The Range Improvement Task Force (RITF) was formed in 1978 in response to New Mexico ranchers’ need for expert assistance with BLM Environmental Impact Statements and the myriad of new environmental laws, regulations, and policy coming out of the Federal government at that time. Demand began to grow for assistance with confusing laws, policies, and regulations. Ranchers also envisioned the need for objective, unbiased technical science advisors from their Land Grant University community that would help them manage their resources with the best science available. The RITF concept became structured within the university system by merging faculty appointments from the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) and Agricultural Experiment Station (AES).

The RITF appropriation bill passed the legislature in 1979 stating “…to be used for employing personnel and for operating expenses to expand the research and educational program in range management…”. Importantly, there were no restrictions in the makeup and function of the RITF and originally included range, wildlife, and soils specialists with CES appointments. A range economist, a range scientist, and a range brush control specialist with AES appointments were also included. The major emphasis was to have a highly flexible and multi-disciplinary team to respond to the needs of the state in the broad area of range management. The team was strengthened with an extension philosophy of solving problems and working with people. The RITF is uniquely designed to work primarily on short-term applied research projects as contrasted with normal long term experiment station projects. This allows the RITF to maximize responsiveness instead of becoming committed to long-term projects that monopolize resources and personnel.

The RITF has an advisory committee to assist in providing vision. This was very important in the initial years to help RITF establish its credibility. The RITF walked a very fine line to prove that it would be the “unbiased, professional, fact-finding advisors and educators in range management” it was organized to be. The advisory committee was composed of ten ranchers and the heads of the Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management, State Land Office, and NM Department of Game and Fish. The annual meetings were open, candid, and sometimes volatile; but this was necessary to establish direction, limits, goals, etc. during the initial years.

At the time of its formation, the RITF crossed the established delineations between the AES and CES, as well as the departmental lines in wildlife, agricultural economics, and range and animal science. This was not easy to accomplish, with faculty and administrators struggling to overcome “real” and “perceived” barriers to crossing traditional departmental lines. Contributing to the success in overcoming these obstacles was the mission-oriented approach and lack of distinction between what was an “extension jobs” and a “research projects”. The RITF became the vehicle through which the original Land Grant Mission was carried out — with Extension, Research, and Teaching working together seamlessly.

Today, 30 years later, the RITF is structured similarly, around a three-part mission: 1) educational programs ranging from one-on-one consultations to workshops and symposia; 2) short-term (and a few relevant long-term) research programs focused on problem solving and answering important, management-oriented questions; and 3) unbiased third party assessments and mediations of conflicts related to natural resource management.

The third party negotiations are the most volatile aspects of the RITF mission and the work that most academic faculty try hard to avoid. We are asked to run toward these problems. The RITF becomes involved in cases when one or both parties have requested input and when “teachable” or precedent-setting moments are evident. Care is taken to distinguish between resource, social, and political problems. The RITF is an advocate for science and science-based approaches to solving natural resource management challenges — the value judgments and political decisions are made after we have left the scene. Information provided by the RITF to the agencies, the livestock industry, and the general public has been credible, factual, accurate and not serving to any one group. This reputation, and the expectation that comes with it, affords RITF faculty the greatest flexibility in delivering quality, can- did, and current science-based information.
This team of specialists was assembled to serve as unbiased, professional, fact-finding advisors and educators on the subject of rangeland use. At the direction of New Mexico’s 33rd Legislature, the team was organized to expand the applied research and education program in range management at New Mexico State University. Team members work with ranchers and state and federal agencies toward effective range resource conservation and economic improvement for range livestock industry.

SERVICES OF THE TASK FORCE

- Provide research-based information on natural resource management available to all who manage or utilize public or private lands. http://aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/taskforce/
- Conduct short-term research to provide practical answers to issues/opportunities that involve rangeland use.
- Provide objective, expert assessments for natural resource management challenges.
- Review Environmental Impact Statements, recovery programs, and provide input into similar policy formulations regarding natural resource management.
- Conduct workshops for ranchers and land management agencies on developing and improving natural resource management.
- Present short courses on research findings, natural resource monitoring methods, and state-of-the-art management strategies.
- On-the-ground interaction with agencies and ranchers regarding natural resource management.

John M. Fowler, Ph.D.
Professor, Ag Economics

- Federal land policy, management, and impact assessments
- Forest management

Nicholas K. Ashcroft, Ph.D.
Rangeland Management Specialist

- Rangeland ecology monitoring/management and profitability
- Agency/Industry conflict resolution and NEPA compliance

VACANT
Rangeland Brush Management Specialist

- Ecology and control of shrubs and weeds
- Rangeland vegetation management

Alexander “Sam” Fernald, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Watershed Management

- Surface water/groundwater interactions
- Vegetation treatments on water quantity and quality

Christopher D. Allison, Ph.D.
Department Head, Extension Animal Sciences and Natural Resources

- Range ecology, management, and monitoring
- Range livestock, drought and poisonous plant management

Jerry M. Hawkes, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Range Livestock Economics

- Prepare range livestock cost and return estimates
- Rangeland economic policy and impacts

VACANT
Riparian Specialist

- Riparian ecology and management
- Forest and fire ecology and management

Monica Hernandez
RITF Administrative Secretary