

The Gunnison Working Group

by Bill Trampe

The Gunnison Working Group is comprised of seven people brought together to develop a Gunnison Basin range-reform proposal. Why should the people in the Gunnison Basin undertake such a project? And why has this group been able to deal with this controversial issue? In order to answer these questions and others, we need to examine some of the historical activities of the Stockgrowers Association and its individual members.

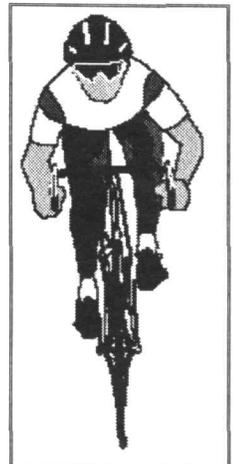
The Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association has long been known to be progressive and responsive to the needs of its members. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that local members were very active in the establishment of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. In more recent times, being progressive has meant being willing to work in a collaborative way with groups having different interests and goals.

One example of an early effort of local ranchers working for consensus was the Wilderness Area boundary designations for the West Elk Wilderness expansion and the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness expansion. Lee Spann, Fred Field, and Ken Ochs worked with Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, the environmental and political community of Crested Butte, the United States Forest Service, and our congressional delegation to establish expansion boundaries that our livestock industry could accept. This effort culminated with Spann carrying this negotiated agreement to Washington, D.C., and testifying before Congressional Committees dealing with wilderness designation. The ultimate boundaries set by Congress were extremely close to those negotiated by the local people.

The entire Gunnison Basin united in opposition to the proposed transmountain diversion of water from our basin. This opposition involved the most conservative rancher to the most liberal environmentalist. And to this point in time, the cooperative opposition has been very successful, with the community hoping that the Colorado Supreme Court will uphold the District Water Court decision that there was not enough unappropriated water available to justify building the diversion project. From this unified opposition there developed a dialog between rancher Ken Spann and environmentalist Gary Sprung. They would meet and discuss issues involved in the water case plus anything else they had on their minds. In turn, this relationship expanded to involve the Board of Directors of the Gunnison County Stockgrowers and the Board of Directors of the High Country Citizens Alliance meeting together for dinner and discussion of issues of mutual concern. Greater understanding and appreciation of each entity's ideas and concerns were gained from or during these meetings. Subjects at these meetings included water, county land-use issues, public-land issues, recreational issues, ranching issues, and other environmental issues.

A number of years ago, the conflict between ranchers and recreationists in the East River Valley became very serious. One person that had to deal with the situation on a daily basis was Barbara East. Barbara is the range rider for Allen Ranches, Inc., and Ochs Brothers in the Slate River Valley and Brush Creek. Having daily confrontations with mountain bicyclists led Barbara to enter a bicycle rental shop in Crested Butte and start a dialog with the owner about the problems she was having trying to do her job and not antagonizing the tourists. From this beginning, came the development of a brochure titled *Share and Enjoy Colorado's High Country*. For Barbara, a well known Western artist, developing and producing this project was a natural. In the brochure are guides to proper trail etiquette when recreationists meet livestock on the trail, drawings and directions about proper methods to open and close gates, as well as a brief description about the part that ranching plays in the esthetics, economy, and environmental integrity of the High Country. The brochure was paid for by donations from ranchers in the East River Valley, East River Valley recreational businesses, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Gunnison County Stockgrowers. Distribution of the brochure is handled by the local rental shops, special-events organizers, the Forest Service, and the BLM. The benefits that the ranching industry has received from this effort are many: a greater understanding by the public of our needs and contributions to the community, an ability to do our jobs on public lands with less conflict and confrontation, a better understanding of the recreationist and environmentalists, and a continuing dialog between ranchers and the Crested Butte Mountain Bicycle Association.

During approximately the past six years, debate about raising grazing fees has been very heated between livestock interests and environmentalists on a national basis. Locally, however, this issue was one that gained consensus within our community. During one of the annual fall Congressional debates over raising the grazing fee, Ken Spann approached the Crested Butte town council about supporting the position of the local livestock industry and asked the council to help the Stockgrowers lobby the Colorado Congressional Delegation to oppose the proposed prohibitive hike in grazing fees. The council agreed to add its support to that already pledged by the Gunnison County Commissioners. This collaborative effort resulted in Senator Tim Wirth becoming an ally of the livestock indus-



try in the battle over grazing fees. The Senator's support in the U.S. Senate on this issue in his last years in office was very important to maintaining the balance of power needed to allow Western ranching to continue on public lands.

