

From Agropastoralism to Sustained Yield Forestry: Industrial Restructuring, Rural Change, and the Land-grant Commons in Northern New Mexico*

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Introduction

In 1948 the United States Forest Service drastically reduced grazing permits for the El Rito Ranger District in the Carson National Forest in Rio Arriba County, New Mexico. The decision was based on a 1947 case study in which local forest rangers claimed that smallholder Hispano ranchers “caused surrounding national forest ranges to become depleted of vegetative cover to such an extent that a reduction in permitted grazing use is necessary.”¹ The district proposed to remedy the economic hardship anticipated by the “stock reduction program” by increasing timber-related jobs through the creation of a special sustained yield timber production unit.

Based on the 1944 Sustained Yield Forest Management Act (SYFMA), the rationale in El Rito and elsewhere hinged on the notion that sustained yield timber production would “promote the stability of forest industries, of employment, of communities, and of taxable forest wealth, through continuous and ample supply of forest products: and in order to secure the benefits of forests in maintenance of water supply, regulation of stream flow, prevention of soil erosion, amelioration of climate, and preservation of wildlife.”² SYFMA authorized the establishment of two types of sustained yield units: Cooperative Sustained Yield Units, which would combine private and public forests to be co-managed for sustained timber production; and Federal Sustained Yield Units, which would include only public forests and would be managed for the economic benefit of local communities.

*Thanks to the helpful staff at the El Rito ranger district, particularly Diana Trujillo and Amy Veirs. I wish, also, to thank Tad Mutersbaugh and John Hintz for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. The map (Figure 1) is John’s accomplishment; any errors in the paper are my own. And to all the land grant heirs in northern New Mexico, particularly Ike DeVargas, Moises Gonzalez and Felipe Martinez who tirelessly work to regain what’s rightfully theirs, the land-grant commons, I say: “*Hasta la victoria, siempre!*”

¹Volume 1, Document #21 of the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit Archive on file at the El Rito Ranger District in the Carson National Forest, El Rito, New Mexico (hereafter referenced by volume followed by document number).

²Sustained Yield Forest Management Act of March 29, 1944 (58 Stat 132).

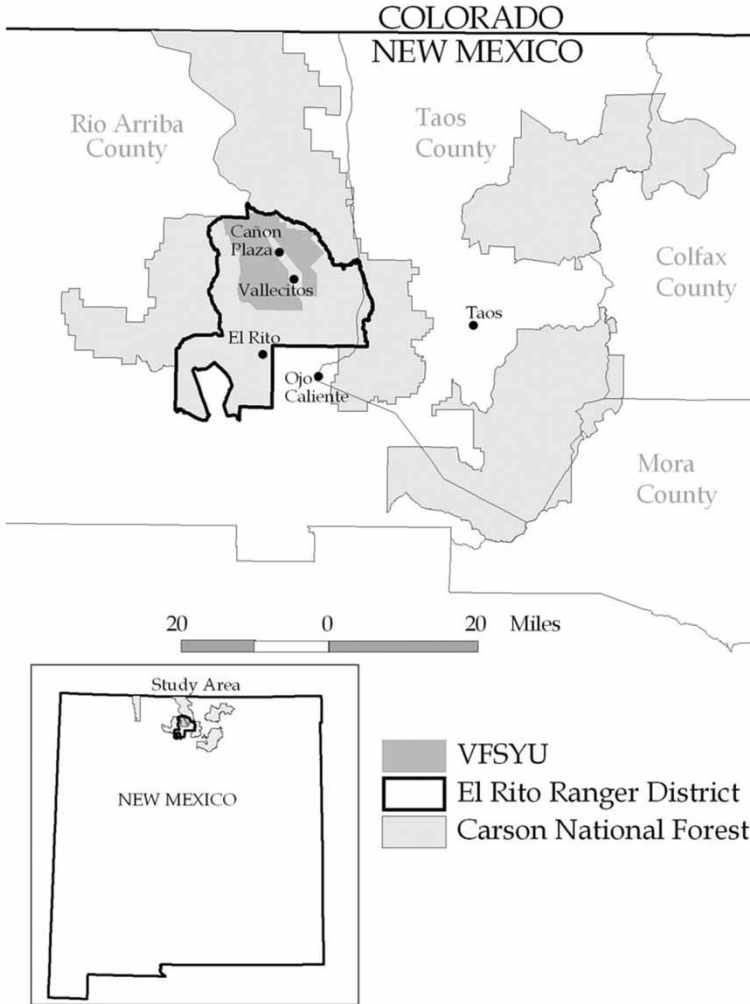


Figure 1.

The Forest Service established the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit (hereafter referred to as the VFSYU, or the Unit) in New Mexico (see Figure 1) arguing that wage labor jobs in the industrial timber industry would resolve the region’s entrenched poverty and environmental degradation: “Present employment of 12 men will be increased to 42 men with a goal of 50 men as the remanufacturing plant becomes established. This is the main reason for the establishment of a federal unit under Public Law 273.”³

³Vol. 1, #21.

The economy of Rio Arriba County was transformed from a subsistence economy organized around irrigated agriculture and the communal use of upland rangelands and forests for pasturage, timber, fuelwood, and non-timber forest resources into a wage-dependent economy. The restructuring occurred through the Forest Service's imposition of a sustained yield management regime, made possible through a history of land and water expropriation in the region that withdrew vast tracts of forest and rangelands from Hispano communities and transferred them to federal land managers.⁴ Throughout this process, challenges to the ecological legitimacy of the Hispano agropastoral economy served to justify economic restructuring. In the case of the VFSYU, the Forest Service viewed smallholding Hispano ranching practices as responsible for overgrazing and entrenched poverty.

In publicizing the VFSYU, the Forest Service promised: "The dependent community will be stabilised (sic), the established operator will be assured of a continuous supply of saw-timber, utilization will be improved and the value of forest products will be increased."⁵ Thus, the Forest Service considered wage labor an improvement over a centuries-old agropastoral subsistence economy that they saw as the cause of poverty and ecological degradation. Although the VFSYU is still active on the Carson National Forest, it has never achieved its stated goals of community stability *or* sustained timber yield.

It is important to consider the rationale underlying the Forest Service's plan to restructure the regional economy. By focusing on the perceived poverty of local smallholders, the Forest Service participated in the production of a discourse of environmental degradation caused by poor Hispano cattle and shepherders. The agency's argument ignored the contrasting impacts between capitalist and pastoralist production regimes. It also refused to acknowledge the institutional environmental racism that viewed Hispanos as responsible for their poverty by virtue of their subsistence economy, and thus "bereft of ecological credibility."⁶ The argument goes something like this: the subsistence economy *caused* overgrazing, which *caused* poverty and environmental degradation. Historic and continued *resistance* to modern land management methods represents the contemporary *cause* of persistent poverty and irreversible ecological damage.

