions:

There is a value to raising our kids in this kind of environment. We have the freedom to enjoy the county and this agricultural way of life that we show our kids. It is about respect for the land and respect for hard work and we want them to learn that. ... Ranching is about the whole family and these are values we want to pass on to our children.

A second social value is the presence of historical resources on the grasslands that are associated with the traditions and values of their way of life. These resources include portions of the Santa Fe Trail and other “historic spots” as expressed in the following statement:

There are historic spots and historic ranches here. People have great misconceptions here about what the land is. One fellow came roaring in and he wanted to see the grasslands. There was this big green spot on the map, like a forest or something. ... It isn't that way. There are sections of it here and there. And some of them are just the way they were when the Santa Fe Trail was being used. And, you can still go out and see that. It is one of the few places you can go to now and see history the way it was. That is important.

Decisions about grasslands management directly address what is perceived as a valued but threatened way of life. Perhaps the very nature of ranching predisposes those who practice it to evaluate their lifestyles and traditions as always on the edge of solvency. This evaluation results in sensitivity to management issues that individually or in combination with other socioeconomic factors (e.g., absentee landowners) may either support or constrain continuing their way of life.

Habitat and Wildlife Values

Several themes about wildlife and wildlife habitat were identified in the data. The first theme expresses a perception of the value of wildlife and its connections with grazing. This is similar to the theme expressed by participants in the Black Kettle focus group. A second theme concerns the value of enhancing a perceived “monoculture” of the grasslands so that it can support more wildlife. The third theme is similar to the second in its emphasis on valuing the grasslands as habitat for wildlife species, including some that are threatened or endangered. A final theme concerns the management of prairie dogs on the grasslands.

The first theme is illustrated in the following comment by a Harding County rancher in response to questions about the character of the grasslands he knows:

Other than the canyon and river county, wildlife and grazing is the majority of acreage over there. That is what there is. Antelope, wildlife, birds, long billed curlew. Wildlife here is part of our life. We get golden eagles and bald eagles. When we are out there, them and the cows is all we see. ... It is part of what makes being out there so peaceful for me.

Wildlife is, as expressed in the statement, a component of the lifestyle that adds enjoyment and satisfaction to the ranching lifestyle. Importantly, creating wildlife habitat and grazing are perceived as complimentary and perhaps as necessary as expressed in the following comments:

I have been in this grazing business more than 20 years and they (Forest Service) have seen the country improve. There are more varieties of plants, more healthy plants, and so they know the grazing is working. ... And they know it is good working with us ... they partner with us and it is really working.

And,

If the grasslands are not utilized, then the plant communities that are there right now would change drastically. The Forest Service had these test plots they fenced off and just did nothing to them and what happened is it just grew weeds(It grew weeds) because there was no hoof action to help new plants. If you remove the hoof action, then the strength of the grass goes down

... the livestock are good for the land Hoof action helps replant new grass and that is good for the quail and wildlife and good for the grazing. It is a necessity that some kind of grazing happen out there. Most folks that have lived a lifetime out there ... they know what makes these systems work, we know about succession, we know about what plants and animals benefit.... We are always trying to learn better management techniques....

And,

This country had thousands of buffalo across it. Then there was the homesteading. What is good for wildlife is good for cattle. They feed off of each other. On my units, I pile up some posts to attract quail ... and we usually have a family of ducks at our watering ponds, and we have plover, American Avocets, and larks. They put the Swift Fox on the endangered species list They come to us and we told them we seen them ... Now we hear about the endangered prairie dogs ... well it is my experience that the prairie dog does pretty well around here. I don't want them extinct, but there seems to be plenty of prairie dogs around here....

The second theme perceives a value in creating more diversity in the perceived “monoculture” of certain portions of the grasslands that are primarily prairie grass. From this perspective, the grasslands are under-used as wildlife habitat because of the preference for managing them for grazing. Participants expressing this perspective emphasize the potential for creating habitat for quail and other bird and wildlife species that could enable different types of uses than grazing, especially for recreational hunters and wildlife enthusiasts.

