

## **Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site Expansion: A Cloud Hangs over Southern Colorado**

by Lenny Siegel  
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On February 11, 2008 I drove through southern Colorado, between the Army's existing Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site (PCMS) and an area, currently owned and managed by a number of local ranch families, which the Army wishes to add to the Site. Then in the town of Aguilar I met with a large roomful of members of the Piñon Canyon Expansion Opposition Coalition. The proposal to expand PCMS is a classic conflict between the U.S. military's expanding training requirements and the long-term occupants of the property that the Defense Department wants.

PCMS is a 235,000-acre site, with a handful of buildings in a 1,600-acre cantonment area, serving Ft. Carson, a major Army garrison roughly 80 miles to the northeast. West of the Purgatoire River, it consists primarily of short-grass prairie and a speckling of basaltic hills. The Army acquired the existing site in the early 1980s, reportedly using eminent domain to obtain much of the property. In February 2007 the Army announced plans to acquire up to 418,577 acres to expand the training site.

A broad regional coalition, including archaeologists and paleontologists, peace activists, environmentalists, Indian tribes, and business owners, opposes the land acquisition, but the heart of the movement consists of the cattle ranchers who manage most of the landscape. These are the people I met in Aguilar, and their story is compelling.



Southern Colorado is light-years from Berkeley. That is, though like other Americans, many of the people there probably question current U.S. policy in the Middle East, they are by no means anti-military. The Coalition's Mission Statement states, "We are strong supporters of our country and our troops.... We firmly support adequate military training but realize a significant amount of land is already owned and secured to provide for that training." In short, they are not convinced that the military really needs their land. One rancher explained, "It's ironic that our young men and women are fighting for freedom overseas while we have to fight the Army here."

Most of the ranches in the Piñon Canyon area are multi-generational. That is, they were operated by the grandparents and earlier ancestors of the current occupants. Thus, the ranchers are not only defending their property, they are defending a way of life. While many are well educated and most seem plugged into the Internet, they raise grass-fed beef sustainably using practices that have been perfected over the past century or more. The Coalition Mission Statement asserts, "We also hold firm to the belief that our national security relies as much on our efforts to produce food as it does on a good national defense."

The ranchers explain that their cattle fill the ecological niche pre-historically held by buffalo. Managed grazing is good for the land. Studies have shown their lands to be reservoirs of biodiversity, because they know the land and recognize that their future is tied to it. Some are already signing contracts with wind farm operators, to harvest that powerful natural resource, while others are exploring solar power generation. Renewable energy generation, they say, is compatible with traditional cattle production; military training is not.



Ranchers and other local residents remember that the Army's promises of economic benefit, made during the creation of the PCMS in the 1980's, never materialized. They know that if even a small number of ranchers decide to sell their lands, it will be easier for the Army to

seize land using eminent domain, to complete the checkerboard. They explain that the mere threat of acquisition has stifled the local economy, as ranchers defer maintenance such as painting. One told me that a merchant who sells fence posts has seen a 90 percent sales decline since the Army announced plans to expand the site. For the ranchers and the businesses that depend upon them, it's not enough to delay acquisition. They need to lift the cloud created by the pending proposal.

The Coalition has the ear of Colorado's Congressional delegation, but thus far their legislative success has been limited. Members of Congress have pledged to fight eminent domain, and the Salazar brothers (Senator Ken and Representative John) inserted language into the December 2007 Omnibus Appropriations Act placing "a one-year moratorium on the expansion of the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site." During that period, the Army will be required to justify the expansion and the Government Accountability Office will study the proposal.

That's a partial success, but the Army is moving ahead with related construction on the existing PCMS. In June 2007, it finalized the Environmental Impact Statement for that project, and in August it was approved but the Army's Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management. To the ranchers and other denizens of southern Colorado, therefore, it appears that the expansion train is still moving forward. Unless the Army abandons the proposal, they believe they are "being held for ransom."