Northwest Ranching Area

The northwestern New Mexico ranching region is a mountain-plateau area, consisting of San Juan, McKinley, Valencia, and Catron counties, as well as portions of Rio Arriba, Sandoval, Bernalillo, Torrance, Sierra, and Grant counties.

This region ranges from 4,000 feet in the plains and semi-arid deserts to more than 10,000 feet in the largely inaccessible mountain plateaus. Broad valleys can be found at intermediate elevations. Average annual precipitation is 12 to 20 inches, but can range from 10 inches in the north-central areas to over 30 inches on high mountain peaks. The majority of rainfall occurs during the monsoon season, from July to September. Monsoonal rains can often be torrential, causing severe soil erosion. The growing season in this area varies widely, depending on elevation and weather conditions.

Galleta and blue grama are the major grass species used for both year-round and seasonal grazing. Western wheatgrass, chamisa, and oak brush are found at higher elevations, while Pinyons, creosote bush, and big sagebrush are found on the lower slopes and valleys. Ponderosa pine and pinyon-juniper are the two main tree species.

Ownership of land in the northwest region is characterized by private land owners, two large national forests, three BLM districts, and the Navajo and Jicarilla Apache reservations (production practices on Indian livestock operations are not incorporated into this study). BLM lands in the northern and central sections of the region are checkerboarded with state trust land, private land, and railroad right-of-ways. Most privately owned land is concentrated on the eastern edge of the study area, along the southern border, and in the central section.

Most rangeland in this region has a carrying capacity of 5 to 8 AUY/section (Stucky and Henderson 1969). However, unique ecological areas have had carrying capacities as low as 3 AUY/section, with some as high as 14 AUY/section.