

Ranchers giving up business, heritage

Wells: Families surrender as drilling spreads across the land where they raised cattle for generations.

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AZTEC, N.M. - Linn Blancett has given a lot to ranching, including his right ring finger, lost in a steer-roping accident years ago.

The 60-year-old's family has been raising cattle among the otherworldly sandstone canyons of the Animas River valley for six generations, stretching back to 1878, before New Mexico was a state. His great-great-grandfather was the first county commission chairman here. And Blancett has buried two sons in these arid hills.

But now, he says, the growth of drilling is forcing him to move.

"All these wells are putting me out of business," said Blancett, his blue eyes gazing up at a 20-foot-tall pump chugging amid the gnarled cedar and scrub oak on his ranch. More than 200 natural gas wells clutter the federal land where he has grazing rights.

"I've had to sell my cows, and it's been real tough to give it all up," said Blancett, spitting bits of Copenhagen tobacco between sentences. He's looking for a new ranch in a place untouched by the proliferation of gas and oil equipment. But it won't convey his decades of heritage.

"The family history, it's gone," he said. "All I ever wanted was to run cattle and be a cowboy. It was an awfully good life ... but this is devastating."

Complaints such as his are increasingly common among ranchers who graze cattle on federal land across the West as the Bush administration has more than tripled the drilling permits approved annually on public lands.

Only 507 acres of the sprawling 32,000-acre ranch are Blancett's property. The rest is owned by the federal government, which holds title to about a third of New Mexico and has signed a series of 10-year agreements to let Blancett's cattle graze on the land.

The government is not ordering Blancett to leave. But he said he has found raising 250 cattle here more and more impractical with the burgeoning number of wells. A few date to the 1950s, but an acceleration recently has brought in about 100 in the past five years, with perhaps another 100 expected in the next five years, he said.

With the wells have come a grid of pipes and roads, as well as constant traffic from heavy trucks and drilling crews, rumbling in and out all day to service the wells and dig more. The trucks sometimes hit and kill Blancett's cattle, and the traffic makes it difficult for the animals to move around and raise calves, he said.

Beside each well is a pit into which pumps spew water contaminated with gas, salt, antifreeze and other chemicals. Cattle sometimes drink at these pits, become ill and die, said Blancett.

Another rancher who lives next door, Chris Velasquez, whose Navajo and Apache roots on the land go back centuries, showed a visitor photographs of his cows, sprawled dead next to the wastewater pits of gas wells. "I've got two daughters, but I don't think they'll go into ranching with all the hell I've gone through," said Velasquez, 52, the fourth generation of his family to raise cattle on the land.

Ray Sanchez, environmental protection chief for the local Bureau of Land Management, said he has sympathy for the ranchers but also understands the need to drill. "Gas development is a heavy industry, with large machines, and not only does it poison livestock sometimes, but sometimes the cattle get run over," Sanchez said. "It's a tough situation, but we are trying to maintain both the livestock operations and the mineral development on this land."

Sanchez said the gas companies have as much right - or more - than the ranchers to use the land, because they own the mineral rights underneath, while the ranchers enjoy only a "privilege" to graze their cattle there, Sanchez said.

"The ranchers are operating on federal land, but they don't want to share that federal land with other uses, and that includes not only the oil and gas industry, but also recreational users, too," said Chad Calvert, a deputy assistant secretary at the Department of the Interior.

Robert Gallagher, president of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, said economics justify energy-industry access to the land because it is the state's largest civilian employer, providing paychecks for 23,000 people and pumping about \$1.5 billion a year into New Mexico's economy. Because Blancett has access to so many thousands of acres, said Gallagher, there's no reason he can't share some of the land with local drillers, who must earn a living, too.

The growing local dependence on oil and gas is shaping residents' mixed feelings about drilling, said Tony Atkinson, San Juan County manager from 1989 to 2004.

When Blancett's great-great-grandfather ran the county back in 1887, ranching was the area's only business. Since the 1950s, oil and gas production has dwarfed ranching in economic importance, employing up to half of the county's 120,000 residents. "The oil and gas industry is a double-edged sword," said Atkinson. "The economy booms with it, and right now San Juan County is in great economic shape. But there's no question that

the interface between the industry and humans is causing problems, and I am concerned about that."

Ervin Chavez, vice chairman of the county commission and a member of the Navajo tribe, said: "When you see ranchers closing up shop and giving in like this, then it's a real sign of trouble, big trouble, because ranching is very important to northern New Mexico. I'm worried we're losing our balance, if all we have left is oil and gas."

Although Blancett is a lifelong Republican, he said he has become so disillusioned by the Bush administration's accelerated leasing of public lands to drillers that he recently teamed up with the liberal group Greenpeace. A volunteer from the organization made a 60-foot-long red and yellow banner reading "Sacrifice Area" that Blancett and Velasquez draped from a cliff above the main road into Aztec.

"They are sacrificing us, sacrificing the environment, sacrificing everything to drill these wells, no matter how much we want to stop them," said Blancett.

His wife, Treciafaye "Tweeti" Blancett, served as a county chairwoman for Bush's campaign in 2000 but since then has become an outspoken critic of the administration, as a director of a group called Republicans for Environmental Protection.

The couple's only living son, age 37, is among those who have given up ranching and works in the oil and gas industry, like many others in San Juan County. Linn Blancett's brother has also abandoned the family's ranching heritage. "I've got no one to leave the ranch to," Blancett said. "When I started fighting oil and gas really hard, it estranged my family. My brother and I, we don't even speak any more."

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