The third theme expresses a value about the grasslands as having value for ground-dwelling birds and other types of wildlife. For example,

This is some of the most valuable bird habitat in this region. This short-grass prairie is unique. It has value for more than grazing, but they (the Forest Service) are not developing that value as much as they should be. I hear all this talk about stock tanks and the value of that to wildlife. Well, that is all well and good, but there is still some of the original prairie here. There used to be a strong population of prairie chickens here and I would like to see that again. I am not against grazing, but I do want to see some habitat development that is about wildlife and not about grazing. ...

This perspective incorporates the previously discussed notion of the grasslands as having value as a “safe haven” for wildlife.

The final wildlife theme identified in the data concerns prairie dogs. Some residents perceive a strong need for more aggressive management of prairie dogs because of their assessments of damage to the grasslands as well as to neighboring lands:

Our area is beginning to recover from a 3 year drought which caused damage to all grassland in the area. Drought was one thing, but uncontrolled animal damage is another. Because of the drought, the prairie dog population has increased and expanded to unprecedented levels. Coming from US Forest Service lands, the dogs have now invaded private pasture and cropland to the point it is nearly unusable.

A sub-theme expressed by some participants that although the prairie dogs do cause damage, and this damage needs to be addressed, the problem can be self-regulating:

People come all the way from Louisiana to shoot prairie dogs. Just about the time you think the prairie will go to the prairie dogs, then the plague happens and Mother Nature takes care of it. She has a way of taking care of it. You have to keep an open mind and have flexibility about these things.

Economic Value

Participants expressed the following themes about the economic value of the grasslands:

- The presence of the local Forest Service offices offering employment opportunity is perceived to provide economic benefits to communities. As one participant noted, *We got a couple of jobs in town because of it.* These benefits are associated primarily with the offices in Clayton, New Mexico. Participants from Harding County expressed a desire to have a local presence to address management issues in Mills Canyon. The effect would be to provide some economic benefit in this small county as well as to increase the presence of the Agency.
- Grazing resources are perceived to directly benefit cattle producers: *The immediate (economic) impact is the benefit to the cattle producers. It helps them and then it helps the community because the money flows about the county.* The interconnections of the cattle industry with many other parts of the local economy results in the perception that benefits to cattle producers help the community economy.
- Cattle producers acknowledge there is direct economic benefit resulting from their access to the grasslands. For some operators this access is the basis for a viable cattle ranch. These ranchers also suggest that although they recognize the financial benefit resulting from the price of grazing fees, they also provide a service in return that benefits the grasslands. For example, one rancher commented: *As a user of the grasslands, we have a great advantage because of the cost of grazing. ... We are taking care of the country too. It used to be that the Forest Service would pay 100 percent if we wanted to put in a fence, but now it is 50 percent and I don't have a problem with that. The more they are not on the land (because of declining Agency resources) and the ranchers are on the land, we can watch out for it There is also a common misconception that the Forest Service just gave the ranchers that property and they don't realize that the permit costs, and it can cost as much as the land. You have to buy that permit then you have to pay the rent on it So it is not free... There is an obligation for us to take care of it and we do.*
- Communities also receive direct economic benefits in the forms of Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) because of the presence of the grasslands within their counties. For example, one county official noted: *We have 70,000 acres of grasslands in our county and ... we get some economic benefits. We receive PILT and then some benefit off the grazing. If we lost the grasslands it would make a difference in our (county budgets). ... We have some tourism and there is wildlife and some fishing and ... the Canyon (Mills Canyon) is a major resource that draws some tourists, but the PILT makes a difference.*
- Participants note there is also some economic opportunity associated with the grasslands that may be under-developed, including mining of slabs of flagstone in certain areas of the grasslands. Some participants note there is a growing market in urban areas for flagstone that could be exploited if residents could mine this resource on the grasslands.

