

Small Tract Rangelands Task Force: An Effort Begun a Decade and a Half Ago

By John Buckhouse and Angela Williams

In 1990, the SRM, under the direction of President Rex Cleary, created a Task Force to investigate and educate members and the public about small acreage, rangeland homesteads and the potentials germane thereto.

A number of individuals were involved in this project, including John Buckhouse at Oregon State University (OSU) as Chair, and current SRM President Angela Williams as a Task Force member.

The Task Force ultimately prepared 3 brochures: The first dealt with horses on small acreages and was entitled, “Why Horse Around?” It spoke to land resource and pasture values as they apply to proper horse husbandry and to land ethics. The second dealt with other livestock on small tracts of rangeland. Like the “horse” brochure, it spoke to animal husbandry and land ethics. The third was called “Other Attributes of Small Tract Rangelands.” The concept here was to recognize wildlife, habitat, water, soil conservation, and esthetic considerations on one’s small acreage or homestead.

It is unlikely that any of these brochures are still in circulation or are available now that 15 years have passed since the initiation and, ultimately, the sunset of this Task Force.

There were several lessons to be learned, however, and perhaps a call toward future action:

Lesson Learned:

First, it became abundantly clear as we dealt with horse owners on small acreages that most were in it for the horses and were naive or unconcerned about land issues. Most felt, apparently, that their acreage was too small to matter environmentally and were unable to see how multiple small acreages might be added together to create significant land abuse.

Second, these owners were very passionate about their animals. We got their attention when it was mentioned that an abused pasture was susceptible to poisonous and noxious weed invasion, mud problems—and, therefore, disease and hoof rot issues, and dust and irritant problems. If one could manage differently to solve these horse health issues (and incidentally prevent or resolve land stewardship issues), they were willing to listen to techniques for manure management, land drainage, irrigation, water development, pasture rotation, dust abatement, and pasture renovation.

Third, other livestock owners tended to have sheep, cattle, llamas, etc for their children’s 4-H or other projects, to keep “weeds and grass down,” for farmland use taxation purposes, or because they had an interest in some particular, usually exotic, species. These people, like horse owners, were hard to reach from a land ethic point of view, although there is some promise of success if one were to couple a 4-H land stewardship program with the husbandry of other animals.

Fourth, the brochure concerning other attributes, while appealing in concept, never really went anywhere—perhaps, because SRM was unsure exactly how to market it.

Call to Action:

The potential call for action is that this issue of small acreage management has not gone away. In fact, most governmental agencies now have “fragmentation,” bureaucratized for urban sprawl and small acreage homesteads, as one of their top 5 challenges for the future. Perhaps, it is opportune for SRM to establish a new Small Tract Rangelands Task Force and attempt to move this important issue forward.

Coupled With This Call Is a Recurring Challenge:

We, as a professional society, need to focus on how to market our message. We have a wonderful product and concept. Yet, we frequently seem to stutter and fall when it comes to expressing this to others in a logical and compelling way. Perhaps that “way” is to commit to always “thinking within as well as outside of the box” and to recognize that we need to be responsive to both our “traditional” as well as “nontraditional” users.

Authors are Professor, Department of Rangeland Ecology and Management, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331 (Buckhouse); and Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Coordinator, Fun Country RC&D, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 105 N Indian Meridian, Pauls Valley, OK 73075 (Williams).



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