

Public Decisions Will Affect Range Future

By Dr. Lawrence Witt and Dr. Jimmie S. Hillman, Agricultural Economics

The preceding articles describe some challenges involved in managing public rangeland for multiple uses and some advances being made in the understanding and manipulation of range ecology. These advances will affect the way public rangelands are used and managed in the future. Another set of factors will also affect these lands' future: the decisions reached on several important public policy issues.

Who should control the way public lands are used? The Sagebrush Rebellion, supported by the Arizona Legislature over the governor's veto, has spotlighted this question. It seeks to transfer much federally owned land into state owned land.

What objectives should be pursued in the management of public lands? How strong should local permittees' or lessees' role be in management? These questions are more basic than deciding which government should own the land. They must be resolved whether or not more feder-

Photograph: Roundup chute at Arsenic Tubs. (Photo by Ted Bundy.)

al land is made state land. However, consideration of an ownership change adds to the immediacy of these questions because Arizona's present state lands differ from federal lands both in purpose and in management pattern. State lands are operated as trust lands to raise money for public schools, universities and other beneficiaries specified in the state constitution. National Forests and federal land administered by the Bureau of Land Management are mandated for multiple uses, including non-money-making uses. In fact, BLM and the Forest Service each spend in Arizona more than three times what they receive in the state from leases, permits, sales and other income.

Some recent history of public rangelands policy helps put current issues in context. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLMPA) of 1976 declared that BLM lands would continue to be federally owned, thus ending an old assumption that this public domain would eventually pass into private ownership. That act directed BLM to manage these lands for long-term, multiple use, similar to the mandate set earlier for national forests.

FLPMA and the National Forest Management Act of the same year required changes in the land use planning methods used by both BLM and the Forest Service. The new methods developed since 1976 seek wider public participation and consider a wider choice of alternatives. A successful suit brought by the National Resources Defense Council and other parties has resulted in a requirement for BLM planning to include formal environmental impact statements. The agencies' new procedures have often affected specific allotment management plans by setting new limits on forage allocation and shifting emphasis from livestock to other uses. Many of the plans completed by each agency so far allow fewer livestock animals than previous permits did. Grazing fees for federal land have been increased, with new shares set aside for range improvement work and for payments to county governments in lieu of property tax.

Also in the past five years, wilderness and mining uses of federal lands have been advanced. Millions of acres of federal land in Arizona and other states have been evaluated as possible wilderness areas. A wilderness designation does not rule out livestock grazing, but hinders it by barring use of motor vehicles and some other management tools. The designation does prevent mining. Meanwhile, high energy prices have accelerated exploration and mining for oil, gas and coal in Rocky Mountain states.

The Sagebrush Rebellion started in Nevada and has spread quickly to other Western states since 1976. Usually, Sagebrush Rebellion refers to efforts to transfer some, most or all BLM land to state ownership. Some proponents also advocate transfer of other federal lands such as national forests. Some urge further transfers to local government or private ownership. For others, the rebellion's goal has not necessarily been a change of land ownership, but relief from trends in federal land use policies that tend to reduce the influence of people living on or near the land and increase that of environmentalists.

The Arizona Legislature passed a Sagebrush Rebellion bill, SB 1012, in 1980. This bill concentrates on BLM land, specifies a series of multiple uses, defines the functions of a State Land Commissioner



Redtail hawk. (Arizona Game and Fish Department photo by Wally Breese.)

and Public Lands Board of Review and authorizes payments to counties if transfer of land ownership reduces federal payments to counties in lieu of taxes. Apparently, the only possible action under the bill is initiation of a court case against the U.S. Government, unless Congress passes complementary legislation to transfer land ownership. Meanwhile, the clamor for a large-scale land transfer has subsided in 1981, partially due to policies of the new administration perceived as more lenient toward ranchers.

At the request of State Senator Boyd Tenney, a committee of University of Arizona faculty members from diverse departments prepared a report earlier this year outlining issues and options related to legislative consideration of the Sagebrush Rebellion.