By now, most readers are probably wondering why such diverse groups could work together, much less agree about anything. In this writer's opinion, a common goal, value, or belief must be in place for such dialogs to take place. Also, in my opinion, we have those commonalities in our community. All the various interest groups have a deep respect and desire for the esthetic values that are present in the Gunnison Basin. We all want to see open space and clean vistas remain a part of the experience of living and visiting in the high country of Gunnison, Colorado. The environmental community and most of the urban people of our area realize that ranching protects that cherished open space and provides the balance in lifestyle and economy found in our mountain valleys. In turn, our ranchers have a deep commitment to our natural resources and a firm belief that good stewardship is an absolute necessity for maintaining our lifestyle and economic well-being.



Out of all these firm beliefs and commitments was born the Gunnison Working Group: a group formed to work on the federal administration's effort at grazing reform and grazing fee increase, a group formed to work on the most contentious issue that has ever faced Western public lands communities.

In the spring of 1993, Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt announced a series of Town Meetings to be held throughout the West, one of which was to be held in Grand Junction, Colorado. In preparing for his meeting, the Gunnison County Stockgrowers contacted leaders of the High Country Citizens Alliance and Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory to see if those two entities would join our local industry's comments to the Secretary at the Grand Junction meeting. Both groups responded very positively. In fact, Gary Sprung of the High Country Citizens Alliance attended and spoke at the meeting in favor of the livestock industry. He addressed the issues of open space and esthetic values being so important to the environmental integrity of local communities and what a positive role ranching plays in providing those attributes. He further stated that grazing reform and fee increases that forced ranchers out of business and off the land would ultimately be very damaging to the economic and environmental well-being of the

West. The Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association comments recognized those of the High Country Citizens Alliance and, further, asked the Secretary to visit the Gunnison Country to see first-hand how the mountain bicyclist and range rider, environmentalist and rancher, local politician and rancher can and do work together to obtain consensus on contentious issues. The Stockgrowers further wanted to show the Secretary an example of the outstanding stewardship practiced in the Gunnison Basin as evidenced by the award-winning BLM allotment of Duane and Brad Phelps. Gunnison County Commissioner Fred Field attended the meeting and asked the Secretary to consider the experiences of the Gunnison Basin in the development of the grazing reforms and fee increases. The Secretary responded very positively as the meeting ended on that early May evening.

All Gunnison Basin residents in attendance at the Town Meeting returned to Gunnison in a positive frame of mind, feeling that they needed to chart a careful course of action to follow the Town Meeting. As a result, the boards of directors of the High Country Citizens Alliance and the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association held a joint meeting. Three commitments resulted from the meeting. They agreed:

- (1) To formally invite the Secretary of Interior to visit Gunnison by submitting letters of invitation from the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association, the High Country Citizens Alliance, and the Gunnison County Board of Commissioners.
- (2) To develop a joint grazing-fee reform proposal.
- (3) To form the Gunnison Working Group to negotiate the joint grazing-fee reform proposal. The group would be made up of three members of the High Country Citizens Alliance and three members of the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association, plus a seventh member that had been instrumental in bringing the groups together initially.

The members of the working group appointed from the Stockgrowers were Ken Spann, Stan Irby, and Bill Trampe.

The members representing High Country Citizens Alliance included Gary Sprung, Sue Navy, and Susan Lohr. The seventh member of the group was Barbara East.

The working group having been formed, they now went to work. Over the course of May and early June, they spent many long evenings negotiating and reaching consensus on the many issues covered in the Gunnison Proposal. In mid-June, the group submitted to its respective parent organizations a final draft of the Joint Gunnison Grazing Reform Proposal. This proposal calls for seven main items.

- (1) Retain a base grazing fee at a reasonable level based on some sound basis much like PRIA (Public Rangelands Improvement Act).
- (2) Impose a capped local administrative surcharge that would create an incentive for improved local management and stewardship of the range resource.
- (3) Change elements of the distribution of grazing fee receipts by charging a single, direct, identifiable return to the United States Treasury.

