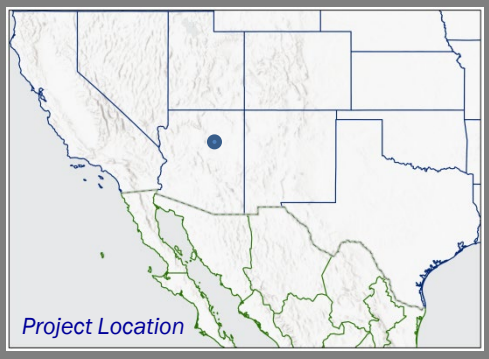
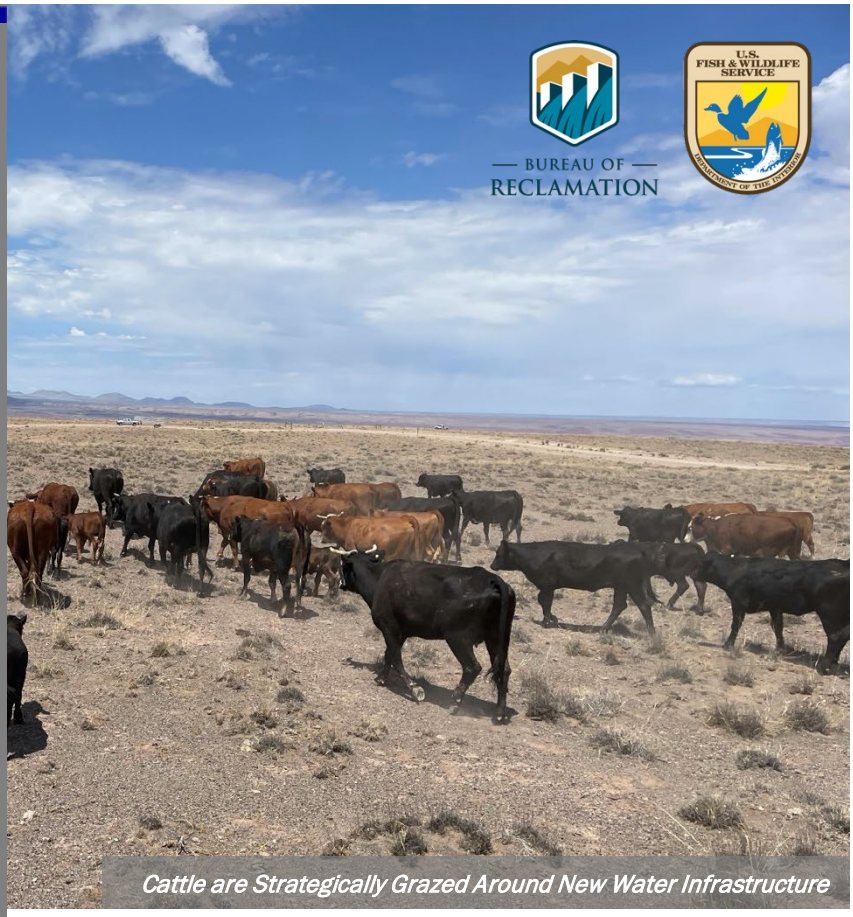
LAND CONSERVATION

Supporting Drought Adaptation on Navajo Rangelands

CODY FAMILY RANCH

Navajo ranchers are experiencing severe and prolonged drought, often resulting in insufficient water to support livestock and wildlife. Mel Cody, a Navajo cattle rancher and manager of the Cody Family Ranch, grew concerned about his land's water availability but knew that improving infrastructure would be expensive. Cody applied for and was awarded an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract, which is a voluntary conservation program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS). Through EQIP, Cody upgraded his water pipeline, tanks, and troughs to facilitate rotational grazing practices and works to raise awareness of federal funds available for drought adaptation projects. Cody now supports other Native ranchers with their EQIP applications.





Cattle are Strategically Grazed Around New Water Infrastructure

KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

Due to remote locations and lack of local water infrastructure, Native ranchers may need to drive many miles to access water. The Cody Family Ranch had only one water point, which hindered their ability to move cattle across the land to reach sufficient grazing resources and increased grazing pressure in certain areas. As a result of limited outreach by the USDA on Native Nations, many Native producers are unaware of available federal programs to support ranchers in drought. Addressing these barriers to awareness and acquisition of federal funds is important to provide resources for sustaining ranching as a Navajo lifestyle and form of land stewardship.

PROJECT GOALS

- Improve water infrastructure for livestock on the Cody Family Ranch
- Assist Native producers in applying for federal funds for rangeland improvement
- Increase Native producers' awareness of the benefits of drought adaptation projects and federal programs offering financial support

Cody Recording a Webinar on Accessing Federal Funds

HEALTHY CATTLE, HIGH PRICES

With greater access to cleaner water, cattle's overall health and body condition improved from 3-4 (skinny) to 6-7 (healthy), and they became more valuable to sell.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Increased Water Quantity and Quality: Cody upgraded his water infrastructure with eight miles of new pipeline, adding five new water tanks and ten new troughs. This increased both water quantity and quality, giving his cattle access to more, cleaner, and clearer water. Increased water storage capacity also eliminated the need for water hauling, saving the ranch time and money.

Water-Driven Rotational Grazing: Cody now moves cattle through specific portions of his land, turning on water where cattle are grazing, and turning off water where he wants the land to recover.

Water Supports All Life: Drought adaptation is a multi-benefit endeavor. Cody improved his water infrastructure to support his livestock, but these changes also benefit wildlife and future generations of his family. Since the project completion, herds of antelope which disappeared with the drought have returned to the ranch.

Student Turned Teacher: To increase his impact and encourage and assist others to apply for federal programs, Cody has partnered with organizations like the First Nations Development Institute and the Native American Producers Success Program. Together, they produce webinars and other accessible resources to spread the word about available funding.

Collaborators

- U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service
- See online for full list of collaborators

LESSONS LEARNED

Cody found that the EQIP application process, especially drafting his conservation plan, required significant independent learning and skill-building. He networked and taught himself a range of skills from budget writing to tax accounting. Cody continues to use those skills as he monitors the health of his land and livestock and reports back to USDA-NRCS.

Cody understood the importance of hiring skilled employees to build his new water infrastructure. He was able to find reliable, trustworthy workers who had relevant construction experience. This was essential to the project remaining on-schedule with so many moving parts. EQIP funds also covered hired employee salaries.

As the manager of his EQIP project, Cody had to be proactive and willing to work with diverse experts. He experienced frustration when government partners' schedules did not align with his faster timelines. He emphasizes the importance of following up with NRCS officials to keep the project moving. Furthermore, Cody learned that rangeland improvement is a collective effort; one must learn to work effectively with a range of professionals to create positive change.

NEXT STEPS

- Increase outreach efforts to spread awareness of federal funds available for drought adaptation on the Navajo Nation through visual materials such as photos, videos, and webinars
- Continue offering one-on-one technical assistance to fellow ranchers applying for EQIP contracts, to help more Native producers access funding for rangeland improvement projects

For more information on this project, contact Mel Cody: codiac4184@gmail.com

New Troughs Increase Water for Cattle and Wildlife

CCAST Author: Erin Connolly, Southwest Drought Learning Network, March 2023.
Photos courtesy of Cody Family Ranch
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