One basic issue is how much land the state should seek to acquire. The economic benefits of reduced federal control may be substantially less in Arizona than in a number of other western states, and under some possible options could become negative. In fiscal year 1980, the Bureau of Land Management collected in Arizona \$4.58 million in oil and mineral leases and sales, \$1.37 million in grazing rights and leases, and \$0.87 million in other income. Expenditures in the state were \$3.09 million in receipts from leases returned to the state, \$7.61 million in payments to counties in lieu of taxes, and \$23.38 in other spending, including salaries. That comes to \$27.26 million more spent than collected. The Forest Service in Arizona in fiscal year 1980 collected \$17.1 million in sales and leases, and spent \$70.6 million.

BLM receipts are higher in some other states than Arizona. For example, oil and gas leasing and management for BLM lands in New Mexico or Wyoming bring in about 100 times as much as in Arizona. Rangeland management receipts in Arizona are also on the low side compared with other states.

By leaving a greater share of land management to its lessees, the State Land Department is able to manage land at less expense than the federal agencies. It looks after 9.6 million acres with 117 employees while BLM manages 12.4 million acres in the state with 410 employees.

In view of the management expenses of federal land, the state may choose to be selective in acquiring federal land rather than seeking a larger-scale transfer. Under its original terms of statehood, in late 1981 Arizona still had the right to obtain nearly 200,000 acres of BLM land. About 43,000 acres were transferred to the state in September 1981, including 13,800 acres for a new Parker townsite and 19,900 acres in the Rainbow Valley area. With transfer of about 37,000 more acres expected by the end of 1981, the state will still be due about 137,000 acres going into the new year. BLM expects most of that amount to be transferred during 1982. Selective acquisition by the state is likely to favor higher-value land, with potential for development or for mineral, energy or timber resources, rather than land valued primarily for grazing.

If a larger-scale transfer of federal land is authorized, the state would have other issues to consider:

Should acquired land be held by the state government, or should some or all of it be transferred to local governments or private owners? Terms set by the federal government may limit the state's flexibility in disposing of any new state land.

What objectives should be set for the use of any new state land? Should it be dedicated to the same revenue-producing purpose as existing state trust lands, or should new lands be operated under new multiple-use objectives? If guidelines are established for multiple uses, to what extent would they also apply to existing state trust lands?

Should any new state lands be managed under the present state system of management by private lease-holders with general supervision by the state? Again, terms set by the federal government for any large-scale transfer might dictate more comprehensive and detailed public planning of land management.

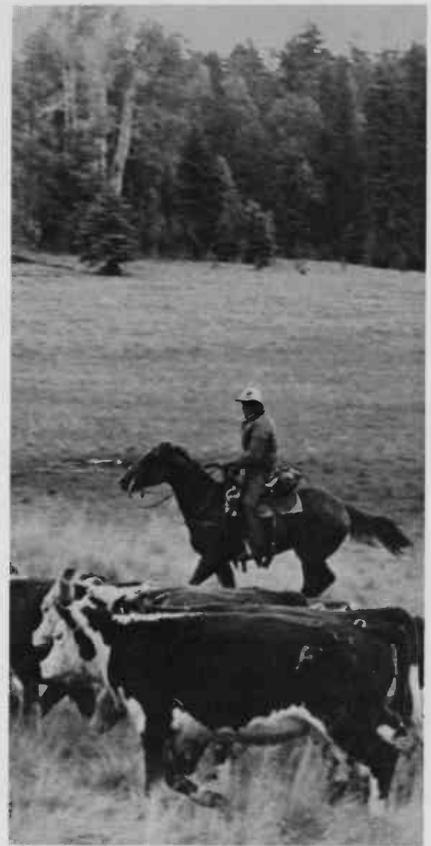
Prospects for a large-scale transfer of federal land to the state have changed in the past year. The state's acquisition of the remaining acreage due it under terms of statehood has accelerated. The movement for seeking new authorization for more massive transfers has lost momentum, however. The primary reason appears to be perception of a favorable attitude from the Reagan administration toward the user groups, including ranchers, that have supported the Sagebrush Rebellion out of frustration with federal management.

