



By Thad Box

Community, Science, Ethics, and Professional Land Stewards

Debate rages about the role of government. Some things are best done by individuals. Other essential actions, beneficial to the community, can best be done by people acting together. Land use involves complex interactions between private owners seeking rewards from their property and public agencies charged with maintaining the health and viability of our social and economic systems. The history of rangeland management helps us understand the role of private individuals and the public acting through government. It also suggests a need for strong professional evaluation of facts, data, and actions.

From the beginning of our republic, there was a mixture of private and public ownership of land. Between 1781 and 1802 states ceded their unowned land to the federal government. Through purchase, treaty, war, and annexation, the United States acquired more land. Using sale, grants, enabling acts, homestead laws, and exchanges, much of the public domain was transferred to individuals and states. Other areas were placed under federal protection as National Parks, National Forests, military reserves, etc. In 1976 Congress passed the Federal Land Management Policy Act declaring the remaining public domain to forever be property of the people and managed for them.

After the Civil War railroads extended westward, federal troops “pacified” Native Americans, and wild bison were extirpated, creating a market for semiwild cattle from Texas and Mexico. Vast grasslands became available for livestock. In two decades millions of cattle were trailed from Texas. In the peak year (1871) of trail driving, 600,000 to 700,000 Texas cattle moved northward. Some were sold for beef, others went to ranches.

Spurred by stories of unlimited free grass, speculation fever spread among cowmen like credit default swaps among investment bankers early in this century. And like the recent housing bubble, the cattle bubble burst. H. L. Bentley wrote in 1889, “In a short time every acre of free grass was stocked beyond its fullest capacity. ... In their eagerness to get something for nothing speculators did not hesitate at the permanent injury, if not total ruin, of the finest grazing country in America.”

Dying cattle littered the plains. Large “die-ups” occurred in 1884, 1886, 1887, and 1894. After the die-up of 1894, cattlemen petitioned their government for help. In 1896, the Division of Agrostology of the US Department of Agriculture sent J. G. Smith to study the rangelands. The following year the government organized a number of range experiments, beginning a long history of federal assistance to private land owners. Almost every land grant college in the West had scientists using tax money to study rangelands.

Fewer cattle after the die-offs of the 1880s and a run of wet years allowed rangelands to improve. Bentley (1898) reported that when he tried to explain the government research, cat-

tleman responded with the following: “RESOLVED, That none of us know, or care to know, anything about grasses, native or otherwise, outside the fact that there are lots of them, the best on record, and we are after getting the most out of them while they last.”

Prior to the 20th century, the history of rangelands was one of overstocking during good years, starvation during poor ones, and a constant decrease in carrying capacity. And after each disaster, landowners asked the government for help.

A combination of economic depression and drought during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s focused the nation’s attention on the vulnerability of its lands. The USDA Forest Service summarized the precarious condition of rangelands. The Soil Erosion Service (later the Soil Conservation Service and now the Natural Resources Conservation Service) was formed. The Taylor Grazing Act was passed, and the Bureau of Land Management formed. Dozens of make-work projects such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Western Writers’ Project were funded. Federal and state research agencies were created. Much good work was done by the government, and it continues today.

This issue of *Rangelands* describes some recent accomplishments of governmental agencies. They are to be commended. But their work, however good, comes at a time when public expectations of rangelands are changing from production of goods (primarily food and fiber) to a desire for ecological services (benefits arising from healthy ecosystems). And government itself is questioned.

Attempts to change land management to meet new, and often poorly defined, expectations have led to renewed charges that the peoples’ money is spent to benefit individuals and corporations rather than to improve land health. The politics of the manager, the quality of data used for decision making, the science behind land management, and the objectivity of the profession guiding land use are questioned. This makes it imperative that a strong, objective, professional society speak for the land.

By the 1930s, scientists were connecting studies of soil, plants, and animals to better manage land and produce food. But humans were destroying more of the earth’s skin (soil) faster than it could be locally created through normal soil-forming processes. Interconnections in ecosystems were weakened and sometimes destroyed. Rangeland scientists were scattered through many state and federal agencies and public universities. No professional society united them.

In 1948 pioneer scientists and managers met in Salt Lake City to form the American Society of Range Management. After long and heated debate, founders decided that the society should be open to anyone interested in rangelands. They rejected requiring academic, scientific, or experience stan-

dards for membership. Their intent was to educate people in good land use rather than police them. Overall, those decisions have served society well. Rangelands have improved. A large body of scientific data has been developed.

But sometimes the Society acts on politics rather than science, raising questions about its professional status. For instance, some years ago the SRM Board endorsed a highly political bill by Sen. Dominici (R-NM) dealing with public land grazing. Many good and stalwart SRM members considered the Board action harmful to our profession and resigned in protest.

My first reaction was to resign. But, we need a professional society, and I stayed. The Board backing a political bill that had not been vetted by scientists stepped over the line. It demoted SRM from a professional society for land care to a lobbying organization. By endorsing a partisan bill, the Board called attention to other SRM weaknesses: lobbying by individuals, papers published with weak or no peer review, officers taking political stands, and other actions without adequate scientific review.

Some members suggested setting stronger standards. Some sister professions have two levels of membership: full members meet strict education, certification, and performance standards; associate membership is available for lay participants. I oppose such a move for SRM.

But, we must improve. All endorsements, written or spoken, by SRM officers or Boards should be reviewed by a panel of approved scientists. Articles for publications should be peer reviewed for scientific accuracy. Advertisements should be published only if scientific data show their products benefit rangeland health. Letters, officer reports, and columns such as this should be edited for clarity of writing and plainly labeled as opinion. Alternative professional opinions should be published, creating a healthy exchange of ideas.

It hurts that some of my close friends—scientists all—do not consider SRM a professional society. We are professionals, but we suffer from continued self-inflicted wounds. We have an ethical responsibility to heal those wounds and to prevent us from further harming ourselves. Forester/philosopher Aldo Leopold argued that all ethics rest on the premise that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.

Leopold taught that a land ethic reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. It changes all of us from conquerors of the land community to plain members and citizens of it. When we require a demonstrated land ethic for membership in SRM, no one will doubt our professionalism.

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