- Grasslands tourism and recreation are also perceived to be under-developed resources. There is existing economic benefit from hunters pursuing antelope, quail, and other wildlife. The development of more wildlife habitat, especially for quail, to increase hunting opportunities is perceived to offer economic benefit to surrounding communities. Similarly, there is also perceived economic benefit from promoting some of the other perceived assets of the areas: historic resources such as the Santa Fe Trail, natural history associated with the many dinosaur tracks in the area, and the clear night sky that is attractive to professional and amateur astronomers. There is also recognition of the potential benefits of promoting wildlife viewing and bird watching given the population of ground-dwelling birds and waterfowl.

Conservation Values

Participants expressed beliefs and values about the conservation of grasslands resources. The three major themes are expressed in the following bullet points.

- Ranchers and agriculturalists perceive their livelihood is tied to the health of the grasslands. They express a strong conservation ethic about maintaining the health of the land because it has direct implications for continuing their way of life. A common statement by ranchers is, *We are the real conservationists, the real environmentalists because we are in contact with the land everyday and we care for it. If we don't care for it, then we pay for it down the line.* As previously noted, ranchers perceive compatibility if not a necessity in the relationship between conservation values and ranching values. For example: *The grazing improvements are good for wildlife, the Swainsons hawk is here, and we put in culverts for the swift fox ... we are the conservationists here.*
- A contrasting perspective is offered by other participants who suggest there is some past and contemporary “over-grazing” by ranchers who are motivated by profit and not by conservation principles. These participants suggest ranchers are willing to compromise their conservation values when necessary to respond to financial or other demands in their ranching operations. As one participant noted, *It is the fox in the hen house and that is why we need the Forest Service to be vigilant. They (Forest Service) are doing a good job on the grazing keeping the ranchers doing what they are supposed to do.*
- A third theme emphasizes the necessity for all users to maintain a conservation ethic about the use of these public lands. This perspective suggests that ranchers and other users have a responsibility to “put something back” in addition to consuming grassland resources. For example, *My whole thing is that I think if you are taking something out then you should be putting something back ... and we seem to be doing an awful lot of taking and not much putting back.... We need to remember ... you never really own the land. We are just stewards of the land. It is our responsibility to leave it better than we found it ... for ourselves and our kids and their future. We seem to be awfully short-sighted in the here and now and greed is a bad thing.*

These themes express potentially conflicting perspectives about conservation values. Ranchers strongly believe they have a conservation ethic that has contributed to the current health of the grasslands. They also believe they are good stewards of the land who have the traditional knowledge and local expertise to fully understand grassland conditions and processes. Other

conservation interests suggest ranchers have been focused on promoting conservation ethics that meet their needs, but not necessarily the needs of other types of users and interested parties. These interests argue there is a need for a broader conservation ethic that promotes a wider range of conservation values rather than only ones associated with ranching. These interests acknowledge the benefits of ranching, but they suggest wildlife conservation values should receive more attention in the future management of the grasslands.

Recreation, Aesthetic and Existence Values

Although utilitarian values appear to be the foundation for most participant statements about the grasslands, there are also other values related to the recreational use and aesthetic appreciation of the grasslands. Some of these also have a utilitarian component, especially those with any potential tourist implications. However, the following themes are present in the data about these other value types:

- There is recognition, as expressed by participants in the Black Kettle focus groups, of a perceived need for the aesthetic and existence values associated with the grasslands. These values have local importance, but they also are ones that may attract out-of-area visitors. For example, one participant expressed these values as follows: *I think there is a big demand for people who want to watch the sunset. There are people who come here for that. ... We were out on a hunt and it was sunrise and dead quiet. One of them said, "Can yawl hear that?" And someone said, "What" and he said, "Exactly, it has been so long since I have been anywhere where I could hear dead quiet." I think there is a big yearning among people who live in big cities, well maybe not to come here and be cowboys but to experience it. ... to experience it, to come out and just be here. ... Here we have this grassland, this massive canvass that has the potential for prairie chickens and antelope, and quail....* This statement recognizes some of intrinsic values of "sunsets" and "quiet" and the experience of open space. Other participants noted the dark skies of the region and the aesthetic values of places such as Mills Canyon. These are perceived to enhance the quality of life for local communities as well as to attract out-of-area residents seeking these types of experiences for themselves.
- In general, participants acknowledge more limited use of the grasslands for their own recreational use and emphasize recreational activities by out-of-area users.
 - o Residents note that Mills Canyon is an important local recreational site. Hunting, fishing, camping, and picnicking are cited as common local recreational uses of this canyon. This constitutes a "special place" for local residents because it represents one of the prime local recreational resources with historical associations with local lifestyles. For example, *Mills Canyon ... when I was a kid there was no improved road. Me and my dad, we would walk down there and go fishing there. That was what the canyon was like for years. People who went down there went just to fish and maybe to hunt. There were some orchards down there at one time In 1904 there was a major flood and between then and the 1950s it was pretty quiet down there.... After that flood the local people would just go walk down there, tourists never really used it. Now, we get lots of tourists, we get four wheelers down there now and in the last five years they tore it up more than livestock ever did. There are roads everywhere, it is a major, major problem as far as I am concerned and it is a major problem for the Forest*

