

Yes, There Is Grass after Overgrazing

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Introduction

Overgrazing; overutilization; heavy use of forage species are some of the descriptive terms used when grasses or other forage species are used to the point of "no return." The drier regions of the country historically, like other parts of the country, have felt the ravages of too many grazing animals on a unit of land. Much of this has been corrected, though, to be sure, there are isolated overgrazing problems that occur intentionally or unintentionally.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has, on many of its districts, had monitoring in place for a number of years. The idea of these studies is in part to detect, in short order, problems related to grazing and correct them.

The Arizona Strip District is a district where monitoring studies have been in place for a number of years. It now has over 400 key areas with monitoring studies. One of these key areas in an allotment put up the "red flag" in 1977. Had this key area been a monitor in a nuclear power plant, the buzzer would have buzzed, the coffee in employees' coffee cups would be rippling as the plant vibrated as a meltdown was about to occur (remember The China Syndrome).

A Capsule of History

In 1973, monitoring studies were set out on the Arizona Strip's Mainstreet allotment. A deferred grazing system was put in place. Pictures were taken, measurements carried out in the plots, and all marked properly on maps. The Englestead pasture's key area was set amongst western wheatgrass and sagebrush. The two species shared the deep soils of the valley bottom equally (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. 1973—Conditions of range are good. Western wheatgrass stands tall.
Rainfall: 1972 (11.0"); 1973 (12.8").

The year of 1976 brought with it the hint of drought; and in 1977 the drought ruled with callous disregard. Grass grew little and water reservoirs were low or dry of water. Englestead pasture had both water and grass—old grass with a little growth by midsummer. The rancher used it while reducing his herd because of drought, but the cattle had to eat and drink. Overgrazing took place in the Englestead pasture (see Figure 2). The western wheatgrass disappeared or showed up as ground-level stubble.



Fig. 2. 1977—Drought utilization of western wheatgrass was severe.
Rainfall: 1975 (10.7"); 1976 (12.4"); 1977 (6.3")

The years of 1978 and 1979 were wet years during the fall, winter, and spring periods, but dry during the summer. The moisture favored the western wheatgrass and the summer deferred grazing allowed it time to grow and to mature. The western wheatgrass, unfortunately, was of such low vigor it reached about 5 inches high and was grazed, where before it reached 2 feet and was relatively thick. It was scattered, and often only dormant overgrazed stubble remained. More time was needed. 1980-81 turned out dry during the fall-spring period, wherein western wheatgrass grows in the Arizona Strip. Trend studies showed only a little improvement.

A Best Pasture grazing system was implemented in 1981. Under this system, the best-looking pastures are grazed, and the poorest pastures are rested to recover. It provided more time—1 1/2 years maximum—for the grasses to regroup. The Englestead pasture was rested the entire year of 1982 and the first half of 1983. It was a wet year throughout. However, the western wheatgrass still did not head out (see Figure 3).

1983 was born of heavy moisture and later in the year the western wheatgrass headed out everywhere; it had regained its vigor. The grass once again stood tall (see Figure 4). Rest from grazing and moisture falling when needed brought the



Fig. 3. 1979—Western wheatgrass still not recovered. Utilization: 1978—Severe; 1979—Moderate
Rainfall: 1978 (17.0"); 1979 (17.7")



Fig. 4. 1983—Western wheatgrass once again headed out. Utilization: 1980—Moderate; 1981—Moderate; 1982—Rested; 1983—Slight. Rainfall: 1980 (17.6"); 1981 (11.51"); 1982 (15.1"); and 1983 until Dec. 1, (15.1")

grass back. Utilization, for 1980 to 1981, had also been reduced to moderate levels, which is an important first step intermixed with rest from grazing.

Conclusion

The western wheatgrass has regained its vigor. However, over the 10-year period 1973-1983, it lost much of its ground to sagebrush. Trend transect data show a continuing gain in

ground cover by sagebrush and a loss of ground by western wheatgrass.

The monitoring studies did their job in detection. The ranchers and the BLM developed a best pasture system for the allotment. Through cooperation, they planned a well-timed-rest from grazing and moderate utilization during grazing seasons in the Englestead pasture.

The grass is back. ●

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