Whether or not any additional federal land is transferred to other ownership, the problem remains that much of the public rangeland in Arizona is in unsatisfactorily poor condition. According to the 1980 Forest Service report described in Lamar Smith's article in this magazine, less than an eighth of the rangeland in the state is in good or excellent condition. Much of the remaining seven-eighths is already improving and is reasonably productive, but still below its potential.

The possible benefits from improved range condition would be shared by the general population, as consumers of range products; by specific users of the range, including producers and recreationalists; and by communities adjacent to rangeland. As William Martin describes in his article on page 13, consumers and recreationists have an even larger economic interest in range improvement than ranchers do.

Among the options for financing range improvement are user fees, perhaps including fees for uses that are now free, and appropriations from general tax revenues. Both approaches have been increased in recent years. The Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 authorized 20 years of federal investment in range improvement, including important data-gathering work. Some costs are indirect: when reduced livestock permit numbers are used to improve range condition, one cost to the permittee is in reduced capital value of the ranch. In Arizona, that value averages \$1,500 to \$2,000 per cow, and is rising.

The issues of the Sagebrush Rebellion, wilderness designations, wildlife preservation and poor range condition have helped make the public more aware in recent years of the value of our range resources. With luck, this awareness will translate in the future into increased efficiency in land use management and increased support for range improvement.



Fall roundup at Apache Springs, near Sunrise, on mountain grassland in mixed-conifer-aspen forest. (Photo by Ted Bundy.)

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Along Burro Creek, Cooperation Is the First Step

In early autumn of 1980, rancher Lee Brimhall phoned Yavapai County Extension Agent Carlton Camp to see if the University of Arizona could help Brimhall deal with the Bureau of Land Management.

Brimhall runs a small ranch near Bagdad that includes the BLM's Burro Creek Allotment. A new environmental impact statement for the area had proposed halving the number of cows permitted on that allotment.

Brimhall objected. "That would just destroy this as a ranch operation," he said this fall.

"The Extension Service has helped agriculture in so many other ways over the years, I figured I'd give them a try," he recalled. "They didn't make any promises, just said that they'd come out and take a look."

County Agent Camp contacted Dr. Dave Bryant, then head of the UA Public Rangelands Coordinating Committee. Brimhall, Bryant and Camp, plus BLM Area Manager Roger Taylor of Kingman and UA Range Research Task Force member John Tanaka, spent several days in November 1980 examining the allotment together on foot and on horseback. The low-lying areas along the creekbed were the major concern.

"It looked to me like an area that had been fairly conservatively stocked," said Bryant. "I didn't see any real damage from livestock." The group did measure signs of impact from flooding two years earlier and of livestock impact on higher country away from the creek.

They set up some monitoring plots near the creek to keep track of whether the range condition there improves or declines in the next few years.

The disagreement between the rancher and the BLM has

not yet been settled, but both parties are pleased with progress toward a solution.

BLM's Taylor said, "Dave Bryant and John Tanaka have played a real important role there. They've helped us clean up our communications problem with the rancher." Without that help, he said, "We'd still be in the letter-writing stage with the rancher. We had quite a little correspondence going back and forth through senators and a congressman, but we weren't really getting anywhere."

Brimhall agreed that the university help had improved his communication and cooperation with the BLM. He said he also appreciated some initial recommendations about rotation grazing, improved trails and placement of salt blocks. "Maybe we can make a better place of this than we've been doing," he said.

Another meeting at Burro Creek was planned for late 1981. "We'll be discussing in more detail a grazing system and management plan for the ranch," said Bryant. Representatives from the Audubon Society are to join BLM and UA people and Brimhall on a survey ride of the allotment to check the monitoring plots near the creek and set up new ones in uphill areas.

Bryant anticipated that both open communication and accurate resource information would help in planning the best use of this piece of public rangeland.

In a move that could benefit other ranches as well, Brimhall's ranch has been selected by the UA Range Research Task Force as a demonstration ranch. Tanaka is studying the effect of grazing on the regeneration of the trees and other vegetation along the creek that were damaged by flooding.