Service. Recreational users of Mills Canyon from out of the area are perceived to be increasing and the effects of some activity, especially off-highway vehicle use, is perceived to be deterring local residents from using this resource. Residents have strong attachments to Mills Canyon, but they also wish to see its resources maintained for both local and non-local users: *From an economic development side the Canyon is important to us. On highway 39 there is a turn off to Mills Canyon and the Forest Service did agree to partner with us on the signs. We want that to happen. ... It is a beautiful and awesome asset we have and ... we want people to visit it and not abuse it*

- o Other participants suggest more limited use of other areas of the grasslands for local recreation. For example: *There isn't a lot of local recreational use of the grasslands. Mostly it is people who have never seen grasslands that might be interested, but we see it all the time. Most people that live here may do some coyote or prairie dog hunting out there, but it is the out-of-state hunters that come here for antelope and prairie dogs that are the big recreation users.*
- o There is also some recreational gathering of plant material that is apparently used for consumption. For example: *Some of the local folks gather some local plants to eat from the grasslands, some of the ladies pick them and eat them....there is a small amount of use in that manner.* Unfortunately, this work did not determine the specific plants gathered.
- Recreational hunting is an important use of the grasslands. There is some local hunting, but out of area hunters for antelope, turkey, quail, and prairie dogs are acknowledged as among the more common grasslands recreationists. Prairie dog hunters are apparently especially attracted to the opportunities for hunting and their contributions to reduction of prairie dog populations is a side benefit.

Multiple-Use Values and Conflicts

There are contrasting perspectives about the multiple-use values of these grasslands. One view describes the grasslands as having limited multiple-use values because of its prairie characteristics. A utilitarian world view, not uncommon among ranchers and agriculturalists, informs this perspective. For example, the following statement expresses a utilitarian assessment of the value of the grasslands:

It is just a lot of grasslands and there isn't much else there. They say a land of many uses, but there are not many uses for most of it. It is just good grasslands. It is very strong grass, but not a land of many uses like other places. It has been a good place to become a rancher.....

The contrasting perspective recognizes the existing grazing focus of grasslands management, but expresses a desire for more multiple uses in the future. This perspective was expressed by conservation and wildlife enthusiasts who participated in this project. For example, one conservationist perspective commented:

I have nothing against grazing and as long as they do not over-graze, I don't see a problem. I just don't want to hear one more thing about the wildlife value of stock tanks! It is going to take more than that for them to seriously promote wildlife and the needs of nesting birds. In my lifetime I would like to see a prairie chicken here again. They need to be more serious about getting rid of

the salt cedar and getting some water into Mills Canyon and other places so it will benefit wildlife. Another thing I would like to see is for them to set aside some habitat for wildlife where there are no cows. There needs to be some places that cows are not stepping on birds. Now, I know all about hoof action and what they say about that, but we just don't need cows everywhere.

Other wildlife interests also stress a future that contains more diverse habitat and more opportunities for a variety of uses, including grazing. On the other hand, grazing interests are satisfied with existing conditions and do not necessarily perceive a need for new types of uses. However, during the focus groups there were cordial discussions among ranching and wildlife interests in which both parties agreed that managing for more wildlife habitat in the future is desirable.