This powerful tautology effectively closed off any chance of establishing ecological legitimacy for Hispano smallholders in the region and positioned the state as the final arbiter of economic and environmental practices. Sustained yield, as constructed by industry executives in the Pacific Northwest, was imported wholesale into northern New Mexico, and the establishment and management of the VFSYU had profound material consequences for the local agropastoral economy.

⁴39 percent, or 2,146 square miles, of Rio Arriba County is federally owned land and includes nearly all former Spanish or Mexican land grants, an area more than twice the size of Rhode Island.

⁵Vol. 1, #3A.

⁶Laura Pulido, "Ecological Legitimacy and Cultural Essentialism: Hispano Grazing in the Southwest," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 7, 4, 1996, pp. 37–58.

This paper attempts to show how the Forest Service regulated nature and labor in service to the industrial production of timber in northern New Mexico.⁷ The Sustained Yield Unit produced the conditions necessary for capital to exploit the region's natural and human resources. This exploitation was accomplished through the state, in this case the Forest Service, mediating the relationship between capital and nature by way of a state-private timber monopoly constructed under the rationale that this would somehow benefit local communities. Access to cheap labor was guaranteed through the application of labor standards that placed locals in a dependent relationship with outside commercial interests. Access to timber was guaranteed by restricting competition, removing economic barriers to production, and defining sustained yield solely in economic terms.

The Regulation of the Forests

The tendency of the capitalist system, therefore, is to destroy the forests, at least where forestry is under a profit-making regime.

Karl Kautsky⁸

The history of centralized forestry management has shown that disinvesting local users in decision-making regarding forest resource use and management often leads to negative environmental impacts, while non-local, often transnational, interests reap the economic benefits.⁹ The consequences of such arrangements are far-reaching. Locally, forests control soil erosion and waterway siltation, protect water resources of local urban centers, offer critical habitat to flora and fauna, and provide an important source of timber, fuelwood, and agriculture for small-scale producers. Globally, forests contain extensive biodiversity and are important in the sequestering of carbon, which helps mitigate global warming.¹⁰

The local, regional and global environmental and economic importance of forests and forest resources has spurred significant research in recent years. Geographers have viewed forests as a site of resistance to bureaucratic restrictions imposed on local users;¹¹

⁷The paper is based on research of both secondary sources and primary archival sources related to the operation of the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit on file at the El Rito ranger district office in El Rito, New Mexico.

⁸Karl Kautsky, *The Labour Revolution* (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1925), p. 228.

⁹Martin Doornbos, A. Saith, and B. White, "Forest Lives and Struggles: An Introduction," *Development & Change*, 31, 1, 2000, pp. 1–10; Anja Nygren, "Development Discourses and Peasant-Forest Relations: Natural Resource Utilization as Social Process," *Development & Change*, 31, 1, 2000, pp. 11–34.

¹⁰Dan Klooster and O. Masera, "Community Forest Management in Mexico: Carbon Mitigation and Biodiversity Conservation Through Rural Development," *Global Environmental Change*, 10, 2000a, pp. 259–272; Richard Knight, F. Smith, S. Buskirk, W. Romme, and W. Baker (eds.), *Forest Fragmentation in the Southern Rocky Mountains* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000); William Laurance and R. Bierregaard (eds.), *Tropical Forest Remnants: Ecology, Management, and Conservation of Fragmented Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹¹Dan Klooster, "Community Forestry and Tree Theft in Mexico: Resistance or Complicity in Conservation?" *Development & Change*, 31, 1, 2000b, pp. 281–305; Robert Kuhlken, "Settin' the Woods on Fire: Rural Incendiarism as Protest," *Geographical Review*, 89, 3, 1999, pp. 343–363.

a destination for the aesthetic consumption of nature by tourists;¹² a production site of timber resources along the capitalist commodity chain;¹³ and as a setting for the production of international conservation discourses and development schemes.¹⁴

Recent research in geography has suggested that the regulation of nature through bureaucratic natural resource management is a key indicator of negative environmental and economic outcomes. Klooster has shown that 30 years of community-based forestry in Mexico has been far more effective at producing beneficial environmental and economic outcomes than capitalist, bureaucratic forms. In the Mexican example, important environmental services such as water and soil conservation, and carbon sequestration were achieved through community-based reforestation and sustainable management practices that also provided significant economic benefits at the local, regional and national scale.¹⁵ Likewise, Emel and Roberts have shown that institutional structures are a key variable in environmental outcomes regarding groundwater management in the American Southwest, with community-based forms more effective in mitigating resource depletion.¹⁶

Recently, geographers have begun to combine concerns regarding the multi-scalar questions of nature-society relations in the development of extractive industries, particularly to understand how modes of social regulation support specific regimes of accumulation. Bridge and McManus have explored how regimes of accumulation in the forestry and mineral sectors are maintained through discourses of sustainability. These discourses surmount negative views of extractive industries by producing a narrative of scientific knowledge that bestows legitimation to specific users and a reification of capitalist relations of production.¹⁷ Krueger has linked the discourses of nature produced by resource extraction firms in the Montana mining industry to beneficial changes in the regulation of mine permits supporting continued resource access and capital accumulation.¹⁸ Prudham has examined the social and institutional foundations of tree improvement along Oregon's Pacific Slope by capitalist firms seeking to overcome the biological limits of timber production. By examining "almost

¹²John Knight, "From Timber to Tourism: Recommoditizing the Japanese Forest," *Development & Change*, 31, 1, 2000, pp. 341–359; Paul Robbins and A. Fraser, "A Forest of Contradictions: Producing the Landscapes of the Scottish Highlands," *Antipode*, 35, 1, 2003, pp. 95–118.

¹³Jesse Ribot, "Theorizing Access: Forest Profits Along Senegal's Charcoal Commodity Chain," *Development & Change*, 29, 2, 1998, pp. 307–341.

¹⁴Melissa Leach and J. Fairhead, "Fashioned Forest Pasts, Occluded Histories? International Environmental Analysis in West African Locales," *Development and Change*, 31, 2000, pp. 35–59; J. Henry Owusu, "Current Convenience, Desperate Deforestation: Ghana's Adjustment Program and the Forestry Sector," *Professional Geographer*, 50, 4, 1998, pp. 418–436.

¹⁵Klooster, 2000b, *op. cit.*

¹⁶Jacque Emel and R. Roberts, "Institutional Form and Its Effect on Environmental Change: The Case of Groundwater in the Southern High Plains," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 85, 4, 1995, pp. 664–683.

¹⁷Gavin Bridge and P. McManus, "Sticks and Stones: Environmental Narratives and Discursive Regulation in the Forestry and Mining Sectors," *Antipode*, 32, 1, 2000, pp. 10–47.