- (4) Bill for, collect, and retain the grazing fee revenues at the local level.
- (5) Create local rangeland ecosystem advisory councils.
- (6) For three fiscal years only, authorize range betterment funds to be utilized for allotment management-plan development.
- (7) Develop an integrated national range educational program to deliver technical and practical information to permittees, agency personnel, and interested publics.

Both parent organizations adopted the proposal, which was also endorsed by the Gunnison County Board of Commissioners. In mid-June 1993, the Gunnison Joint Grazing Reform Proposal was submitted to the Secretary of Interior and to the Colorado Congressional delegation.

With the completion of the group's effort, a news release was prepared to make the public aware of the reform package negotiated. After distributing the news release, the group was contacted to provide information and interviews for major articles about their efforts and ideas. Articles appeared in *The Denver Post*, *Beef Today*, *The Colorado Rancher and Farmer* and *The Los Angeles Times*. The *Times* article was released on the Associated Press wire and appeared in newspapers all across the country. Thus, the entire nation became aware of what the group of seven people with such diverse interests had been able to accomplish because they shared a common goal and value to maintain the environmental integrity of their mountain valley.

The Working Group now began to feel the pressure and notoriety created by the extensive press coverage. Questions and comments, both positive and negative, became common daily occurrences for all working group members. Members received inquiries and comments from all across the nation. Livestock industry leaders and environmental organization leaders alike had positive and negative responses to the efforts put forth by the working group. Something new and innovative had been suggested, and now the response was occurring.

In late September 1993, Colorado Governor Roy Romer came to the Gunnison Country for a visit. During that visit, the Working Group had the opportunity to have dinner with the Governor, because he was interested in learning more about how and what the group had accomplished. During this meeting, the group briefed the Governor on the proposal and then answered questions from him and his cabinet. The Governor left the meeting with a very positive attitude about the federal lands issues and indicated to the group he could carry its ideas to the Western Governor's Conference in early October. Governor Romer also indicated that Secretary Babbitt was to attend the Governor's Conference and that he would carry the group's message to the Secretary.

In early November, yet another event involved the Gunnison Working Group. In response to the inability of people in Colorado to become proactive on grazing reform, Governor Romer formed the Colorado Rangeland Reform Group. This group was made up of seven ranchers, seven environmental-wildlife individuals, and two local-govern-

ment people. The group was formed to collaborate on the many issues involved in grazing reform and to attempt to reach consensus on as many issues as possible. Gunnison Working Group members Gary Sprung and Ken Spann were both requested to participate in this process. They were also asked to bring the Gunnison Grazing Reform Proposal to the group as a basis on which to build consensus. Further, the Governor asked the Secretary of Interior to be a participant. Secretary Babbitt accepted the invitation, and a schedule of eight meetings was arranged during November, December, and January.

Secretary Babbitt announced his participation in the Governors' Rangeland Reform Group and requested a visit to Gunnison during his first trip to Colorado. The Secretary was welcomed to Gunnison and met with the Working Group, the Board of Directors of the Stockgrowers, and members of the Taylor Park Pool. The Working Group had the opportunity to discuss the Gunnison Grazing Reform Proposal with the Secretary and to answer questions and exchange ideas with him. The Secretary watched a slide show given by Brad Phelps, about the Phelps' award winning efforts at riparian-habitat management on their BLM allotment as well as the efforts of the entire Taylor Park Pool. Secretary Babbitt was extremely pleased with the meeting and slide show and indicated that the trip had been very worthwhile. In closing the meeting, the Secretary actually gave the Working Group some homework to do before the next Governors' Group meeting. The homework involved providing the Secretary with more information, ideas, and specifics about the Gunnison Grazing Reform Proposal. The Gunnison Working Group had succeeded in accomplishing its goals of developing a reform proposal and having the Secretary of Interior visit Gunnison to see in person what we as a total community can accomplish. But much work remained to be done.

When Secretary Babbitt visited Gunnison, so did the national media. *NBC Evening News* and *The Today Show* interviewed members of the Working Group and the Duane Phelps family. Both news programs broadcast segments about our community efforts at rangeland reform, good stewardship, and preservation of open space. *KUSA News* of Denver broadcast live feeds from Gunnison about the visit of Secretary Babbitt and the collaborative efforts taking place in the Gunnison Country. *KREX News* of Grand Junction, as well as all the major newspapers in the state, also covered the meeting.