Participants noted a limited number of conflicts about existing uses as well as desired futures for the grasslands. The most prominent use conflict noted concerns off-highway vehicle use in Mills Canyon. Participants noted that while they are supporters of the concept of multiple-use, OHV use needs more management:

In the 50's and 60's they made a road and a picnic area down in the canyon (Mills Canyon). They invited tourists and recreationists down there with that road. Now, we all support multiple-use, but once they get to the campground, they need to walk. The four wheelers and the vehicles, the roads they have developed are a problem.... I think they need to have some personnel there to enforce the rules and regulations. If they had a ranger station or something there it would be a valuable asset to the county ... they need to concentrate some effort and some personnel where there is a problem. ... We are the caretakers, but they are the managers of the grasslands. It is up to the ranchers to take care of this land, they are very good conservationists and economists. They watch the grass and know when to move the cattle, they have an interest in it The 740 or so that are left here are the ones that really care for the land here. They want to be there, they care about the way of life, they care about the land and there is a reason they are there.

Multiple participants describe OHV use as potentially problematic for the grasslands and especially Mills Canyon. Participants suggested this is an area of potential conflict in the future as the recreation pressures in the canyon increases. Other participants also stressed the need for promotion of a conservation ethic that is equal to their own conservation values:

No one opposes the responsible use of the resource. I support multiple-use, but it has to be responsible use, recreational use, the hunters, everyone They need to have the same level of responsibility as the people who live here and take care of the land They know that when they wake up in the morning they know they are going to have to pay a price for the decisions they made yesterday ... and we would like the other users to be as responsible....

Although some hunters leave open gates and others use fence wire and poles for target practice, participants do not describe any perceived significant perceived conflicts among grazing, hunting, and other recreational users.

Special Designation Values

The Canadian River is currently under consideration for designation as a Wild and Scenic River. Organizations such as the Center for Biological Diversity and Amigos Bravos (Friends of Wild Rivers) support this designation. However, participants in this process are at least ambivalent about the need for this designation.

Participant responses to this proposed designation express themes in a more general discussion about special designations and their relationship to these grasslands. In general, participants are skeptical about the need for any additional “special designations.”

- Participants observed that a special designation usually results in constricting other types of uses, especially grazing uses. For example, this extended quotation describes the content of ranching concerns about such designations: *The Canadian River is up for designation as a Wild and Scenic River. I don't know what that means, but if it means a total removal of livestock, then I don't support that. Now, the Forest Service said that the rock formations there are very unique, but I am not sure it is. There are formations in other places nearby that look the same, so I am not sure it is unique. I don't know what the restrictions would be ... but if it restricts livestock use, then I would be against it.* This statement expresses reservation about designations that would restrict other types of existing uses, especially grazing uses. This is one basis for opposition to any special designation for the Canadian River Canyon. This statement also questions the “uniqueness” of the Canyon based on the criteria of distinctive rock formations that are perceived to exist elsewhere. A related perception is that a special designation may also prevent addressing key ecological problems such as the spread of salt cedars, an invasive species, in the Canyon.
- Another response to this proposed designation suggests a gathering of local and other interested parties to address the perceived need to “protect” the Canyon with a special designation. For example, one participant commented: *You can go in there on horseback and that is ok with me, but not the four-wheelers. ... I oppose it (Wild and Scenic status) because of the restrictions ... We should let the canyon rise and fall on its own merits. There should be consultation with locals and interested stakeholders out of the area and then make a decision about what most benefits the wildlife, plant life and the river Any special designation, well ... interested parties should be able to work out the problems, locals and others without having to have a special designation.....*
- Participants also suggest that special designations tend to attract more visitors and this may result in the degradation of what is considered to be sensitive and fragile habitat. For example, one participant observed: *Special designations tend to attract people and then what people are coming to see deteriorates. Then more and more come and you see less and less.*

Participants in this process value the special resources such as Mills Canyon and the Canadian River Canyon. However, they also suggest these designations may have unintended consequences that may ultimately harm the resources they value. Also, if a special designation restricts current uses, especially grazing, then it is likely to be opposed by those local residents who support the ranching communities of the region.

