Central Mountain Ranching Area

The central region consists of the mountainous area of northern New Mexico and the Rio Grande corridor (figure 1). It includes all of Taos County and portions of Rio Arriba, Colfax, Sandoval, Santa Fe, Mora, San Miguel, Bernalillo, Torrance, Lincoln, and Otero counties.

Elevations in the central mountain ranching area range from mountain peaks of more than 13,000 feet in the northern area to valleys of approximately 4,300 feet in the southern area. Precipitation varies from 10 to 30 inches annually at higher elevations, and from 8 to 12 inches at the lower elevations. July through September are the heaviest rainfall months, although showers are more frequent at higher elevations, extending from April through September. Accumulated snowpack during the winter months contributes to annual precipitation outside the monsoonal season. The higher elevations have a growing season of approximately 100 days, but frost can occur at any time. In the lower valley areas, the growing season can last up to 185 days (Gray et al. 1980a).

Blue grama, western wheatgrass, and Indian ricegrass are the main grass species, with Kentucky bluegrass, a naturalized species, occurring in the mountain areas. The primary brush species are big sagebrush and mountain mahogany. On the southern and western exposures, ponderosa and pinyon pine are the dominant tree species. Douglas fir, lowland white fir, and associated species dominate the other slopes.

The central region contains several large national forests and numerous Indian reservations. Several large Spanish land grants are also present in the northern and eastern portions of this area. Many cattle in this area are grazed on common allotments, where multiple ranchers graze their individually owned livestock. Many small, deeded ranches exist and are intermingled among tracts of state and other land ownership types.

Livestock operations are the predominant agricultural enterprise in the central mountain ranching area, and have a carrying capacity of between 5 and 17 AUY/section (Stucky and Henderson 1969).