

Views on Public Land Grazing

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I am a rancher in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona on public and semi-public lands. I was highly honored last month by being presented with the "Range Manager of the Year" award by the Arizona Section of SRM. In my acceptance speech, I was quick to give the credit to Steve Barker and Dan Robinett from SCS for the range improvements we were able to accomplish in the last 18 years. I also got on my soapbox about my pet peeve: the grazing "system" does not offer to a rancher any incentive or reward for doing a good job, and little to no penalty for doing a poor job of range management. I offered some thoughts for changes and challenged the Arizona Section to take action. Your national president, Fred Bryant, was in that audience and came up afterwards to invite me to come to this national meeting to share my views with you.

I am a rancher, not a range management professional like most of you. We share a lot of interest and knowledge base, but my interest is focused on the rangeland on my ranch only, and how to improve it. I have been a member of your society, on and off, over the years, but I have mostly an outsiders' view of SRM. However, I am an informed and admiring outsider.

The field of public land grazing has always been one of diverse opinions and controversy. At one extreme, we have the outdoor enthusiast who wants public lands set aside for their personal enjoyment without seeing even other humans—much less cows. At the other extreme, is the rancher standing with his rifle at the fence protecting his "private rights"? I categorize these extremes as people who believe more in "birth rights" as opposed to "earned rights." An example would be the advocate that claims citizenship gives them the "birth right" in determining policy on public lands. Meanwhile that advocate may have never made a significant contribution to society that could give them an "earned right" to have their opinions weighted heavily. Another example is the person that has inherited or bought a ranch and feels no one should be interfering with this "birth right" or "private rights." He feels no need to "earn his rights" by performances, to be entrusted as being the primary steward of particular public lands.

So, we continue to have controversies like: decreasing or eliminating grazing on public land; the ending of multiple use; and the size of grazing fees. The only issue to me personally is: I want to be a productive contributor to society, while at the same time, improving the conditions of the rangelands! You say, "of course, that is what SRM is all about. That is what we do." And I say, "yes, but in your own, low profile way!" As an outsider, I see the SRM as

being very "professional" and removed. You don't want to appear to be against ranchers because they are one of your biggest customers. Plus, I believe, you more than any other group, know the difficult plight of the rancher. On the other hand, you don't want to irritate the environmental groups, partly because of their political clout, but also because they have good basis for many of their concerns. (By the way, I had always thought I was an environmentalist until I bought a ranch 19 years ago and found that I was suddenly considered to be an anti-environmentalist). I believe that your walking the narrow line between adversaries has taken you out of controversy, and therefore, has taken you out of the resolution. At this meeting I have concerns about the image, the credibility and even the future of SRM. Perhaps it is time to step out from behind the cloak of professionalism and start providing some leadership! By not asserting leadership, you have abdicated the leadership and influence on policy to special interest groups like the Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy, the National Cattlemen's Association and others. However, you are the experts in Range Management and thus you should be the major influence of policy on grazing on public lands.

I would like to challenge SRM to set up a task force to make specific recommendations on how we should manage grazing on public lands! The following 8 points represent some of my thoughts on what that task force should consider. All of these changes would, of course, have to be implemented over time with grandfather rights available.

1. New grazing leases/permits should only be issued to people that have, at least, a minimum level of certification as a "range manager."

Perhaps that may be a BS. or AA. degree (or equivalent) in Range Management. Perhaps the certification is passing some competence based exam plus appropriate experience. Isn't it peculiar that we require real estate brokers, general contractors, and even lawyers

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to pass a competency exam in their field before they are allowed to practice, but we don't require any knowledge level to be the primary steward of public lands! I have obtained and renewed grazing leases/permits on the US Forest Service, BLM and Arizona State Trust lands. In none of these experiences was I ever asked anything about range management or even if I cared about the land! I don't fault the individuals, because the "system" wouldn't know how to treat the answers because it isn't even a consideration in holding a lease.

2. Leasees should be required to participate in continuing education in range management.

Perhaps they should be required to belong to SRM, attend seminars, short courses, or conferences. Many other fields require so many "units" of updating activities per year to maintain their certification.

3. Leasees should be required to record official management plans and present annual reports and an on-ground ranch review.

We are making progress on this in many cases. But, they should also be required to establish methods to evaluate the management plans and suggest changes for continuous improvements of the plans.

4. Leasees should assume certain responsibilities of an employee.

They should:

- *report violations of laws on public lands (limited policing);
- * maintain some reasonable level of clean-up from other users (hunters, campers, hikers, etc.); and
- *plan and install improvements for other uses (e.g., wildlife, riparian protection, etc.).

I do all of these things, but I must tell you that it is harder for me to champion these points now than 2 weeks ago. In the 7 days before coming to this meeting I had two pregnant adult cows killed by mountain lions (as well as an unknown number of calves), my herd bull was shot and killed by an unknown hunter/recreationist and my boundary fences were cut several times! I still believe that ranchers should assume these broad responsibilities for public land stewardship because he knows the range on his ranch better than anyone else in the world.

5. Leasees should be "graded" each year.

Perhaps the grades should be: satisfactory; needs improvement; and unsatisfactory. What successful business or industry is there that doesn't evaluate the performance of their professionals to determine promotion, merit increases or terminations?

6. Grazing fees should be determined on a sliding scale that depends on "employee responsibilities assumed" and long term "grades."

Grazing fees now are on a sliding scale, but the factors have nothing to do with how good of a job was done of public range management. As the agencies come under more pressure to reduce staff or to divert more person power to other customers other than grazing, than ranchers have to assume more responsibilities. The sliding scale should go from negative values to positive values. Why shouldn't ranchers be paid by agencies if they assume some of the responsibilities of those agencies? Perhaps the federal agencies could reduce the costs associated with grazing management and even make money on leases.

7. Grazing leasees should be terminated as defined by flagrant violations or a history of poor performance or grades.

Perhaps three unsatisfactory grades in any ten year period would be the basis for termination. Re-issuance of a terminated lease should be based on the best range management record of any of the applicants, not the proximity of nearby leases. Violations should be strictly enforced.

8. A person that has a grazing lease terminated should never be allowed to hold another public land lease of any kind.

This would be somewhat comparable to a convicted felon not being allowed to vote.

I reiterate that I think it is time for you range management experts to exert some national leadership and become proactive! The 8 issues I have listed above are only some of the thoughts that should be considered by the SRM task force. I believe that the successful completion of this task force report from SRM could be very good for the Society. But even more important, it would be good for the rangelands!

