

Improved Stewardship Through Innovation and Cooperation

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In the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978, the U.S. Congress directed the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to develop an Experimental Stewardship Program. The program was to have two basic thrusts. One was to develop innovative grazing management systems or techniques and innovative grazing policies. The other was to provide incentives to, or rewards for, permittees whose efforts resulted in improved range conditions. A progress report is to be made to Congress in 1985.

As the primary land managing agencies in the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service were given the lead in developing this experimental program. Here is a report of progress 30 months after passage of the Act.

Three areas have been designated as joint stewardship programs that involve BLM-administered lands and National Forest lands, as well as private and state lands. The Challis Area, located in central Idaho, has been active the longest and was organized in February, 1979. The Modoc/Washoe Area, which takes in the extreme northeast corner of California and northwest corner of Nevada, started in September, 1979, and the East Pioneer Area, in western Montana, started in November, 1979.

In addition, BLM is working with two other stewardship areas: the Tonopah in central Nevada and the Randolph in northern Utah.

These areas share several common characteristics and also present a wide array of resource values and resource management challenges. The people in each area are approaching these challenges in the same way, generally speaking. The details of how things are done from one area to another may vary but the general approach is quite similar.

For example, the workings in the Challis Area give a general idea of the approach being used. The effort is guided by a working group made up of local representatives of federal land management agencies, involved ranchers, state lands, state wildlife agency, Soil Conservation Service, resource conservation districts, county and/or state natural resource committee, state university, Extension Service, and Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation committees. Others involved are special interest groups, such as the local chapter of the Wildlife Federation and the Sierra Club. This group's role is to jointly develop management goals and objectives for the local area based on the resource data available from the land use plan and the grazing environmental impact statement. It also recommends alternative management systems for reaching goals and objectives and monitors and evaluates the effects of management systems and practices.

Interdisciplinary planning teams make up the next level of the stewardship structure. Their roles are to develop man-

agement plans for specific areas of land within guidelines set out in the land-use planning decisions and refined by the working group. These plans are very detailed and include allotment specific range improvements, grazing systems—including stocking rates and seasons of use—grazing prescriptions, and methods for gathering and analyzing data to monitor the results of management actions. Basically, these teams are composed of the individual ranchers involved, BLM and Forest Service range conservationists, a wildlife biologist, plus a representative of the Soil Conservation Service. Other technicians or representatives or other interest groups are included depending on the variety and types of resources and the particular ownership of the lands under consideration.

It is important to point out that planning teams do not develop management plans just for federal lands. They consider lands of all appropriate ownerships and how those lands can fit into the management plan and provide optimum benefits for all resources. Similarly, range improvements may be designed primarily to improve wildlife habitat or stabilize watershed conditions with benefits to livestock grazing secondary or nonexistent.

As of today, the Challis and Randolph Areas have shown the greatest progress. Their allotment management planning and development work were completed in 1980. The other three areas are in various stages of development of their allotment management plans. Obviously, it is too early to identify any improvement to the resources resulting from livestock management.

The results identified to date relate to improved working relationships between federal and state agencies, between agencies and range users, and between ranchers and special interest groups. The expanded understanding of each other's concerns that have resulted from these people sitting down to discuss a common problem has been the largest single item contributing to the improved relationship. In addition, the fact that all parties were involved in developing the management plans to meet existing challenges has resulted in a mutual commitment to see that the management schemes are carried out.

The BLM is also involved in developing experimental stewardship programs with individual ranchers, as opposed to groups of ranchers. The rationale behind this is that there may be greater opportunities to develop innovative management techniques through dealing with one rancher since management actions aren't constrained by what neighboring ranchers can or cannot do.

The report to Congress in 1985 should be comprehensive and serve rangelands by encouraging that body to recognize their importance and potential. All of us are vitally interested in improving rangelands. Each day of delay is a day of opportunity lost. This program has brought people together to discuss mutual problems, but shouldn't that be standard operating procedure?