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Source: Rangelands, 36(2):20-24. 2014.

Published By: Society for Range Management

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2111/RANGELANDS-D-13-00034.1>

URL: <http://www.bioone.org/doi/full/10.2111/RANGELANDS-D-13-00034.1>

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By Samuel F. Parry and Rhonda Skaggs

On the Ground

- Impermanence syndrome involves farmer apprehension or uncertainty about the future and leads to disinvestment in an agricultural operation as well as erosion of producer confidence.
- We explored impermanence syndrome among New Mexico public rangeland cattle producers in order to assess perceptions of impermanence syndrome impact factors in the region.
- Urban fringe effects, proximity to the US-Mexico border, multiple-use of public rangelands, public perception of public land ranching, as well as economic and government agency issues were identified as causes of ranching impermanence syndrome.
- Mitigation of uncertainty and perceived impermanence threats to ranching would promote management and investments that promote long-haul planning for and enhancement of rangeland health.

Keywords: impermanence syndrome, ranching, public lands, southwestern United States, disinvestment, US–Mexico border, land use, cattle industry.

Rangelands 36(2):20–24

doi: 10.2111/RANGELANDS-D-13-00034.1

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Ranch and rangeland sustainability are contingent upon numerous actors, actions, and forces, including uncertainty about the future. Uncertainty affecting agricultural operations' planning and investment decisions can lead to impermanence syndrome, which is the perception that long-term prospects for continued agricultural production and land use are uncertain.^{1–3} The response is economically rational disinvestment of capital resources, declining infrastructure maintenance, loss of efficiency, and loss of income to the operation.^{4–6} Imperma-

nence syndrome undermines producer confidence, hampers long-term planning, and encourages speculation. In some settings, impermanence responses may be premature and unmerited.^{5,7,8} However, ineffective responses to either real or perceived impermanence threats can undercut farm-level profitability and viability.⁶

Urbanization is often the primary impermanence-syndrome factor affecting agricultural producers (e.g., crop and dairy farms located on the urban fringe). However, urbanization as a source of uncertainty is not typical of livestock ranching conditions throughout much of the western United States, particularly in remote areas with extensive public land grazing. In land-extensive western ranching conditions, an individual ranch operator's decisions and reactions to various pressures can influence conditions on thousands of acres,⁹ many of which may be in the public domain and ecologically fragile. Thus, better understanding of the degree to which a wide variety of impermanence factors are perceived to impact public land ranching is critical to improved land management and policy formulation.

Impermanence Issues Affecting Southwestern New Mexico Ranches

We surveyed public land ranchers in southwestern New Mexico (via mail, telephone, and in-person interviews) in 2011 in order to assess their perceptions of possible ranching impermanence factors. One hundred and forty-one ranchers representing 191 grazing allotments across eight counties within the federal Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Las Cruces District completed a questionnaire. These responses accounted for 35% of public land ranches and 47% of the BLM grazing allotments in the study area.

The survey instrument included questions that covered specific issues related to ranch proximity to the US–Mexico border, multiple-use of public lands, public perceptions, urbanization, economic issues, government agency, and environmental issues. The questions were designed to identify ranchers' perceptions of ranch management impact factors (e.g., potential sources of impermanence syndrome).

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