¹⁸Rob Krueger, "Relocating Regulation in Montana's Gold Mining Industry," *Environment & Planning A*, 34, 5, 2002, pp. 867–881.

one hundred years of science and capital working together in tree improvement,” Prudham has illustrated how capital seeks to remake nature into a form more acceptable to capital accumulation.¹⁹ This paper seeks to explore the practices of natural resource management in industrial forestry as a means to understand how capital, via the state, enrolled nature and labor in a regulatory process seeking to ensure free and unfettered access for sustained capital accumulation.²⁰

A focus on capitalist exploitation of nature and state regulation and the institutional arrangements managing and controlling the uses of nature offers a theoretical lens through which to understand how sustained yield came to be seen as a solution to the economic and environmental exploitation of the forests of the American West. By carefully examining how access to nature is produced in a socio-spatial process supporting capital accumulation, we can see how the timber industry in the American West—which has historically used nature in ways that generate ecological crises which undermine long-term profitability—attempted to construct the political arrangements necessary to externalize social and ecological costs.

In the case of the VFSYU, it would be incomplete to explore how the political and economic arrangements allowed the Unit to operate without also considering how the pre-existing and resulting *conditions* of those social relations contributed to the failure of sustained yield in New Mexico. Such an approach is, as Bridge has argued, a “move beyond conventional, dualistic interpretations of separate economic and ecological crises and provides an explanation for how ecological problems might emerge from particular ways of organizing production and how ecological conditions might, in turn, influence the rate and form of growth.”²¹

Central to this approach is the view that the ecological and economic crises that emerge in industries dependent on free and unfettered access to nature require the intervention of the state, through regulatory frameworks, to mediate capital’s exploitation of nature. Within this scheme, as O’Connor argues, nature’s availability to capital “depends on the political power of capital.”²² Constructing modes of social regulation, then, requires elaborate political arrangements; yet these arrangements are inherently unstable, as the following VFSYU case study illustrates.

Economic Restructuring and Sustained Yield Forestry

In the 1947 case study determining the appropriateness of a sustained yield unit in Vallecitos, Carson rangers defined the ecological conditions of rangelands as

¹⁹Scott Prudham, “Taming Trees: Capital, Science, and Nature in Pacific Slope Tree Improvement,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93, 3, 2003, pp. 636–656.

²⁰For a review of the literature on regulation and capital accumulation in natural resource-dependent industries see, Gavin Bridge, “The Social Regulation of Resource Access and Environmental Impact: Production, Nature and Contradiction in the U.S. Copper Industry,” *Geoforum*, 31, 2, 2000, pp. 237–256.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 239.

²²James O’Connor, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), p. 165.

overgrazed. From the statements made by forest rangers, overgrazing was narrowly defined, through visual inspection, as a degradation of “vegetative cover.”²³ Disturbance of the vegetation structure, it was thought, would lead to soil erosion that would cause irreversible ecological damage.²⁴ Designating the forest rangelands as degraded provided the basis for the Forest Service’s recommendation of a sustained yield unit in Vallecitos.

The rangers’ economic solution to the perceived ecological problem of overgrazing attested to their belief that poverty was the cause of environmental degradation. Indeed, after claiming the ranges of the El Rito District were overgrazed, the Carson rangers’ evaluation completely ignored the ecology of district rangelands, and focused instead on quantifying local poverty.²⁵

Management practices, however, not poverty have been shown to be the major contributor to environmental degradation.²⁶ Further, as noted above, the ranger’s claims of environmental degradation were based entirely on a visual inspection of the forage layer. But overgrazing cannot be defined solely as the loss of vegetation cover through livestock foraging when the ecological impact of grazing depends on a series of related social and ecological factors, such as stocking rates, intensity and timing, vegetation types, climatic conditions, and non-domestic herbivores.²⁷

The claims of overgrazing on the Carson National Forest can, perhaps, best be attributed to the Forest Service’s erroneous conflation of agropastoral production practices and commercial ranching practices. Beginning in the late 19th century, the boom in commercial grazing operations throughout the arid West resulted in vast ecological damage. As Sayre has pointed out, widespread, capital-intensive commercial livestock production began when surplus capital seeking to take advantage of free rangelands flooded the American West.²⁸ Easy access to credit and the arrival of the railroad allowed stockmen throughout the West to rapidly increase herd sizes.²⁹

²³Vol. 1, #21.

²⁴Frederic Clements, *Plant Succession and Indicators* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1928).

²⁵The VFSYU archive includes no reports, letters, memoranda or data related to any ecological study conducted of local rangelands prior to the determination that ranges were overgrazed.

²⁶Karl S. Zimmerer, “Soil Erosion and Social (Dis)Courses in Cochabamba, Bolivia: Perceiving the Nature of Environmental Degradation,” *Economic Geography*, 69, 3, 1993, pp. 312–327; Ayana Angassa and R. Baars, “Ecological Condition of Encroached and Non-encroached Rangelands in Borana, Ethiopia,” *African Journal of Ecology*, 38, 4, 2000, p. 321; Scott M. Swinton and R. Quiroz, “Is Poverty to Blame for Soil, Pasture and Forest Degradation in Peru’s Altiplano?” *World Development*, 31, 11, 2003, p. 1903.

²⁷H. Lamprey, “Pastoralism Yesterday and Today: The Overgrazing Problem,” in F. Bourliere (ed.), *Tropical Savannas: Ecosystems of the World* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1983); A. Wilson and N. Macleod, “Overgrazing: Present or Absent?” *Journal of Range Management*, 44, 1991, pp. 475–482; W. Laycock, “Stable States and Thresholds of Range Condition on North American Rangelands: A Viewpoint,” *Journal of Range Management*, 44, 1991, pp. 427–433.

²⁸Nathan Sayre, *Ranching, Endangered Species, and Urbanization in the Southwest* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

²⁹For a review of the impact of international credit and investment in cattle ranching in the American West, see Monica Rico, “The Cultural Contexts of International Capital Expansion: British Ranchers in Wyoming, 1879–1889,” *Antipode*, 30, 2, 1998, pp. 119–134.

