

Conservation Plan Improves Ranch's Resources, Productivity

Wayne Nipple

"Yes, we've still got plenty of grass," the ranch manager said. "But I just wanted you to come down and see what you thought about changing pastures. We've been on the Winter's pasture since June 16, and we haven't grazed the Coal Bank pasture since October 15 of last year."

Steve Smith, ranch manager for the Decker Coal Company 7-D Ranch, made those comments to me as we crossed the Tongue River Dam and headed toward the fields. Steven and I had ridden through the pastures many times since 1979 discussing grass production and what might be done to increase it.

"Since the fall rains started, our western wheatgrass has added about 5 inches of regrowth. I sure don't want to hurt it by staying in the pasture too long," Steve explained.

The grass on the west side of the Winter's pasture was used harder than either of us would like. But since Smith moved the salt locations, the cows were using the east side more now.

"My uncle used to say—it's easy to use the grass close to home, getting the far corners is what is hard," Steve said. To further encourage the cows to the east, Smith turned off the tank supplying water to the west side of the pasture.

We agreed the cows could stay in the Winter's pasture a little while longer.

Balancing livestock numbers with the available forage was the goal Steve had in mind when he came to the U.S. Soil Conservation Service for help in preparing a conservation plan for the 7-D Ranch in 1979.

The plan began with a soil map and an inventory of the rangeland for grass condition based on what the soil and climate would support. The location of fences, existing stockwater, and grazing hazards were recorded. From the inventory it was easy to see where grazing pressure was high, about right, and low.

Using this inventory information, Steve and I discussed ways to adjust the grazing pressure and then Steve decided what changes to make. The central point of the plan was a grazing system that would allow long periods of rest for each pasture. The object of the grazing system is to keep plants healthy and productive.

Big sagebrush was a problem, but Steven didn't want to overlook wildlife needs. To insure minimal adverse effects from spraying to reduce sagebrush population, a team consisting of Ron Batchelor, biologist, and Dave Doty, range conservationist, both with the Soil Conservation Service, and Stephen Knapp, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist, reviewed the proposal.

Since that review, Smith sprayed sagebrush on 3,500 acres. The benefits are visible; moisture once used by sagebrush is now used by more desirable plants.



Steve Smith, ranch manager for the 7-D Ranch near Hardin, Mont., checks out a dead sagebrush plant. Steve sprayed sagebrush as part of a coordinated plan that has improved his rangeland from fair to good condition.

Fencing was part of the plan too. Steve and I agreed that 1 cow in a big pasture will graze exactly where you don't want her to—along a creek bottom or around a waterhole. She must be fenced out periodically so all parts of the pasture can receive a rest from grazing.

During the summer of 1980, Steve added 6-1/2 miles of additional fence to the ranch. Now Smith had 7 pastures instead of 3, which fit the grazing system.

Water is essential to making a rotation grazing system work; each pasture must have water available in any season.

During the summer of 1981, Ken Peterson, Soil Conservation Service engineering technician, helped Smith design 3 springs and 4,200 feet of pipeline for stockwater. Smith contracted the installation, which was completed before freezeup that fall. Since then other pipelines and tanks have been placed in strategic locations within the pastures.

One water system uses a well in a saddle of a hill. A windmill pumps water into a 7,000-gallon storage tank. The water then gravity flows from this tank through 2,180 feet of pipeline, watering 3 pastures.

The Big Horn Conservation District named the Decker Coal Company its "Outstanding Cooperator" for the conservation work on the 7-D Ranch. Through the conservation plan, the soil and water resources have been protected from erosion. And the intensive ranch management practices have increased the productivity of the operation dramatically.