

# SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

## Wildlife and livestock can co-exist – the Farm Bill can help

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We often think wildlife and livestock are mutually exclusive, that the left and the right have nothing in common, and that “you’re either with us or against us.” But in the natural world, that world where all things actually need to live together and share resources to survive and prosper, none of that is relevant.

I’m the owner of a small place in San Miguel County. We have around 160 acres of upland, irrigated fields and an extensive riparian zone.

My grandfather was a farmer who sold our family farm so I wouldn’t end up working myself to death like he did. He told me straight up, “You’re not getting this place because I don’t want you to become a farmer.” Not being particularly clever or obedient, I purchased my first farm/ranch/woodland at age 21.

Three decades into my current place, the “ranchito,” I’ve come to accept that I won’t be around long enough to see all the fruits of my labor, but I’m not disappointed in the least. What working the land teaches you, what it gives you, is priceless.

I’ve focused on improving the land, diversifying the habitat, encouraging wildlife to come back to forage on the grasses, shrubs and trees that were not there when I bought the property. The fields that were in dismal condition due to neglect and the absence of any irrigation system are now healthy.

This is where I need to give a lot of credit to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Through a variety of programs they offer, I was able to receive technical assistance and cost sharing for delivering water directly to where it does the most good.

They helped me with soils, drainage and reseeding, but most importantly, they provided me with data to help me understand how to farm, how to raise livestock and how to regenerate the habitat for wildlife. These many things go hand-in-glove, one not improving unless all of your practices are in balance.

Ultimately, this formula helped to encourage wildlife to return to the property, and where there were only a handful of trees and shrubs on day one, now there are small bosques of native trees, many 36 inches in diameter, that grew from planted whips. Willow

habitat now supports beavers who in turn slow, cool and clean the water, and who provide an opportunity for hundreds of other species to thrive.

It's a wonderland, and due not in small part to the help from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, its Environmental Quality Incentive Program and the funding they get from the Agriculture Department through the Farm Bill.

Congress is in the process of updating that Farm Bill, which is an opportunity that only comes around every five years. Members of Congress are also working to protect the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act, which enhances the Farm Bill and the programs that most affect conserving wildlife and soil.

Please, reach out to your member of Congress and encourage them to include strong wildlife and soil conservation provisions in the new Farm Bill. It's for all of us, and for all things.