“Overstocking during drought was almost an inevitable result. Herds built up during rainy periods could not be supported on the range, but low prices, which always accompanied drought, meant that selling the cattle was tantamount to defaulting.”³⁰ Capitalist ranching in New Mexico exploded between 1870 and 1890, when range cattle numbers increased from less than 200,000 to over 1.3 million.³¹ Because of the market dynamics that accompanied drought conditions, most ranchers kept ranges overstocked, hoping that rain would come and prices would rise.³² By the 1920s, more than 1.6 million cattle grazed on New Mexico’s rangelands.³³ The environmental damage resulting from commercial cattle production produced a scientific conservation ethic rooted in the emerging science of rangeland ecology; however, it did not distinguish between capitalist and pastoralist ranching.³⁴

Hispano stock raising in northern New Mexico, however, differed significantly from the patterns of 19th century commercial ranching. While the capitalist model of meat production is based on the production of commodities with profit extracted from the labor process within a cost structure precariously dependent on cheap land and abundant water, the pastoralist model relies on the reproductive capacity of animals to produce surplus. Grazing restrictions by federal and state land managers, however, were imposed on both smallholders and large-scale commercial operations.³⁵

Hispano farmers have grazed small herds on the montane rangelands of Rio Arriba County from the 17th century to the present day.³⁶ In 1948, 141 permittees averaged only seven head of cattle on more than a quarter-million acres; in contrast, at the height of the cattle boom in southern Arizona, the established sustainable carrying capacity of more arid ranges was one animal unit per 20 acres, more than ten times more intensive than rates in the El Rito District.³⁷ The low stocking rate among

³⁰Sayre, 2002, *op. cit.*

³¹Cathy W. Dahms and B. Geils, “An Assessment of Forest Ecosystem Health in the Southwest,” (USDA Forest Service: Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station, 1997).

³²Gerry Wildeman and J. Brock, “Grazing in the Southwest: History of Land Use and Grazing Since 1540,” in R. Jemison and C. Raish (eds.), *Livestock Management in the American Southwest: Ecology, Society, and Economics* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2000), pp. 1–26.

³³John Fowler, “Historic Range Livestock Industry in New Mexico,” in R. Jemison and C. Raish (eds.), *Livestock Management in the American Southwest: Ecology, Society, and Economics* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2000), pp. 419–444.

³⁴For a review of USDA range scientists’ views of pastoralist and commercial forms of ranching see Jared Smith, “Forage Conditions of the Prairie Region,” in *U.S. Department of Agriculture Yearbook* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1895); Arthur Sampson, *Plant Succession in Relation to Range Management* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, USDA Bulletin No. 791, 1919); A. Sampson, *Range Management: Principles and Practices* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1952).

³⁵Nathan F. Sayre, “The Cattle Boom in Southern Arizona: Towards a Critical Political Ecology,” *Journal of the Southwest*, 41, 2, 1999, pp. 239–271.

³⁶Paul Starrs, *Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Carol Raish and Alice M. McSweeney, “Economic, Social, and Cultural Aspects of Livestock Ranching on the Española and Canjilior Ranger Districts of the Santa Fe and Carson National Forests: A Pilot Study,” (USDA Forest Service: Rocky Mountain Research Station, 2003).

³⁷Sayre, 1999, *op. cit.*

small-scale producers in the region suggests that pastoralist livestock practices were not responsible for depleted ranges.

Understanding the impact of sustained yield forestry in northern New Mexico requires exploring “the process of exploitation of labor and self-expanding capital, state regulation of the provision or regulation of production conditions, and social struggles organized around capital’s use and abuse of these conditions.”³⁸ The cut-and-run patterns of commodity production in the forestry practices of the Pacific Northwest produced specific contradictions by virtue of their uses of nature. Cheap access to land and trees allowed the industry to operate in an unstable pattern of clear-cut forestry, a production regime that threatened the continued accumulation of capital as the social and ecological costs exceeded industry means.

The history of the region bears this out with numerous examples of timber operators clear cutting forests and flooding the market with timber. Such practices resulted in cycles of overproduction that created price fluctuations that then led to massive underproduction, layoffs, and mill closures. Further, the resulting itinerant nature of the industry fostered a floating reserve army of workers as employment levels constantly shifted across space and time. The impact to local places was extreme as boom towns quickly became ghost towns when local timber supplies were exhausted.

Unable to work out these contradictions through market mechanisms or cartel agreements, industry leaders constructed a regulatory framework that would preserve profit positions for the largest operations. This framework became institutionalized during the Depression when the timber industry linked the discourse of sustained yield to promises of community stability, thus hiding the central rationale: corporate profit preservation. As by design, large timber operators benefited from the spatial configurations constructed by the discourse of sustained yield.³⁹

Sustained yield was not a means to protect forest resources from the damage wrought by timber production; rather it was a method advocated by the timber industry to externalize the social and ecological costs of production.⁴⁰ The rhetoric of sustained yield and community stability obscured the larger goal of guaranteeing control of timber resources for large timber operators, who, it was argued, were more capable of counteracting the inherent instability of timber harvesting and production. Institutionalizing this arrangement through government regulation became a means to continue to cheaply access nature.

³⁸O’Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

³⁹For a review of the history of Pacific Coast forestry, see William Prudham, “Timber and Town: Post-War Federal Forest Policy, Industrial Organization, and Rural Change in Oregon’s Illinois Valley,” *Antipode*, 30, 2, 1998, pp. 177–196; William Robbins, “Lumber Production and Community Stability,” *Journal of Forest History*, 31, 4, 1987, pp. 187–196; Carl Wilmsen, “Sustained Yield Recast: The Politics of Sustainability in Vallecitos, New Mexico,” *Society and Natural Resources*, 14, 2001, pp. 193–207; Con Schallau, “Sustained Yield versus Community Stability,” *Journal of Forestry*, 87, 9, 1989, pp. 16–23.

⁴⁰In fact, nowhere in the 1944 act is sustained yield defined as the management of forests for the production of timber. Rather, the vaguely defined goal of community stability is the purpose of sustained yield.

While the origins of the 1944 Sustained Yield Management Act reside partly in the influence of scientific forestry imported from Europe—particularly Germany⁴¹—more influential in the U.S. context, was the hope that the act would end the “propensity toward overproduction, cutthroat competition, and chronically unstable markets”⁴² throughout the Pacific Northwest.

In the 1920s, the timber industry’s lobbying organization, the Western Forestry and Conservation Association, began to push for sustained yield. Industry leaders argued for monopoly control of timber on federal lands by disguising the consequences of their own predatory practices as flaws in the market.

Their arguments were largely ineffective until the Depression, when their obfuscating rhetoric of ‘community stability’ became persuasive to desperate communities throughout the region.⁴³ But as William G. Robbins has argued, “The essential function of those industrial proposals, however, was never the humanitarian end of community stability; rather they would serve to restrain production and compel more rational market behavior. The forest in that sense became a commodity to be manipulated by private enterprise for private ends.”⁴⁴

Sustained yield was a political dream of West Coast lumber barons—a means to secure access to forests in the Pacific Northwest. Ironically, the discourse of sustained yield, as it was developed by timber industry executives as a means to resolve the cycles of crises in industrial timber production in the Pacific Northwest, was first implemented in northern New Mexico.

The Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit

It seemed that [the Unit] really resembled somewhat what our ancestors used to have by way of land grants. This was like the only real thing that we have any more in [the] Vallecitos, Petaca, El Rito areas that resembles the land grant.⁴⁵

In a public meeting held in Vallecitos in 1947 to consider creating the sustained yield unit, one resident stood up and bitterly condemned the Forest Service for their

⁴¹For a review of the influence of German sustained yield forestry practices, see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); R.G. Lee, “The Classical Sustained Yield Concept: Content and Philosophical Origins,” in D. LeMaster, D. Baumgartner, and D. Adams (eds.), *Sustained Yield* (Pullman: Washington State University, 1982), pp. 1–10.

⁴²W. Robbins, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁴³For a review of industry involvement in constructing sustained yield management practices in the United States see William Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); W Robbins, “The Great Experiment in Industrial Self-Government: The Lumber Industry and the National Recovery Administration,” *Journal of Forest History*, 25, 3, 1981, pp. 128–143; and W. Robbins, 1987, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴W. Robbins, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁴⁵Comment by Felipe Martinez at a public hearing held to determine whether to continue the Sustained Yield Unit in Vallecitos, 2003.

treatment of grazing permittees. He drew enthusiastic applause from his neighbors by comparing Forest Service policies as equivalent to “[putting] a yoke around our necks.”⁴⁶ Despite internal Forest Service memoranda linking the Unit to grazing restrictions, the forest supervisor skirted the issue by replying that “this was a question aside from the purpose of the meeting.”⁴⁷

The suspicions articulated by local residents at that meeting stem largely from a history of land and water expropriation that began in 1846 with the arrival of the United States military. In 1848, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo officially ended the Mexican-American War and ceded 50 percent of Mexico’s territory, including the Territory of New Mexico, to the United States. Throughout Spanish and Mexican control of the region, land grants to individuals and smallholder agropastoral communities served as a means to reward patrons of Spain and Mexico and promote settlement as a buffer, initially between Indian nations and the mining and population centers south of the Rio Grande, and later as a buffer against a rapidly expanding United States. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established that these grants would be “inviolably respected” by the United States.⁴⁸

In 1891 the U.S. Congress created the Court of Private Land Claims⁴⁹ and charged it with the task of adjudicating all Spanish and Mexican land grants made in the territories of New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah and the states of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming. This process proved onerous for land grantees,⁵⁰ however, as only 155 of the 295 New Mexican land grants conveyed during Spanish and Mexican control of the region were confirmed, accounting for only 2 million of the nearly 35 million acres granted.⁵¹ The poor record of confirmation partly stems from an 1897 Supreme Court case, *U.S. v. Sandoval*, in which the Supreme Court found that Mexico had granted only *possession*, not *title*, to the community grants made between 1821 and 1848.⁵² As a result of this finding, under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States, not land grantees, received ownership of these lands.

While the decision did not overturn previous confirmations of Mexican land grants, it affected all subsequent claims made before the Court.⁵³ Among those grants affected by the *Sandoval* case were the Vallecitos de Lovato grant, which was not

⁴⁶Vol. 1, #67.

⁴⁷Vol. 1, #67.

⁴⁸R. Ellis (ed.), *New Mexico Historic Documents* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975).

⁴⁹(26 stat. 854), 1891.

⁵⁰For a review of the land grant adjudication process see Victor Westphall, “Fraud and Implications of Fraud in the Land Grants of New Mexico,” *New Mexico Historical Review*, 49, July 1974, pp. 189–218; and Malcolm Ebright, “New Mexican Land Grants: The Legal Background,” in C. Briggs and J. Van Ness (eds.), *Land, Water, and Culture: New Perspectives on Hispanic Land Grants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); and M. Ebright, *Land Grants and Lawsuits* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

⁵¹Susan Poling and Alan Kasdan, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: Definition and List of Community Land Grants in New Mexico, Exposure Draft* (Report of the United States General Accounting Office, 2001).

⁵²(67 U.S. 278), 1897.

⁵³Poling and Kasdan, *op. cit.*

confirmed, and the Petaca grant, which was confirmed at a vastly smaller size than originally claimed.⁵⁴ Nearly a million acres of the Carson National Forest is made up of land originally claimed by Petaca and two other Rio Arriba grants.⁵⁵ All, or nearly all, of the VFSYU once belonged to the Vallecitos de Lovato and Petaca land grants.⁵⁶

In that initial public meeting in 1947, local residents rightly feared that access to their historic communal lands was being restricted once again against their interests. They had reason to worry. The operation and management of the VFSYU further curtailed access to forest resources and enrolled locals into a wage economy deepening their dependence on outside commercial interests. On January 21, 1948, the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit was declared active. Prior to the Unit, timber operations cut more than 7 million board feet (mmbf) per year. In establishing the VFSYU, foresters set the sustained annual yield at 1.5 mmbf.⁵⁷

On March 17, 1948, the Vallecitos Lumber Company, an inexperienced outside outfit recruited by Carson rangers, self-described, rather unimpressively, as having “at one time or another, during [our] respective careers, done some logging,” requested the designation of Approved Responsible Operator (ARO), a category that conferred on them oligopsony status for all timber sales on the Unit.⁵⁸ In return for this advantage, the ARO was to send at least 40 percent of all harvested timber to the local mill and maintain a workforce where, under the original Forest Service language, “not less than 90 percent of labor employed by Vallecitos shall be local residents.”⁵⁹ In their initial letter, however, the Vallecitos Lumber Company agreed “to employ, *in other than supervisory position*, at least 90 percent local labor” (emphasis added).⁶⁰ Two weeks later, the Forest Service issued a special clause appended to VFSYU sale agreements wholly adopting this language.

The policy change was a significant one for the future of the Unit in Vallecitos. In the immediate future, however, it wouldn’t matter. The president of the Vallecitos Lumber Company disappeared before ever entering into a sale agreement with the Forest Service. Until another operator, the Jackson Lumber Company, was named

⁵⁴See *Peabody v. U.S.*, 175 U.S. 546, 1899 and *U.S. v. Pena*, 175 U.S. 500, 1899.

⁵⁵Susan Sawtelle, A. Kasdan, and J. Malcolm, *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: Findings and Possible Options Regarding Longstanding Community Land Grant Claims in New Mexico* (Report of the United States General Accounting Office, 2004); Marcus Kauffman, K. Fitzpatrick, and C. Moseley, “A Review of the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit, Carson National Forest, 1986–2002,” (El Rito: on file at the El Rito Ranger District, Carson National Forest, 2003).

⁵⁶The exact dimensions of both the Vallecitos de Lovato and the Petaca grants are uncertain. Spanish and Mexican practices regarding grant dimensions were based on topographic description or the use of rope sections, called *varas*, which often expanded and contracted depending on temperature or how they were manufactured. As a result, only estimates of size can be assumed. For a review of the practices of Mexican grant making see Ebright, 1987, *op. cit.* For a review of land grant dimensions in the Vallecitos area see the court cases referenced above.

