

Youth Forum

Senators, Soccer Moms, and Sideoats Grama

By Ross Tolleson

Editor's Note: This paper is the 1st Place winner of the High School Youth Forum contest at the Society for Range Management Annual Meeting, February 2006, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

As a child when I heard the word “rangeland” several scenes came to mind. I saw Woodrow Call and Augustus McCrae on horseback herding cattle, bison grazing lazily on vast plains, and wide open lands with mountains and never-ending skies. Since that time I have had the opportunity to participate in the Texas Section Youth Range Workshop and my mental picture of range has changed. I still see wide open country, but now I see a rancher, talking to a rangeland professional about their prescribed burning plan. I see a scientist collecting data in the field, and I see a hiker enjoying the landscape purely for its aesthetic value. So whether we are producers, researchers, or nonconsumptive users we are all responsible for taking care of the rangelands of the world.



"Senators"

- Policy Issues
 - Economic
 - Geopolitical
 - Environmental
- How do we make rangelands important to Senators?

The slide features a photograph of a man in a suit and tie speaking at a podium with an American flag in the background.

The perception of rangelands has changed over the years, but its importance has not. As urban sprawl and absentee landowning increase, the importance of properly managing rangelands has reached a critical juncture. That raises a question: if managing and protecting rangeland is so important, shouldn't everyone know about it? And how do we, as stewards of these lands, expect good decisions to be made if we haven't educated our neighbors about why they should care? There is an extensive list of the benefits of rangelands that most people don't know about. If we want others to care, the first thing we have to do is tell them.

First and foremost, we must inform our policy makers, all the way from your local city council up to our representatives in Washington, DC. There are 2 fundamental reasons for educating politicians. The first is that they need to be well informed about range when policies are presented that concern rangelands and their use and management. The second reason is that if range is important to their constituents, it will very quickly become important to them. When we educate policy makers, we will rapidly lose our audience if we try to explain to them the basics of managing range. Instead we need to tell them about the things that range can do for them. We should tell them how range is a multimillion-dollar industry and that it creates thousands of jobs and does its part to support the American economy. But the economic impact of rangelands worldwide extends far beyond simply helping the economy. In many third-world countries, the animals raised on rangelands are the primary source of income, and having healthy rangelands provides economic and often political stability because a country with a stable economy and a steady food supply is much less likely to feel the need to invade its neighbor. So, in some parts of the world, properly managed rangelands can help to create peace.

In addition to the economic importance of rangelands, we should also inform politicians about the role that rangelands play in the environment. Many states are currently having water shortages. Rangelands, when managed properly, are a vital part of aquifer recharge. The rainwater that falls on rangelands goes not only into the plants, but to aquifers as well. Rangelands additionally provide oxygen to the atmosphere through the photosynthesis of the plants present. With the rising concern of air pollution, oxygen replacement and carbon sequestration will make rangelands an invaluable resource that politicians will quickly recognize. However, simply educating politicians is not enough.

We must also educate voters.

Very few things that we can tell a senator will have as much impact as letters from soccer moms or other voters. Therefore we must also educate the voters because if they don't care,

it isn't likely that politicians will either. Just as politicians are concerned with the economy, voters are concerned with family. Logic dictates, then, that we would present to voters all the reasons why rangelands are important to their family. Most people are concerned with the water shortages and, just as we told the politicians, rangelands are vital to combating that crisis, but to people who are not experiencing a shortage the quality of their water becomes important. Rangelands catch the majority of the water that goes into aquifers and as that water seeps through the ground it is filtered naturally, leaving behind many of the pollutants gained while in the atmosphere. Clean water is very important to people with children. And once again the clean air produced from rangelands carries weight with voters.

Besides clean air and water, the food supply is a significant issue to voters. Rangelands are primarily used for livestock. The animals raised on these lands provide food for voters and their families, which makes them imperative. But rangelands provide more than just crucial services to voters. They also provide recreational opportunities. Rangelands are also commonly used for recreational enterprises, most often hunting. The experience of taking a son or daughter on a hunting trip and spending that quality time together is just as valuable to some voters as clean air and water. For those who choose not to hunt, other options exist. Camping and hiking are also activities valued by many voters. Similarly, ecotourism has steadily become a preferred pastime. Bird watching, wildlife photography, and plant identification constitute an increasing amount of the usage of rangelands. No matter what the voters are interested in, rangelands are somehow involved in their everyday life. So it is our job to help them understand their worth. Without the support of voters, making the case for range will not be an easy task.

A recent topic of concern to voters and policy makers alike is the recent outbreak of wildfires. These fires have affected the forests and rangelands of many western states and have also destroyed many homes and businesses. The public's perception is that fires are bad and we should work hard to prevent them with burn bans. Though burn bans are sometimes needed they are very often misused. What people don't realize is that sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. Using a technique known as "prescribed burning," range professionals are able to minimize the number and scope of wildfires. A prescribed burn is exactly what it sounds like; fires are set in pastures and forests in a controlled and planned way. The benefits of the fires are twofold, benefiting rangelands and homeowners at the same time. The pastures and forests benefit because the fire promotes regrowth and clears out the detrimental plants from the landscape. Homeowners benefit because those controlled fires eliminate the fuel load around their home or place of business. Changing the perception of fire is vital to the future of rangelands and the safety of suburban residents.

The question now is: Why? Why should we educate senators and soccer moms, politicians and voters? The answer:

"Soccer Moms"

- Family Issues
 - Water
 - Air
 - Food
 - Recreation/ quality of life
 - Must have support of voters

The graphic includes a photograph of two women standing next to a car with its door open. One woman is holding a soccer ball. The background is dark, and the text is in bright colors.



sideoats grama, the rangelands themselves. If voters and policy makers understand and appreciate the value of rangelands they will be more likely to vote and act in favor of policies that will benefit rangelands, such as the current legislation before Congress concerning the use of fire as a management tool.

Finally, we should educate policy makers and their constituents to ensure the future of rangelands. Not only for the

people that it benefits, but also for the people that have made preserving it their career, their passion. Organizations such as the Society for Range Management have taken steps in the right direction by organizing so that all of the best in the business can collaborate and learn from one another and improve and maintain our rangelands. Now it is up to us to do our part in preserving the rangelands of the world, which is work worth doing.

Woodrow Call and Augustus McCrae made their journey long ago and many things have changed, but the vast expanses of range over which they traveled are not gone. But to ensure that the next generation will continue to have these same rangelands we must effectively manage them. But if only people who know about range and how to manage it are the ones in the business, it does us little good. We have to educate policy makers and voters so that they will appreciate and help protect rangelands; in order to do that we have quite a bit of work ahead of us. But Teddy Roosevelt said it like this, "Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."

Author is a high school student from College Station, Texas, tolleson@cox.net.