Management Priorities And Desired Futures: Agency And Public Perspectives

The following bullet points describe themes in the focus group discussion data about management priorities and desired futures. In general, participants express a theme consistent with the “status quo is the way to go” perspective of the Black Kettle focus group participants. That is, there is a general satisfaction with grasslands management. As one participant noted: *I would like to see things stay the same. The grasslands went through a terrible time when people were farming it and it is not tillable soil. It is back to the way it was before homesteading and that is the way it ought to stay....* However, participants do have a perspective to “fix” some perceived problems in a system that otherwise appears to be meeting most needs. These issues include:

- Consideration for more diversity in the grasslands ecosystem, especially diversity that supports wildlife and bird habitat. This issue is expressed in such statements as: *I don't think the grasslands have ever been managed for much more than keeping cows and calves going. I would be a firm believer in peaceful coexistence between production agriculture and ecotourism We don't have lots of some things here, but we have lots of antelope! We are attempting to do what we can to improve wildlife habitat I think there are more things that could be done When we want to go in and take out five acres from 640, then I think that has a negligible impact on the amount of grass that the producers have to give up in support of the wildlife....* This sentiment applies to other wildlife and related perspectives that desire a wider mix of habitat and ecological values other than forage for cattle. Again, these perspectives generally support grazing, but the desire is for consideration of other than grazing issues among the priorities for managing grasslands resources.
- Participants note that fire is as much a part of the ecological history of the grasslands as ungulate grazing. Participants generally praise the Forest Service for the use of controlled burns to clear invasive species and for other management purposes. This is expressed in the following comment: *A few years ago juniper had infested the whole area and so we had a controlled burn and it made a big difference. We killed 80 percent of the juniper and now there is grass growing all around. The fire has done a super job at cleaning that up. Fire, grazing, those are both tools that can make a difference ... Fire can be a hazard if the grass grows up and it is not used , but the way it is now it is ok. You have to remember, there are two kinds of fire – hot fires that kill the grass and controlled fires that clean up the ground and return the meadow cycle to the land that is beneficial to the land and start the initial stages of succession. The hot fires are catastrophic Other fires hurt the ground, but it does not kill them. ... If the grasslands were not used, then it would be bad for the land ...* This view of fire is strongly utilitarian. It also represents common sentiments about fire in the group discussions and individual data.
- Managing to support local custom and culture. Participants perceive the grasslands as an environment that requires some tending in order for it to flourish. They also perceive their way of life as requiring some appreciation in the management of these grasslands. There is a strong perceived connection between the viability of many ranching operations and access to grazing. Recognition and consideration of these interdependencies in making management decisions is a strong theme in the data about future management priorities. For example: *They (Forest Service) should continue to be cognizant of our custom and culture, and our way of life. They should manage in a way that respects and supports our way of life. People come here as*

tourists to be apart of the way of life in our communityI think that shows the value of it. We feel we are the true environmentalists. Why should someone in New York dictate to us our way of life? These are common sentiments, especially the comments regarding outside (e.g., New York) influences with what is perceived to be limited to no knowledge of local conditions appearing to have more say in management issues than local people who are in touch with the land daily.

