



JOURNAL OF THE NACAA

ISSN 2158-9429

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 1 – JUNE, 2025

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Evaluating 51 Years of Utah's High School Range Camp

Abstract

Established in 1973 by Utah State University (USU) Extension and the Utah Society for Range Management, Utah's high school Range Camp has provided students with immersive experiences in sustainable rangeland practices for over five decades. Survey findings suggest strong satisfaction with the quality of instruction and positive influence on educational paths and careers. Many participants continued to apply what they learned, demonstrating the camp's lasting impact. Ongoing efforts focus on improving data collection, monitoring Future Farmers of America (FFA) competition performance, and expanding recruitment. Overall, based on findings from the survey, Range Camp is effective in guiding youth toward higher education and range-related careers while promoting responsible rangeland management.

Introduction and Problem

In Utah, there are nearly 45 million acres of grazing land mainly owned by state or federal agencies (Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, 2019). Rural economies benefit from livestock grazing on these rangelands, which are managed for multiple

uses including recreation, mineral extraction, timber harvest and other practices (Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, 2024). Grazing often falls under political and public scrutiny which causes conflict between ranchers and other parties (Reagan, 2018). Improper rangeland management can increase this conflict while proper management can improve soil and plant health, water infiltration, and biodiversity (Reagan, 2018). Grazing can also decrease fine fuels and catastrophic wildfires. In 1954, the Utah Society for Range Management realized that ranchers were slow to understand and accept rangeland management practices and principles (Smith, 1981). To increase the speed of adoption of these principles, it was decided that youth programs including a Range Camp should be initiated (Smith, 1981).

Response and Target Audience

In 1973, Utah State University (USU) Extension and the Utah Society for Range Management (Utah SRM) partnered to deliver Utah's annual Range Camp for high school students. The goals of the camp were to help youth: 1. recognize the value of rangelands and livestock grazing, 2. qualify for rangeland management careers, and 3. become more competitive in range and natural resource contests.

Up to 25 high school youth are allowed to participate in Range Camp each year. The camp is generally held four to five days in July with youth camping each night at the host facility. Days are spent in the field at various elevations and ecosystems while evenings are spent giving trainings or lectures from the facility. The camp teaches youth the basics of rangelands and natural resources. Youth gain hands on experience with poisonous plants, noxious weeds, wildlife, livestock, rangeland monitoring techniques, range restoration, proper range management practices, and how to identify plants. Youth experience each ecosystem available in the area, from desert shrubland to alpine tall forb communities. Extension and university professors, agency land managers, and ranchers are brought together to describe their careers and the various challenges they face in their work, as well as ways to manage rangelands. Based on the survey, most youth choose to attend the camp because they want to work in a range-related field, or

because their family is involved in range management. Others attend because they feel the experience can help them improve in FFA competitions. While some attendees may never be involved in a range-related career, they are taught the importance of natural resources, multiple uses, and become vital to the future of rangelands as educated community members. Over the past 51 years of delivering Range Camp, an estimated 1,100 Utah youth have participated.

Outcomes and Impact

A Qualtrics survey was sent via email or through Facebook Messenger for the 131 individuals that were on file. The survey was also shared with the Utah Society for Range Management email list serve and emailed to the Forest Service, BLM, and other Federal and State agencies within Utah. The survey was available for a period of two months to ensure adequate time to complete. The survey received 62 responses out of approximately 1,100 total estimated participants, equating to a 5.6% response rate. Among the 131 individuals that were directly contacted, the survey received a response rate of 47%. While the dataset provides meaningful insight, results should be interpreted with caution due to possible nonresponse bias and limited means of contacting the total number of participants. The survey included a series of yes, no questions, open ended questions and multiple-choice questions. All respondents (100%) felt that it was important for youth to attend Range Camp and would recommend the experience to other youth. Respondents that chose to add comments at the end of the survey included that Range Camp is a great way to teach youth the importance of rangelands, it prepares youth to participate in FFA Contests, employment, and provides networking tools to introduce students to colleges and career paths. Some comments from survey participants noted that they loved gaining knowledge of rangelands and the friendships they built through the program. Over half of those surveyed (58%) attended the camp more than once. Single year attendees noted that they would have preferred to attend more than once. The top reasons for not attending the camp a second time were that the students had either a) aged out or b) their agriculture teachers did not notify them of the activity. Figure 1 shows which years the survey participants attended Range Camp.

