Sustaining the Peoples' Lands: Implications for Rangeland Management

Linda H. Hardesty

As a member of the committee that authored this report, I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Craig Whittekiend's comments on behalf of the SRM, and to briefly highlight some aspects of the 193-page report for SRM members.

The most critical point I need to make is that rangelands were not overlooked in the committee's deliberations and recommendations, but are integrated throughout in the sense that all the resources of the National Forest System are intended to be managed as components of ecosystems rather than as distinct resources or programs. Other resources (minerals, wilderness etc...) are similarly spared prescriptive management attention. The resources specifically addressed in the report are limited to those that the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) required be addressed to this degree (such as timber production suitability). The scientific foundation for resource management expands daily, but regulations are only formulated periodically, hence our emphasis on the goals of management rather the management practices employed in pursuit of those goals.

Integrated resource management stands on a definition of sustainability as the state of the ecosystem being managed rather than specified levels of resource outputs. This is consistent with the direction of progress in scientific understanding in the years since the passage of NFMA. Economic and social aspects of sustainability are fundamental to the committee's approach. We do not recommend, nor intend to imply that there will be no resource outputs, only that outputs are consistent with progress towards a desired future condition that contributes to future ecosystem integrity and productivity.

The key to implementation of this approach is focus on a detailed and realistic desired future condition (DFC) for specific management areas. Often we still lack the means for establishing progress in this direction over time, especially when confounded by natural variability in many of the parameters used to describe DFC. This is the rationale for our emphasis on collaboration between scientists and managers, and on adaptive management and other types of learning processes. Monitoring management actions and resource conditions is essential for completing the feedback loops this system requires.

Other recommendations include expanded flexibility in defining the planning and decision unit: for example part of a particular National Forest, or an aggregation of several Forests or Grasslands, with the emphasis on logical resource boundaries rather than traditional administrative unit boundaries. Concurrent coordinated planning with adjacent land managers and all interested publics is strongly advocated. The goal is to accurately view the Forest Service System in the context of the larger landscape. Local management discretion is encouraged and the participatory aspects of planning and management are emphasized in a manner consistent with the use of Coordinated Resource Management. As Craig notes, these processes can be difficult and the report addresses this extensively as "building stewardship capacity".

If our vision is realized, future land and resource management plans will be concise, specific and continually evolving. Planning and management will be indistinguishable, enjoy wide public support and ensure accountable agency action. Ultimately, more agency and public energy would be invested in stewardship and enjoyment of public resources than in wrangling over their future.

A separate committee is currently drafting proposed revised regulations for implementation of NFMA. I would encourage you to offer your comment on these proposed regulations as they become available. As Craig reminds us, there remain important, range management issues for the agency to address, most outside the scope of NFMA, and I would encourage the agency and SRM to work towards their resolution. Perhaps the committee's work will provide a useful frame for these efforts.

Many SRM members assisted the committee through their thoughtful analyses, comments and suggestions. Some gave their time to meet with us. We are grateful to you all for your help and for your continuing concern for the future of our resources.

The author is associate professor, Department of Natural Resource Sciences, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-6410.