⁵⁷Vol. 1, #3a.

⁵⁸Vol. 2, #240.

⁵⁹Vol. 1, #21.

⁶⁰Vol. 1, #91.

ARO in October of 1952, the VFSYU was idle; grazing restrictions, however, remained in place.

In 1952, the district responded to requests from Jackson Lumber and more than doubled the annual sustained yield from 1.5 mmbf to 3.5 mmbf.⁶¹ Within two months of Jackson's tenure, complaints began to surface regarding hiring practices. Local residents frequently complained to the Forest Service, United States Senator Dennis Chavez, and local elected officials about Jackson's unfair labor practices. Jackson repeatedly asked for exemptions from the 90 percent labor standards, once arguing that "competent men are not available locally" (underline original).⁶² The Forest Service often allowed exemption requests to the labor standards, arguing that it "took time to get the local people accustomed to the regular routine of going to work at an industrial plant every working day."⁶³ Frequently Jackson requested exemptions for positions they described, rather illogically, as "untrainable specialists,"⁶⁴ despite the fact that the employment office in Española held applications by experienced local workers for just these positions.⁶⁵ By 1955, even the district ranger began to believe Jackson "rigged" the labor lists.⁶⁶

In July of 1955, local workers formed the Lumber & Sawmill Workers Local Union No. 2507, affiliated with the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, and went on strike. Despite the strike, the ARO was still required to meet local hiring standards. The union, however, was unable to gain an advantage. Rather than bargain with the union, the company circumvented labor requirements by purchasing private timber sales and "mixing" the lumber, which they argued allowed them to employ a larger percentage of non-local men. Jackson owned 10–12 mmbf of timber on the Tierra Amarilla grant directly west of the VFSYU.⁶⁷ While officially opposing the practice, the district did little to restrict Jackson. In 1957, the district forester in El Rito admitted: "timber inspectors from the Washington Office have expressed some amasement (sic) when they learned our purchaser was permitted to bid competitively outside the Unit and haul the timber into said Unit."⁶⁸

Against charges of improper firings made before and during the strike, Jackson claimed workers were "habitual drinkers." Jackson attempted to deflect attention on their record by challenging the authority of local labor leaders. Although the company frequently hired workers from outside the employment area, it claimed in a letter to the forest supervisor that the president of the union lived in Española and should therefore be barred from employment and union activity on the VFSYU.⁶⁹ Despite

⁶¹Vol. 4, #427a.

⁶²Vol. 2, #240.

⁶³Vol. 2, #182.

⁶⁴Vol. 2, #228.

⁶⁵Vol. 2, #193.

⁶⁶Vol. 2, #237.

⁶⁷Vol. 3, #280.

⁶⁸Vol. 4, #412.

⁶⁹Vol. 3, #312.

Jackson's constant attempts to evade the 90 percent local labor requirement, it remained an issue the company could not avoid during the strike.

The company, however, remained intransigent. At a hearing to determine the company's fitness as ARO, their lawyer⁷⁰ complained: "If we are now told that even though the individuals are available, and that we have to go to them, and have to employ them on their terms, then we are being told that we have to enter into a contract with the union specifying wage rates and hours of work that the union dictates; in other words, we have no free choice, and the men themselves have no free choice."⁷¹

The primary issue in the strike was the use of outside labor and discrepancies in wage scales. The company offered the union a 5-cent raise on top of the basic wage of \$1.05 an hour, but the offer came without the protection of a labor contract, which Jackson refused to sign. The union declined the 5-cent raise offer.

Meanwhile Jackson paid \$1.50 an hour to non-union labor⁷² arguing, with staggeringly self-interested logic, that the use of outside labor actually benefited local people: "Now these lumber stackers stacked on a top truck basis where they cruised timber we were getting from private lands and roughly at \$1.00 a thousand they made about twice as much wage per day as the [local] lumber stackers working by the hour, so after that the lumber stackers that had refused to stack by the thousand then went on the thousand rate and they jumped their wages from \$8.40 a day to where they were making \$12.00 and \$15.00 a day, and Jackson's lumber that had formerly cost him \$1.50 a thousand to stack was getting stacked for a \$1.00 a thousand, so both the local people and the company benefited from the importation of the lumber stackers."⁷³

The union's lawyer was not convinced: "Mr. Jackson is one of very few people in this country who is fortunate to have a sustained yield unit contract, and he is enjoying privileges under that contract that no private operator enjoys and here he is bringing in this foreign labor from Texas to work in New Mexico in his mill to save 50 cents on the thousand in piling lumber. I think that's very absurd."⁷⁴

By restricting locals to positions as laborers, and regularly offering exemptions to the 90 percent labor rule, the Forest Service facilitated the enrollment of locals into a wage economy as a reserve army of workers available to the ARO to hire or fire at will. Local resistance to this process, however, was fierce. The union actively picketed

⁷⁰The lawyer for the Jackson Lumber Company was Fletcher Catron, son of Thomas Catron, first senator for the state of New Mexico and a former lawyer that amassed great wealth at the expense of Hispano clients unaware of their rights and obligations regarding land claims under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Ironically, Catron represented the claimants in the Supreme Court case involving the Petaca Land Grant that led to the dispossession of all communal lands.

⁷¹Vol. 3, #301.

⁷²Vol. 3, #280.

⁷³Vol. 3, #301.

⁷⁴Vol. 3, #301.

the mill during the strike, harassing Jackson's managers and scab workers imported from outside New Mexico. Local opposition culminated in 1957, when Jackson's mill in Vallecitos burned down, and the company asked the Forest Service to end its designation as Approved Responsible Operator.

The Unit was without an operator for 15 years. Throughout that time, the importance of the lumber and wood products industry in Rio Arriba declined. By 1958, the U.S. Forest Service began to plan for the decommissioning of the VFSYU, as only eight sawmills operated in Rio Arriba County, down from 13 just four years earlier.⁷⁵ In addition to decommissioning the Unit, the district also sought another round of grazing restrictions.

