

## Youth Range Forum:

# Whoa! to Sodbusting!

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*Editor's Note:* This paper was the third place finisher at the Youth Range Forum at the Annual Meeting, Society for Range Management, Rapid City, South Dakota, 12-17 Feb 1984 and completes our series on the Youth Range forum. The author is a student in Agriculture Education at Montana State University. She was raised on a small ranch in eastern Montana and hopes to own her own ranch in the future. She would appreciate any comments on her speech. They can be sent to JoAnna Halmans, Route 3, Baker, Montana 59313.

No! I am not speaking about the same type of sodbusting that was being done in 1916 when Charlie Russell, a famous Montanan artist and a true conservationist, painted "The First Furrow" and said "It's this side up now; to the speculators it looks like a better place, but it looks like heck to me." The sodbusting I am talking about is being done in Montana as well as in many of your states. Rangeland is being plowed in blocks as large as 50,000 to 70,000 acres. What would Charlie say if he saw this today? I am here to inform you of sodbusting, the extent of it on our rangeland, why it is bad, why it is being done, and what is being done to stop it.

Sodbusting is the conversion of rangeland to cropland. The majority of rangeland is too rocky and shallow to withstand extensive plowing and farming. This has not stopped land speculators and short-term operators from plowing the land. For example, the number of acres of rangeland that have been plowed in the last five years are:

|              |                    |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Colorado     | 4.7 million acres, |
| Texas        | 2.5 million,       |
| Montana      | 1.7 million,       |
| South Dakota | 1.7 million, and   |
| Wyoming      | 0.8 million.       |

Nation wide we have plowed 41 million acres in the past 5 years.

What is wrong with plowing this land? Nothing, if it is planted back to a more productive state of rangeland. However, a more productive state that involves continuous plowing will significantly decrease the productivity of this land. The crop takes valuable nutrients from the soil and in many instances there are insufficient plant roots or residue to hold the land in place. The result is soil erosion.

Soil erosion is a big problem and it is getting worse. Our Soil Saving Account could be compared to a person with a savings account in a bank, whose interest income does not meet his consumption needs. If he continues to consume with no conservation, he will soon find himself empty handed. If we do not conserve our soil we will find ourselves empty handed.

How can we, as Americans, let this happen? We vowed "never again" after the Dust Bowl of the Thirties. Present soil loss in one year in the United States is 5.4 million tons as opposed to 2.5 million lost in 1934. Enough soil goes down the Mississippi River each year to build an island one mile



long, a quarter mile wide, and 200 feet high. Pretty impressive, but this soil will no longer do anyone any good.

As I have said before, not all land is suitable for plowing. According to the Soil Conservation Service, there are 8 classes of soil. The highest class, I, can be used for anything from wildlife to very intensive cultivation. Class VIII, is only recommended for wildlife uses. Class IV is the lowest class that can be broken up and seeded with minimal soil loss. Since most rangeland falls into the category of Class IV or below, it is usually not broken and worked year after year.

Why is this land being plowed and seeded to cropland?

The main reason is to get more special crop productivity, therefore increasing profits. With recent high operating ranch costs and low cattle prices, range plowing has increased. Ranch owners with large debts can realize a short-term gain if they plan on selling the land in the near future. Land values are often doubled when they are converted from rangeland to farmland. This encourages the short-term operators and speculators to continue to plow the land as fast as possible. However favorable this financial gain looks on paper, it will not conserve our soil resource. As input costs to produce a grain crop continue to increase, the land productivity potential is decreased, meaning less profit. So in the long run, livestock would have been the best harvesting machine of this land without the added cost for tillage equipment, fertilizer, or fuel.

What is being done to slow down or stop sodbusting? Senator William Armstrong of Colorado has presented Senate Bill 663 to the 98th United States Congress, which if passed will stop government price supports for crops produced on newly plowed fragile land. Operators will not be able to receive insurance, disaster payments, FmHA loans, and Farm Storage Facility loans. This bill will not stop sodbusting but it is a start. It will stop the government from subsidizing erosion.

Now I have told you the extent of sodbusting on our rangelands, what it is, why it is bad, why it is being done, and what is being done to stop it.

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "The nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself".

WHOA! TO SODBUSTING!