

# Speaking With People in Our Profession

## An interview with George Chavez

**G**eorge Chavez is the State Resource Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in New Mexico. A native of New Mexico, George completed his BS degree in wildlife science at New Mexico State University in 1977. He joined the NRCS in 1976 as a range conservationist in the student trainee program in Nebraska. In 1982 he returned to New Mexico where he continued his NRCS career as a range conservationist. In 2005 he accepted the position of State Resource Conservationist, in which he assists the NRCS State Conservationist in the formulation, direction, coordination, and implementation of policies for natural resource conservation programs in New Mexico. In 1987 and 2004 he was awarded the New Mexico Section SRM Presidents Award and in 2004 he was awarded the parent Society for Range Management "Outstanding Achievement" Award. A member of SRM since 1975, George is currently the chairman of the SRM University Program Accreditation Panel.

### **New Practices, New Tools, New Clients**

*Question: You've been a conservationist with the Natural Resource Conservation Service for some time, mostly working in New Mexico. How have your conservation practices changed over time?*

*Answer:* If you really stop and think about it our conservation practices have changed dramatically over the years. Yes, we still have grazing management, seeding, fencing, and water development, and so on. But, the goals and objectives as well as the resource information and technology available have changed, and as a result, the way we design and implement those practices has changed. One important thing that is different is that we have better tools available to us, especially digital technologies.

*How have digital technologies, basically computers, improved what you do?*

Information is now much more accessible to us, and much more readily available. This helps us make better decisions, and more complete information-rich management plans. We are not able to be on the ground with people as much as in the past, and we need to be both site specific and time efficient. Our greatly increased access to digitally available information is a tremendous help to us.

*Are you less able to spend time on the ground because you have fewer people or has there been some sort of institutional change?*

We certainly have fewer people. In the 1970s, for example, there were over 300 NRCS staff in New Mexico, and today we have less than 200 staff. However, we are also doing things differently. We now leverage resources with other agencies and conservation partners as well as utilize computer decision support tools. In addition, we have to rely on ranchers to keep better records and provide more resource information in the development of their conservation plans. Basic conservation plans are still required to participate in several farm bill programs.

*As you have relied more on the computer, certain software packages, and digital information, have your clients kept pace with these technologies as well?*

Initially, no; there was a delay or a lag in adopting computer-based technologies. However, with the greatly increased availability of satellite internet service we have seen a tremendous increase in client use of computers and internet-based information. For example, we have been



George Chavez at home and at ease in New Mexico.

using software programs for nutritional management of livestock, and many of our clients are very adept at using software in their management programs.

*Can increased reliance on digital technologies, though, take the place of reduced field staff?*

Only to a certain extent. We still need to be on the ground, verifying resource information, working directly with people, and developing those relationships. Computers can't take the place of actually being on the ground working one-on-one with ranchers. We can contract some of this through the use of Technical Service Providers, but in reality there are limits to what we are able to offer as pay to these contract providers, and that has limited their interest in contracting these services.

*Are you able to hire new technical staff who are properly trained, or at least are able to come in and learn how to work as conservationists?*

Yes, we can use programs like the Student Cooperative Education Program to work with students during their academic programs to provide the right mix of education and training before they are hired as full-time staff. In

addition, we are faced with a huge problem in that approximately half of our staff will be eligible to retire in the next 5 yr. Not only are we going to see new employment opportunities, we are also going to see promotion opportunities for many of our current staff.

*What are the new tools that are effectively being used in your conservation practices?*

Certainly the Rangeland Health Assessment protocols are very useful for us, not only in terms of formal assessments, but in simply talking with people on the ground about indicators and what they mean. These indicators are helping us communicate with a common language about natural resources and their management. Obviously, a key tool for us is Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs). These descriptions are getting better and better, and our users are telling us that ESDs have a lot of utility. People are calling us all the time about ESDs. They are our benchmark for management, they work really well for us, and people are really using them.

*Speaking of people, how have your clients changed over the years?*

One of the biggest changes I've seen is that many new landowners do not emphasize livestock production. We are now more commonly dealing with owners of trophy ranches, and this is a very different emphasis than in the past. They have much more nontraditional goals and objectives. Another development has been large ranches split into much smaller ranchettes, and this fragmentation has had serious consequences for wildlife habitat conservation and other resource management issues. Also, we have seen increased land ownership by our native tribes and pueblos due to increased financial resources, and they have been very positive and aggressive in their land management goals and practices.

*You, though, are still the same range conservationist you have always been?*

Yes, still the same range conservationist, dealing with constant change. Change and diversity of issues has kept it interesting and challenging over the years. Hopefully I have gained in knowledge, experience, and wisdom in dealing with the constant change and the application of the art and science of range management.

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