

Southwest Ranching Area

The southwest ranching area includes much of the Chihuahuan Desert region of southern New Mexico. It contains all of Hidalgo, Luna, and Dona Ana counties and portions of Grant and Sierra counties.

This region is primarily associated with the Chihuahuan Deserts (Ecoregion 24), Madrean Archipelago (Ecoregion 79), and Arizona/New Mexico Mountains (Ecoregion 23) identified in the New Mexico ecoregion framework. The landscape consists of broad desert basins, alluvial valleys, bajadas, rugged mountain ranges, and desert grasslands. Elevations generally range from 4,000 to 8,000 feet, with higher elevations occurring in surrounding mountain systems.

Annual precipitation ranges from less than 10 inches in the desert basins to more than 16 inches in mountainous areas. Most rainfall occurs from July through September during the summer monsoon season, often through short-duration but intense thunderstorms. Winter precipitation is limited, although freezing temperatures are common during winter and early spring.

Vegetation varies across elevation and soil conditions, but dominant forage species include tobosa, black grama, blue grama, and other desert grassland species. Common brush and shrub species include creosote bush, mesquite, yucca, ocotillo, and chamiza. Portions of the region have experienced shrub expansion associated with prolonged drought, historical grazing pressure, and desertification processes.

Livestock grazing remains one of the dominant agricultural land uses throughout the region. Large portions of the land base are federally managed through the Bureau of Land Management and National Forest systems, while state trust and private ranchlands also comprise significant grazing acreage. Average carrying capacity generally ranges from 5 to 7 AUY per section, although forage productivity varies substantially depending on elevation, precipitation, and ecological condition.

The region also contains important wildlife habitat, including desert bighorn sheep, pronghorn, mule deer, and numerous desert-adapted species characteristic of the Chihuahuan Desert ecosystem.