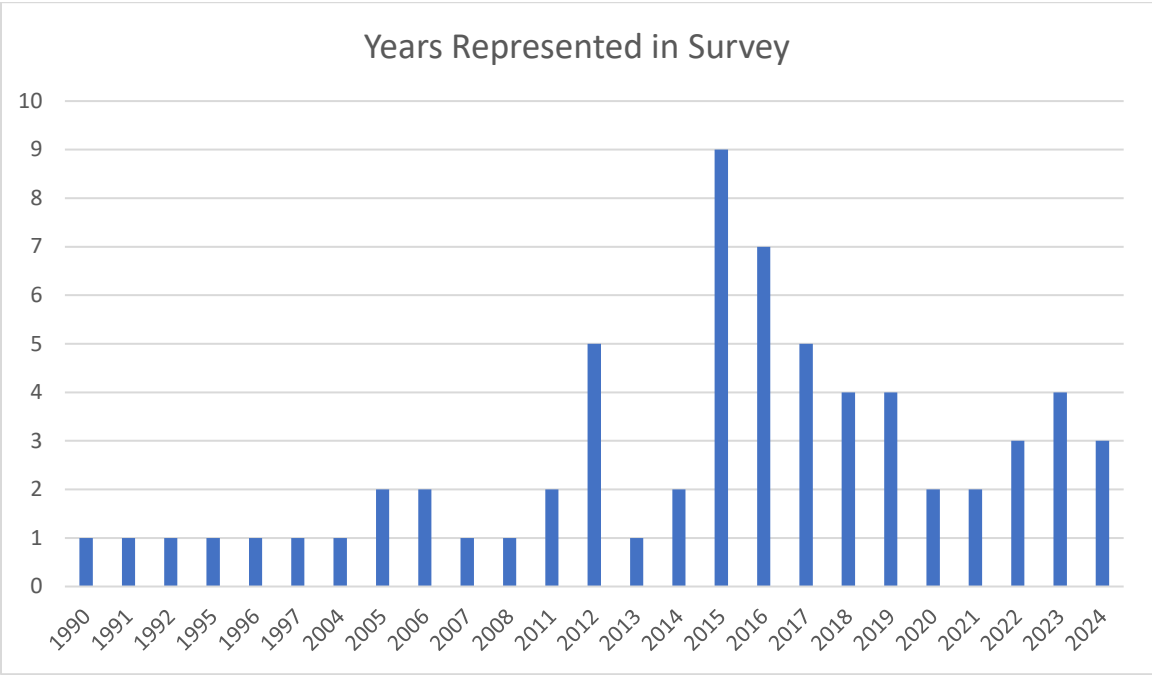


Figure 1. Youth Attendance at Range Camp, 1990-2024

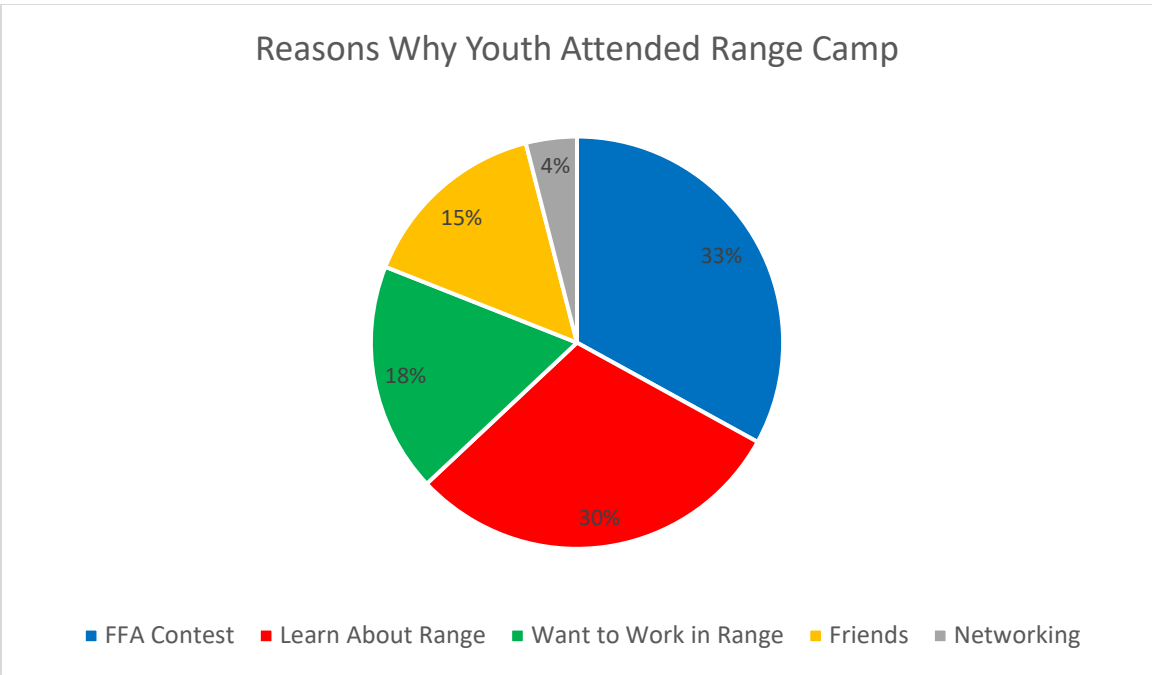


Figure 2. Reasons Why Youth Chose to Attend Range Camp

The survey of Range Camp participants revealed overwhelmingly positive outcomes associated with the program. All respondents (100%) rated the quality of both the instruction and the instructors as either “very good” or “excellent.” More than half of the participants (54%) indicated that Range Camp influenced their decision to pursue a college degree in rangeland or natural resources, and 56% reported that the program impacted their choice of university. Utah State University, Southern Utah University, and Snow College were the predominant institutions attended by these individuals.

In terms of Range Camp’s impact on career trajectory, 39% of participants applied for a range-related internship because of their experience at Range Camp. Of those who completed an internship, 83% went on to secure employment in a range-related field, and 73% noted that Range Camp influenced their choice of employer. The most frequently reported employers included the United States Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Land Management, the United States Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and private ranches. All individuals (100%) who were employed in a range-related career indicated that Range Camp increased their capability as a rancher or range manager.

Every survey participant (100%) affirmed that Range Camp positively influenced their career decisions and helped them contribute more effectively to society. Notably, all respondents continued to apply knowledge gained from Range Camp, highlighting the program’s lasting impact on their careers.

Public Value and Next Steps

Prior to 2016, data collection from Range Camp participants was limited, largely due to reliance on school-issued email addresses that became invalid upon graduation. Consequently, most existing data were obtained by locating past attendees via Facebook Messenger. To address these challenges, future data collection efforts will incorporate personal email addresses to facilitate more comprehensive long-term tracking. One primary objective of Range Camp is to improve participants’ performance in FFA competitions. Range Camp participants have ranked within the top 5 individuals

at the Utah FFA Career and Development Event (CDE) each year since 2011 (with the exception of 2013 where no data was found) and teams that sent someone to camp also ranked within the top 5 each year (Figure 3). Due to insufficient data collection previous years, the extent of its total impact previously remains underexamined. Recent results from the 2024 Western National FFA Competition showed that seven of the top 10 individual winners and five of the top 10 teams had participated in Range Camp. These outcomes will be closely monitored in the future. Range Camp continues to serve as an effective recruitment tool for both colleges and employers, equipping youth with professional skills that improve their employability. In turn, these professionals and ranchers play pivotal roles in advocating for responsible rangeland management. These findings address the program's success in guiding students toward higher education and range-related career paths, while also promoting the adoption of research-based rangeland management practices in Utah.