By the middle of the 1960's, however, the district began to feel pressure from land grant activists, led by Reis Lopez Tijerina and his organization, La Alianza Federal de Mercedes. In a confidential plan approved on February 9, 1967 for the abandonment of the VFSYU, the rangers prepared a strategy to slowly convince local people to support ending the Unit. In the plan district rangers recognized their precarious position: "It is expected that the Federal Alliance of Land Grants (Alianza federal de las Mercedes) will see this as an opportunity to move in and try to stir up support for their program. We will attempt to keep the proposal for abandonment of the sustained yield unit separate from the grazing problem, which is now under consideration. However, from past experience, it has been shown that the local people will be inclined to associate the two."⁷⁶

The impetus to shut down the Unit, however, likely came from an offer by Yale Weinstein, the president of Albuquerque-based logging company, Duke City Lumber, who saw a terminated VFSYU as a way to bust the union at his nearby Española mill by using workers from Vallecitos and the surrounding area as scabs: "We have been involved in a labor dispute. Our Company is unfortunately caught between two unions attempting to achieve recognition, and we are presently facing several unfair labor charges filed with the NLRB."⁷⁷ In a January 27, 1968 letter to the El Rito district office, he said: "Assuming that we could successfully terminate the VFSYU, we would be very agreeable to making a long term logging contract with Mr. Abiniano Gurule or any other local people from Vallecitos of Cañon Plaza."⁷⁸

But plans for abandonment died in late spring. On June 5, 1967, 20 armed men of La Alianza Federal de las Mercedes raided the Rio Arriba County Courthouse in Tierra Amarilla, taking two hostages, in an act they hoped would illustrate the plight of land grant heirs in New Mexico. La Alianza achieved that goal.⁷⁹ The courthouse

⁷⁵Rudyard Goode, H. Corley, and R. Edgel, *The Outlook for Expanding New Mexico's Forest Industries* (Albuquerque: Bureau of Business Research, The University of New Mexico, 1964).

⁷⁶Vol. 4, #447.

⁷⁷Vol. 4, #449.

⁷⁸Vol. 4, #465.

⁷⁹Robert Rosenbaum and R. Larson, "Mexican Resistance to the Expropriation of Grant Lands in New Mexico," in C. Briggs and J. Van Ness (eds.), *Land, Water, and Culture: New Perspectives on Hispanic Land Grants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

raid and subsequent land grant war—in which Governor David Cargo ordered the National Guard into the mountains to hunt down la Alianza—finally brought national media attention to the longstanding social and economic conditions in northern New Mexico.⁸⁰ The “TA Raiders,” as they came to be known, received widespread popular support, particularly in Rio Arriba County. Many residents of Vallecitos, Cañon Plaza and Petaca, land grant heirs themselves, were members of la Alianza. Following the raid, a memo from Carson Regional Forester William Hurst put an end to decommissioning plans: “If we propose the elimination, many people will automatically be against it. It will also appear that we are taking something *more* away from the ‘poor people of Rio Arriba County.’” (emphasis added).⁸¹

The Forest Service committed to a plan to “support small local industries and otherwise better meet the needs of local people.”⁸² But Forest Service rhetoric to help locals proved hollow, as requests to name a local cooperative timber outfit as ARO were denied by the Forest Service. And by 1972, the Forest Service had all but forgotten their promises and designated Yale Weinstein’s Duke City Lumber as approved operator.

Duke, much the same as Jackson Lumber Company before it, routinely violated labor agreements and contractual obligations. In November of 1970, Duke City hired only 44 percent local labor. The following month the company used 50 percent local labor.⁸³ When local residents complained about its hiring practices,” Duke City retaliated by protesting the hiring guidelines.⁸⁴

But local government foresters ignored complaints by workers. Instead, they took Duke City’s word at face value and emphasized to workers “the mutual responsibility” they shared with the company in the operation of the mill and work in the woods. “The people have a responsibility to come to work on time and on a regular basis,” wrote a district forester.⁸⁵ A local labor leader named Albert Jaramillo argued worker absence was not a result of laziness and pointed out that “local people left the woods because of late payment, and in some cases non-payment of wages.”⁸⁶

By February 19, 1971, Duke City still maintained only 47 percent local labor in their timber operation.⁸⁷ The company continued to argue that absences and poor work performance attributed to the low percentages. Local residents, however, claimed that local men were made to look bad as a means to avoid hiring them. Duke City’s subcontractors gave out faulty equipment and then fired local workers when they couldn’t maintain production quotas.⁸⁸

⁸⁰Richard Gardner, *Gritol: Reis Tijerina and the New Mexico Land Grant War of 1967* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971).

⁸¹Vol. 4, #450.

⁸²Hassell Report, on file at the El Rito Ranger District.

⁸³Vol. 4, #492.

⁸⁴Vol. 4, #492.

⁸⁵Vol. 4, #495.

⁸⁶Vol. 4, #495.

⁸⁷Vol. 4, #499.

⁸⁸Vol. 4, #504.

In 1974 Jaramillo sent a handwritten letter to Yale Weinstein complaining about a Duke City subcontractor: “Do we have to be Bill Thomas’s slaves?” asked Jaramillo. He cited a litany of complaints including unfair hiring practices, wage scales favoring non-local labor, and overtime paid to outsiders but withheld to local workers. “Since you told me to contact you if we had any trouble up here I think this is one of the greatest problems we can ever encounter. I would appreciate any help you can give us,” he concluded.⁸⁹ Weinstein’s response, however, was to forward the letter to Carson Forest Supervisor, Bill Snyder, with a request for a reduction in stumpage costs to make up for what he viewed as the obvious costs of additional security to protect his subcontractors against a threat of violence that he inferred from Jaramillo’s letter.⁹⁰

The district not only agreed with Weinstein’s stumpage adjustment request but also increased the allowable annual cut offered to Duke City from 3.5 mmbf, where it had been since 1952, to 4.0 mmbf.⁹¹ On June 12, 1977, the Vallecitos Sawmill was destroyed by a fire caused by a “spark in the residual sawdust under the south end of the mill building.”⁹² Duke rebuilt the mill and continued to operate in Vallecitos until 1996.

Throughout this period, Duke City continued to argue that the allowable annual cut was too small to support the Vallecitos sawmill. In 1980 the annual cut was increased from 4.0 to 4.2 mmbf. In 1985, a Carson National Forest draft plan proposed increasing the cut to 8.0 mmbf. The furor that erupted over the plan, led by local residents who argued that the plan exceeded the sustained yield of the area and represented a gift to a company that had made it a practice to routinely violate labor standards, resulted in a negotiated process that reduced the proposed annual cut offered to Duke City to 5.5 mmbf and set aside an additional 1.0 mmbf of timber and 1.1 mmbf of small forest products for locally owned operators.⁹³

The activism of local residents and loggers forced Duke City to replace outside contractors and employ two local timber operations, La Compania Ocho and La Madera Forest Products. Unfortunately, the successes of the local operators were limited by constant conflict with both Duke City Lumber and the Forest Service. La Compania Ocho sued the Forest Service three times in the 1990s claiming racism in the district’s refusal to offer timber sales to local operators as stipulated by the 1985 agreement. And since 1993, appeals by environmental organizations to Environmental Impact Statements prepared on planned timber sales offered to local operators have all but shut down the Unit.

⁸⁹Vol. 5, #547.

⁹⁰Vol. 5, #549

⁹¹Vol. 4, #427a.

⁹²Vol. 5, #586.

⁹³Carson National Forest Memorandum of May 5, 1986 on file at the El Rito Ranger District.