- Anticipate future demands from increased population pressures. Participants note that although their communities are not experiencing growth pressures, areas within reach of the grasslands are growing. This external growth will create a need for more “people” management, especially for uses such as off-highway vehicles; and more “intensive” management in sensitive areas such as Mills Canyon. One participant expressed the essence of this concern in the following comment: ... *What I do see because of the increased population is that things will probably become more intensely managed as more people come in and want different things from the land. I totally support multiple-use, but you are going to have increased pressure on the grasslands for more types of uses and not just grazing. I foresee that in order to maintain the quality of life we have now, it will take more intense management such as a ranger or some staff person at the Canyon It is the outside people pressure, not the local people pressure that will change things.* Other participants share this concern about a growing awareness of the grasslands and the need to anticipate “people management” as essential for avoiding degradation of resources as well as the quality of experiences currently available to area residents. One solution offered is to increase the management presence in sensitive areas, especially at Mills Canyon.
- Effective management of off-road vehicles is a corollary to concerns about “people management.” Participants emphasize they support multiple-use, but perceive OHV usage as requiring more intensive management.
- Invasive species were noted by multiple participants from varying perspectives as an essential issue to be addressed in future plans. Species such as salt cedar (Tamarix), locust trees, mesquite, and scotch thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*) are species specifically cited as requiring attention in future management.
- Prairie dogs were noted as a topic requiring present and future consideration in management decisions. In addition to the destruction of grasslands and the spill-over to lands bordering the grasslands proper, some participants also noted the potential health problems associated with the plagues affecting prairie dog populations in this region.
- Ensuring fair return for grazing is a topic raised by several non-grazing participants in individual interviews and focus groups. These participants suggest the grazing use of public lands appears to be a “bargain” for cattle producers; and, the Forest Service should make an effort to ensure fair market value for grazing permits. When these topics were discussed in groups with diverse participants, ranching interests stressed the value of their management knowledge and the contribution this makes to grasslands health as an important but under-appreciated contribution that accompanies their grazing permit.

These management priorities from a public perspective can be compared to those the key issues for Forest Plan revision identified by forest managers. The grasslands managers identified three priority areas:

- Invasive species, especially eastern red cedar and black locust.
- Potential increased levels of oil/gas development and of impacts.
- Consideration of the interaction of declining ground nesting bird species and management practices such as prescribed fire, grazing management, and invasive species control.

Participants in the grasslands groups expressed the above concerns as well as others. Forest managers share some of the same priorities as expressed by the publics participating in this project. However, public priorities also include consideration of the effects of grasslands management on community ways of life; management of anticipated demands on the grasslands from more diverse uses; and, more effort toward creating more wildlife habitat that will benefit a variety of species. Additionally, there is specific public concern, as expressed by the participants in these groups, about off-highway vehicle use, prairie dog management, and continued use of fire to effectively manage the grasslands.

Forest-Community Relationships

There are three noteworthy themes in the information about the relationship between grasslands managers and surrounding communities. The first theme emphasizes satisfaction with the working relationship between the Agency and grasslands users. Several factors appear to contribute to this satisfaction:

- Communication between managers and publics about the reasons for management actions.
- A willingness to be “flexible” and not manage “strictly by the book” so that local ecological and social conditions are an element of management decisions.
- Outreach by District Rangers to key local groups and local government.
- Consistency in local management personnel.

The second theme is an overall satisfaction with the grazing programs and “forward looking” grazing management by the Forest Service. For example, this sentiment is typical of many expressed by project participants:

Their grazing management is forward looking, and they will work with you on problems. We developed a relationship to work with them on land use planning and they are very open to local input as well as other input. They will listen to all sides of the issue. They use innovative grazing practices and they have created a larger diversity of plant life which creates diversity of wildlife too.... If you rotate those cattle, when you are only in those pastures 30 days at a time, you rest those pastures and it is good for forage and good for wildlife ... So, those practices they have developed, they have done a good job.

The third theme concerns some desired changes to increase the quality of communication and relationships with local managers. The desired changes include:

- Increased presence of Agency personnel in the field, especially at Mills Canyon.
- Attention to acquiring Agency expertise that fits the ecological conditions of the grasslands, which will promote confidence in management decisions.
- A greater range of opportunities to provide feedback to the Agency about issues and concerns.
- At a region-wide level, consideration of the use of perceived special interest groups that may not necessarily be objective. One participant specifically suggested: *On a region-wide level, they seem to listen to the National Wildlife Federation. They are a special interest group But the Forest Service treats them as an independent body and they are a special interest group with what some people think is a biased point of view I would like to see the universities involved.*
- Greater appreciation for local knowledge about the ecological processes and best management practices for this region. Or as one participant observed: *Sometimes there is a problem with them listening to us and what we know about the land. They listen, but I am not so sure they hear us. I think it is a good thing that some of our feedback gets back to the Forest Service....*

Each of these suggested changes were presented as “gentle criticism” in an effort to constructively improve the working relationship between communities and grasslands managers.

