By Gary Frasier

Frasier's Philosophy

We continually hear that we are now living in a “Changing Time.” There is no doubt that conditions are different than they were in the past. The direction of the perceived change is influenced by an individual’s bias and beliefs. The rangelands are in better condition. The rangelands are in worse condition. The climate is drier than in the past. The climate is hotter than in the past. We know how to take care of the natural resources. We are ruining our natural resources. These may all be true depending upon where you live, your perspective, and your desires.

There are some things that are definitely changing. A significant portion of the area that used to be classified as rangelands is being converted to suburban or ranchette living. Ranches are being used as hobby or part-time enterprises. More people that do not live on the rangelands want a say in how to manage them.

The rangelands of the US, especially in the West, have long been the last frontier. You could go out and with a relatively low investment carve out a life. There is no doubt that many of the early settlers did not know how to use the land in a manner that permitted long-term sustainability. It was recognized early on that some of the lands needed to be controlled and managed in the public interest. This resulted in the formation of the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Their early task was to manage the land in a sustainable usage manner with livestock grazing and logging and, in some areas, mining, all recognized as permitted uses. There were a few people that used the land for recreation, ie, hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping.

Times have changed. There is increasing pressure to limit livestock grazing, mining, and logging on the public lands. Large blocks of land are being set aside in a “Wilderness” classification that limits the use of the areas. There is increasing pressure to manage public lands for recreational use, especially near large urban localities. The potential disturbance to the natural resources, water, and soil from recreational activities in some places can be more significant than was experienced in the past from livestock grazing, especially in riparian settings. The use of our rangelands has changed. The weekend camper, hiker, fisherman, and hunter are changing the rangeland resources in a manner that could not be envisioned 10 to 20 years ago. The number of people who want to use the land for these activities grows every year. As a result, the public land management agencies have to place more and more resources, manpower, and money on recreational activities.

With this issue’s theme of “Recreation” we are presenting some papers that reflect some of the changes that are occurring in management of rangelands and how they might affect your perspective of rangelands. Again, we are probably “preaching to the choir.” We need to get the message out to our “suburban” neighbors.

Many of our public land agencies are experiencing downsizing with respect to personnel available to manage the land. Yet the work of managing the rangelands continually increases.

If you go to public land areas during the summer vacation season you see the large number of people trying to “experience the great outdoors.” These visitors do provide some revenue to the local businesses, but only a small amount to the agencies that manage the resources. I have been told, unofficially, that range specialists spend about 5% of their time on recreation use impacts, mostly with hunting and off-highway vehicle uses. They may spend up to 15% of their time with wildlife uses and activities. It is believed that recreation use on public lands is the largest subsidized program.

I had originally thought there would be a number of papers that would fit this theme topic. In trying to solicit

potential authors, 2 items came to the front. Perceptions of public land management have passed a threshold which demands that the lands be managed for recreational activities. There is a large group who believe that public lands should not be used for ranching, logging, and mineral exploration. I was told several times that recreation on rangelands is here, and there is not much we can do to change it.

I do not believe all of this. I do think that recreation on our public lands must be managed to protect the natural resources in the same manner as other uses of the lands. This includes having the weekend recreational visitors pay their fair share for use and management of the natural resources. ♦