

Dean Baker, Rancher—Snake Valley, Nevada



Dean and his dogs, Snake Valley, NV / photo: Christina Roesler

It's hard to know what Dean Baker loves more—the land or his cows. In his laconic way he's got an infectious enthusiasm for both. It's difficult to be in his presence for more than a few minutes without sharing his enjoyment. He likes to say he has “an incurable disease called agriculture. I like to watch things grow—plants and animals. I like working on the land.”

Dean's ranch is in the Snake Valley in Eastern Nevada within spitting distance of the Utah border. His father started coming to the Snake Valley in the 1920s, and Dean recalls coming to the valley for vacations most summers of his childhood. It wasn't until 1959 that the family bought the current ranch, coincidentally in Baker, although as far as they know the town and family are unrelated.

Dean's home, Snake Valley, NV / photo: Christina Roesler



Dean's cattle, Snake Valley, NV / photo: Christina Roesler

Modest pretty much sums up the man and the ranch. It's hard to determine his age from his appearance, but he's probably somewhere in his sixties. He looks every bit the rancher with his blue jeans, boots, and work shirts. His heavily calloused hands are a dead give-away of a life spent working outdoors—although his glasses lend just a hint of a Poindexter air. His house, too, is modest. It's a single-story prefab house with a small addition in the form of an enclosed porch looking out on a lovely wetland area. It has a comfortable lived-in look and feel.

A serious ranch on a serious scale

This is not the Hollywood image of a successful western cattle ranch. But that doesn't mean it isn't a serious ranch on a serious scale. The ranch consists



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Dean at rally, Carson City, NV / photo: Christina Roesler

of 12,000 deeded acres, but the 2,000 mother cows and calves also run on 200-300,000 acres of rangeland that the Bakers lease from the Bureau of Land Management.

Unless the water dries up

Dean runs the ranch with his three sons—all of their families live there, too. Together they produce about two million pounds of beef a year along with 4,000 tons of hay as well as alfalfa, corn, and barley. They make a living. Some years are better than others, but it evens out. They intend to continue ranching this land indefinitely.

That is unless the water dries up. Dean is very concerned that the Southern Nevada Water Authority's plans to take underground water from Snake and Spring Valleys and pump it through a pipeline to Las Vegas will devastate the region and will leave

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ranchers and farmers like him and his neighbors high and dry. “Snake and Spring Valleys are currently in balance, but it’s a delicate balance. All of the water is being used to support the life within the region. There is no excess water.”

There is no excess water

For the most part all living things in the region, not just humans, are dependent on the Great Basin aquifer and its springs for water. According to Dean Baker, “Virtually any level of irrigation here leaves nearby springs dry, and the vegetation dies. That’s just a drop in the bucket by comparison with what will happen when SNWA turns on the spigot and starts pumping 25,000-50,000 acre-feet per year. And once the vegetation goes, the dust will really start blowing around.

“If the pipeline dries this county up, and I’m certain the water just isn’t there, then what happens? SNWA has a multi-billion dollar pipeline with no water in it. That would be a fiasco, so they would have to go elsewhere for the water. If the pipeline is built, the beast will have to be fed somehow from somewhere.”

These days, Dean calculates he spends about 30% of his time opposing the pipeline. He’s frustrated by this because he’d rather be ranching, producing the meat that’s sold in markets all over the country, including most likely Las Vegas. Ultimately, he’s optimistic that the pipeline won’t get built.

“I just don’t believe the people in Las Vegas want to kill everything and take people’s communities and livelihoods away. There are better ways for Las Vegas to have the water it needs. Improved conservation would go a long way. Las Vegas could grow quite a bit and not need any more water than it has now.”

Pond on Dean’s ranch, Snake Valley, NV / photo: Christina Roesler