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Appendix. Topic Areas for Discussion

The following topic areas will guide the discussion about forest and grasslands management.

Identity. Each participant will be asked to describe their interest in management of national forests and grasslands and any particular perspective or interest/stakeholder group with which they are affiliated.

Community Character and Recent Changes This topic address about the lifestyles and social life in communities adjacent to national forests and grasslands. The purpose of this discussion topic is to understand the connections between communities and these public lands. Example questions are:

How would you describe this place to someone who has never been here, both the place and the way of life?

How has this community changed in the last 10-15 years? What are the important sources of change?

What are your thoughts about the challenges for this community/region?

What communities, occupations, or lifestyles are most and least affected by how national forest and grasslands are managed?

Uses. Communities and groups have connections to national forests and grasslands from the types of uses of these lands. This topic develops the range of uses of national forests and Grasslands. Example questions to discuss are:

What are the most and least common uses of these national forest and grasslands?

Are there any types of existing or potential uses that are not compatible with these lands? Do all users get along?

Is there anything the USDA Forest Service should do to change how forests and grasslands are used in the future?

Resources. This topic area identifies the types of resources that are contained within national forests and grasslands. This will aid in identifying the connections between communities and resources of the national forests and grasslands. An example issue to develop is:

A place is often thought of as the sum of its parts. Can you describe the parts, the types of resources of this national forest or grassland?

What are the special qualities and characteristics of these grasslands?

Areas for Special Designations. Some forests and grasslands have an area or geographic feature that is given a special designation such as Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River, Roadless Area, or Research Natural Area.

For any existing area, how do you describe the qualities and characteristics of this area?
What does it contribute to communities in this area?

What are the benefits of having this type of area in this national forest or grasslands?
(local, national, other?)

If areas for special designation do not exist on this National Forest or Grasslands, is there are need to identify a particular place or landscape? If so, where?

Are there other types of “special places” in this national forest or grasslands (locate these on forest/grasslands map), and what are the qualities of these places that make them “special?”

National Forest and Grasslands Benefits and Values. “Value” has several definitions such as “attributed worth or merit.” This discussion will develop locally meaningful definitions about values and identify specific values about national forests and grasslands.

Similarly, a “benefit” can refer to the types of effects that result from a resource such as a National Forest or Grassland. Some benefits may be economic and others may be recreational. Some communities, groups, or individuals may receive more benefits than others from having such resources nearby. This topic area will address questions such as:

What is valued about national forests and grasslands?” (e.g., products, services, opportunities, existence)

What are the benefits to nearby communities and groups from national forests and grasslands?”

Desired Futures. Many people have an idea of how they would like to see a place such as a national forest be in the future. They have ideas about current conditions and how those should change to improve the landscape and its resources. This topic will develop information about your future vision for national forest and grasslands resources. Example questions this topic will address are:

How would you describe how these lands (national forest/grasslands) were when you first became aware of them? (Historical and present-day conditions)

If you think about how you want these forests/grasslands to be when your children are grown, what is your vision?

What should the USDA Forest Service do to achieve your future vision for these lands?

Key Management Issues and Priorities for Future Forest Management. The USDA Forest Service is developing strategic plans to guide future management of national forests and grasslands. An understanding of public assessments of existing plans and future needs can help the agency to identify planning issues. To discuss this topic, we can address questions such as:

What do you think is broken and what needs to be fixed as the USDA Forest Service revises existing plans?

What has the USDA Forest Service done well in its management of lands and resources here? Are any changes needed in the management strategy in those areas?

What are the “bottom line” issues for you in revision of the existing plan? That is, are there management issues that absolutely must be addressed or changed from how they are now?

Additional Issues. These topics are guiding the discussion, but there may be others that you feel are important and need to be included. Please identify any additional topics you feel need to be considered by the USDA Forest Service as it tries to understand the connections between communities and national forests and grasslands.