Conclusion

There people are really trying awful hard to get everything working. There is (sic) two companies [La Madera and La Compania] that have tried it and they have not succeeded. Is there a possibility that the Forest Service is not helping these people get off the ground? I don't know. There might be a problem there"⁹⁴

The case study of the VFSYU offered in this paper is a political ecology of timber production that illustrates the social consequences of the commodification of nature and labor. Forest Service practices in regulating access to nature and labor along with the practices of the timber operators in manipulating labor costs were designed to establish conditions of production favorable to industrial timber interests. While the grazing restrictions have, in fact, restructured the local economy by divorcing local Hispanos from the land base, sustained yield has never offered a viable economic option for local Hispano residents.

When the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit was established in 1948, the area was considered one of the poorest in New Mexico. According to the El Rito Ranger District case study conducted in 1947, the average annual household income in Vallecitos, Cañon Plaza and Petaca was \$223.73.⁹⁵ After 56 years of sustained yield timber management, however, poverty among the Hispano population of Rio Arriba County remains high. In 1989, 30 percent of children under five years old in Rio Arriba County lived in poverty. Despite an 81 percent increase in median family income between 1989 and 1999, 24 percent of children under five still lived in poverty in 2000.⁹⁶ Rio Arriba's location near the tourist centers of Santa Fe and Taos further exacerbated the economic woes of the local Hispano population, which has seen an onslaught of wealthy newcomers, retirees, telecommuters and others who purchase property, driving up land prices and property taxes. This "takeover of the land base"⁹⁷ in Rio Arriba by Anglos has not benefited local Hispanos. While 1990 per capita income for white residents was \$11,979, Hispanos residents reported a per capita income of only \$7,496.⁹⁸

⁹⁴Comment by Joe Ortega at a public hearing held to determine the future of the VFSYU, 2003.

⁹⁵Vol. 1, #21.

⁹⁶1990 and 2000 U.S. Census. The appearance of an improvement in Rio Arriba County child poverty rates is a result of a demographic shift in the county between the 1990 census and 2000 census rather than an improvement in child poverty: in 1990, 204 households out of 11,525 total households in Rio Arriba reported incomes greater than \$75,000 per year. By 2000, immigration by wealthy outsiders had swelled the number to over 1,557 households, an increase of more than 663 percent. Total population growth in the county was only just greater than 30 percent. Between 1990 and 2000, almost half of all newcomers to Rio Arriba County, a county with a median household income of just over \$18,000 per year, made more than \$75,000 per year.

⁹⁷W. Robbins, 1994, *op. cit.*

⁹⁸For a discussion of the impact of wealthy outsiders moving to the American West see, Pulido, *op. cit.*; James McCarthy and Euan Hague, "The Cultural Politics of Celtic Identification in the American West," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94, 2, 2004, pp. 387–408; Lucy Jarosz and V. Lawson, "Sophisticated People versus Rednecks," *Antipode*, 34, 1, 2002, pp. 8–27; Peter Walker and L. Fortmann, "Whose Landscape? A Political Ecology of the 'Exurban' Sierra," *Cultural Geographies*, 10, 4, 2003, pp. 469–491; Peter Walker, "Reconsidering 'Regional' Political Ecologies: Toward a Political Ecology of the Rural American West," *Progress in Human Geography*, 27, 1, 2003, pp. 7–24.

Furthermore, the Unit has never achieved its goal of sustained timber production. In the years prior to the VFSYU, between 1914 and 1926, 88,831 mmbf were cut.⁹⁹ During the first 25 years of the Unit, despite allowable cuts often beyond its sustained yield, only 39,319 mmbf was cut.¹⁰⁰ The history of the VFSYU bears out Clary's argument that sustained yield units "actually inhibited systematic management of the timber on the national forest."¹⁰¹ As Prudham has shown in his review of sustained yield production in the Pacific Northwest, the ecological failures of sustained yield forestry are equally matched by "the social failures of these policies."¹⁰²

The federal lands established in northern New Mexico closed off vast areas of land long used by Hispanos as common grazing and gathering lands. The grazing restrictions and regulations of the U.S. Forest Service favored commercial timber and grazing operations, all but eliminating sufficient access to smallholders. Further, far from benefiting the people and lands of northern New Mexico, the forests were managed to meet the economic demands of outside commercial timber operators.

This paper sought to evaluate the history of the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit not as a narrow example of capital's exploitation of nature, but rather as a broader examination of the social context of production and the regulation of nature in New Mexico. In the case study, sustained yield, designed to resolve the contradictions of capital's use of nature in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, was incapable of resolving the contradictions that emerged based on the specific historical, geographical and ecological conditions of production in New Mexico. The Unit, pursuing the fantasy of community stability, sought to guarantee timber and an available workforce to industrial timber operators under the illusion that this radical restructuring of the local economy would produce benefits that would somehow trickle down to local people. The policies and practices of sustained yield forestry exacerbated, rather than resolved, the contradictions of industrial forestry. Similarly, sustained yield arrangements offered no means to solve the existing tensions between Hispanos, the Forest Service, and the large-scale timber operators seeking to acquire the access to nature and labor required to sustain capital accumulation.

As argued, sustained yield forestry was a response to the specific arrangements of the conditions of production in the Pacific Northwest. Its translation and imposition in northern New Mexico reveal its historical and geographical specificity related to production and regulation. As is evident from the empirical analysis of the Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit, the practices and institutions of sustained yield forestry opened a space for local resistance to capital, as the Unit was unable to ensure continued access to nature and labor for sustained capital accumulation in the northern New Mexico context. The suspicions of local agropastoralists to the practices and discourses of federal bureaucracies stemmed from a long history of land and water

⁹⁹Vol. 4, #472.

¹⁰⁰Vol. 5, #541 and #543.

¹⁰¹David Clary, "What Price Sustained Yield?: The Forest Service, Community Stability, and Timber Monopoly Under the 1944 Sustained Yield Act," *Journal of Forest History*, 31, 1, 1987, p 12.

¹⁰²Prudham, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

expropriation in the region. The transformation from agropastoralism to sustained-yield forestry began with the abrogation of the obligations in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo intended to protect the land-grant commons. The VFSYU labor policies and timber contracts further disrupted the agropastoral economy by establishing local dependence on commercial timber production. The 1947 grazing reductions sought to firmly establish the necessary conditions of production in New Mexico by opening up access to nature and labor for industrial timber operators. The operation and administration of the Unit, however, further solidified local resistance to the Forest Service. By 1948, when the Unit began, 100 years of land and water dispossession at the hands of state and commercial interests had already cemented a pattern of oppression that engendered an active and occasionally violent resistance, the contours of which were not recognized by the discourse and practice of sustained yield. From the beginning, locals recognized that the Unit represented another in a series of attempts to separate Hispano smallholders from their land base and “put a yoke” around their necks.

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