The fact that the Secretary of Interior's visit and the Governor's Rangeland Reform Group brought attention to the Gunnison Country merely pointed out the progressive and responsive attitude of our community and what can be accomplished when we make a commitment for positive change in our community and industry. The progressive attitude of our community continued, as all seven members of the Gunnison Working Group found themselves very in-



volved in the workings of the Governor's Rangeland Reform Group. Ken Spann and Gary Sprung were occupied on a daily basis dealing with issues of the Governor's Group and communicating how the Gunnison Proposal would address a lot of the specific issues under consideration. Barbara East and Susan Lohr spent untold hours expanding and refining their idea of the Integrated Rangeland Education Program and presenting this concept to the Governor's Group. Stan Irby, Sue Navy, and Brad Phelps offered great assistance in that effort. Barbara, Stan, Susan, and Sue found themselves on the road to the Governor's office or to Grand Junction as often as Ken and Gary. Brad found himself in the Governor's office giving his slide show one more time for the benefit of the Secretary's staff. The entire group worked untold hours to assist in developing a rangeland-reform proposal that would actually have merit and acceptance by the federal government.

The work of the Governor's Rangeland Reform Group culminated in January 1994 with the development of the Colorado Model for range reform. The Colorado Model was developed in the pattern of the Gunnison Grazing Reform Proposal, which the Gunnison Working Group had developed in the early summer of 1993. The local group was very pleased with the overall output of the Governor's Group and saw this as one more evidence of what can happen when there is a desire to talk and work through differences of great consequence to many people of differing interests. Many issues and differences of great challenge remain to be addressed, and members of the local group are in the lead in confronting those issues and differences.

During the National Cattlemen's Association Convention in Reno, Nevada, Ken Spann was appointed Chairman of the Federal Lands Committee of the National Cattlemen's Association for the year of 1994. This appointment was made as a result of the outstanding leadership that Ken has provided in the work of the Gunnison Working Group and, more importantly, the leadership and direction he provided to the Governor's Rangeland Reform Group. Ken's work has only started, and we offer our support and assistance as he undertakes to provide this same leadership and direction to our national industry at this critical time for Western federal lands livestock operators.

On February 14, 1994, Secretary Babbitt announced that he was submitting the Colorado Model as his basis for range reform because in his travels to the West during the past months he continued to hear that the best way to manage federal lands was to return that management to the country. The Secretary said he agreed with the concept and the Colorado Model was the best avenue to accomplish that goal. He has indicated that a locally-adjusted, incentive based fee is a desirable method to drive improved local management and stewardship. Secretary Babbitt has further stated that the educational program required by the Gunnison Proposal is a very important segment of grazing reform because it enables all people involved to have a common knowledge base, therefore, creating commonalities that can be built upon with continued dialog.

The ultimate goal of the Gunnison Working Group is now in our grasp. The goal of the Gunnison Grazing Reform Proposal becoming the Federal Government Grazing Reform Proposal is a distinct possibility. The goal seems terribly lofty for a small mountain community, but the Gunnison Working Group is a tremendously talented and dedicated group that is constantly thinking of new ideas and concepts. The United States Government's Administration and Congress are just another challenge that the group will gladly tackle.



As the Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association celebrates 100 years of service to its local industry and community, we can look back over the years with pride. Pride is what this Association has accomplished for its members—pride in the quality of members that serve the Association. These members give freely of their time and talent for the betterment of their industry and community, because they believe in the future of that industry and community and know that the only way to provide and protect what they value is to communicate those values and desires to the entire community, state, and nation in a responsive and progressive manner. And now, as the Gunnison County Stockgrowers move into the next century, the Gunnison community can expect the same commitment to responsiveness and progressiveness and, hopefully, many other working group situations for the betterment of our industry and basin. The members of the Gunnison Working Group want to thank all Gunnison Basin residents for their total support.

Editor's Note: This article is related to the upcoming Summer Meeting to be held in Crested Butte, Colorado.

The author is a local rancher from long-time pioneering ranching families in the Gunnison Basin. He is very active in local and statewide livestock industry affairs, including participation in the Governor's Rangeland Reform Group, High Country Citizens Alliance, USFS and BLM Advisory Groups, and as an invited presenter at SRM functions.

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