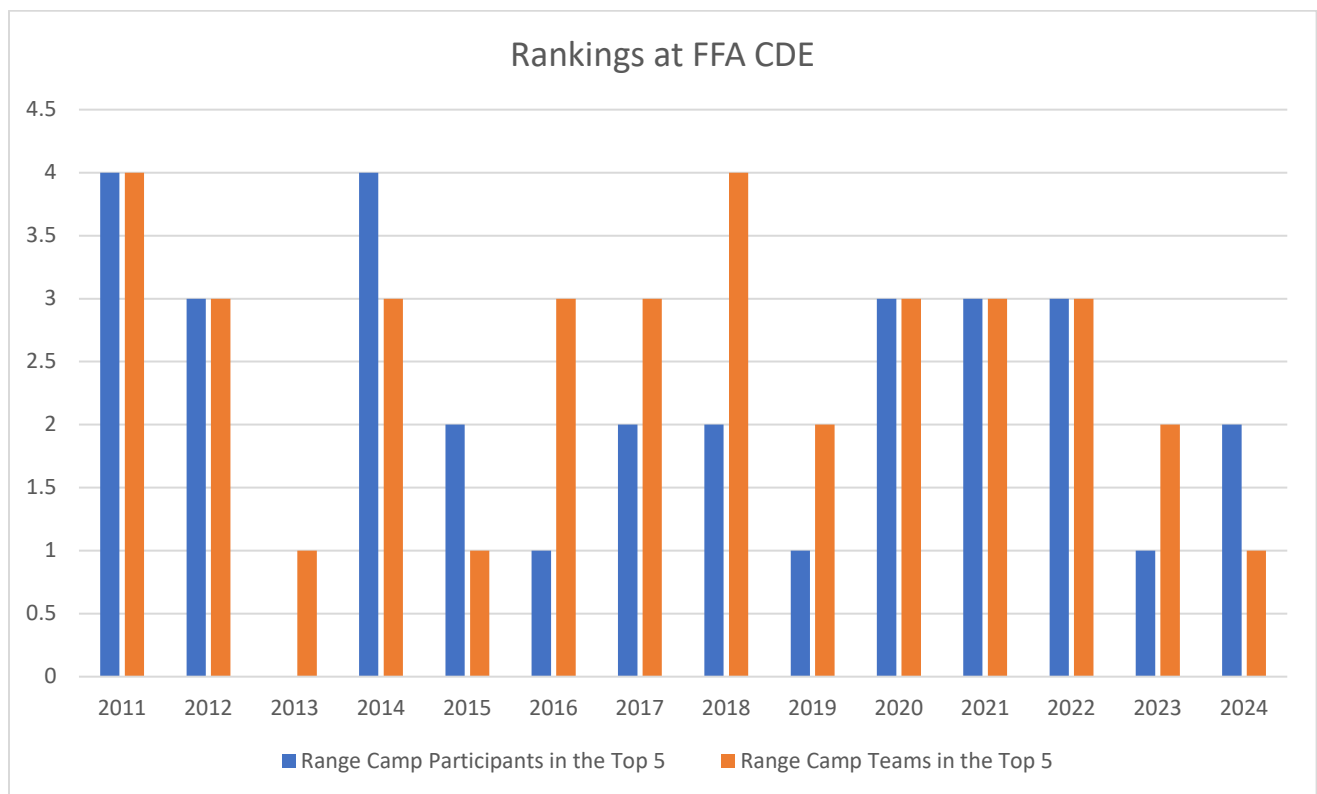


Figure 3. Utah FFA CDE Contest History.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to the Utah Society for Range Management, the United States Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, Utah State University Extension, and the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration for the valuable support that was provided. Additional acknowledgment is offered to Mike Ralphs, Randall Viollett, Fee Busby, Dean Winward, Jeffery Barnes, Eric Thacker, and Ashley Longmore, whose expertise and dedication were instrumental to the completion of this work.

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