

The Prince of Iran Said...

James R. Brunner

"If," said the prince, "You use the rancher's livestock as a tool to improve the range, he shouldn't be paying grazing fees. You should be paying him."

The prince of Iran toured the Western U.S. several years ago. He was head of Range Management for the Peacock Throne in Iran. I was detailed to escort him on a weekend.

On the edge of the Inter-mountain Basin, I explained the vegetation and the rest-rotation grazing systems we were using. Then he made his statement.

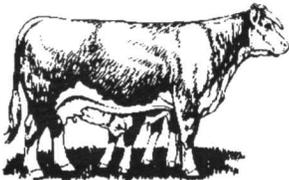
I've never forgotten his idea. Could it have been sage advice?

The outstanding feature of millions of acres of public land is the sparse vegetation. Land productive enough to pay taxes on was patented. The sorrier land stayed in government hands. However, it was required that all the lands be allotted for grazing, no matter how sparse the vegetation. One reason for this allotting was the seniority system in Congress, whereby a re-elected person is elevated to a position of power. When a high school classmate complained to Senator X, who headed an agricultural committee, the power was used to require an agency to follow the Senator's wishes.

The second reason was the foresight of the officials of the U.S. Forest Service.

After passage but before the Taylor Grazing Act could be implemented, the U.S.F.S. reduced the time that livestock was to be allowed on the forest. Basically, the season was shortened by about a month in the spring and a month in the fall.

Where did the cattle go? They had to come off the hay fields at green-up time and go on Grazing Service land. Land that wasn't ready to be grazed yet because the grass was just starting to grow.



"Hey!" said the Senator. "Let my old buddy turn his cows out. Or else."

So the lower range was badly abused.

One year the Bureau of Land Management (successor to the Grazing Service) tried to control the range. The result was the "McCarran Holiday". The powerful Senator denied funds to BLM for one fiscal year. That taught BLM (and other agencies) that when the Senator hollered 'frog', you

jumped.

Senator McCarran wasn't the only Senator dabbling in public land policy. A District Manager on his first day in his new job received a long-distance phone call from Senator Church. He was told not to jangle the chain of any rancher.

With the rise of the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society (among others) the scales began to balance. PAC's, man.

Then came the Natural Resources Defense Council. The suit against BLM asked that Environmental Impact Statements be written for every action taken. In most BLM districts on-the-land management came to a halt. The staff sat in the office yearlong writing.

Then more personnel were added. The new employees were from urban backgrounds. So the new employees had to rely on the Manual. The Manual tells you how to do things. But it's black and white. In real life there are mostly shades of grey.

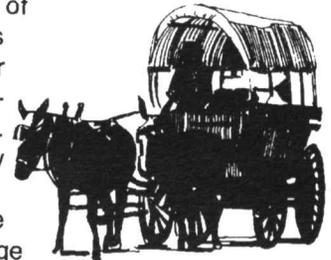
This caused the 'Sagebrush Rebellion' in Nevada. Much of Nevada was settled by Brigham Young back when he was starting the Kingdom of Deseret. Their descendants have been living here for some 150 years, hardscrabbling a living off the land. The government land they run on is part of their home.

Back to the idea of the Prince of Iran, Chief of Range Management for the Peacock Throne.

Some public land is highly productive, furnishing grazing for livestock and wildlife, clean water for communities. Ranchers should pay a reasonable fee to use these lands.

But some public land is rated at over a hundred acres per animal unit month (aum), which is the amount of forage needed to sustain a cow with her calf for a month. This isn't grazing land, no matter what the Senator said, unless you have 8X40 cattle. Oh, an 8X40 cow is one with a mouth eight feet wide that can run forty miles an hour. Seriously, the cow loses weight every day she's on that kind of range.

My cut-off point is 25 acres per aum, but you choose your own. Go see how long it takes you to pluck ten pounds of air-dry forage (a day's maintenance ration for a cow) on that range. Well, you can pick for fifteen minutes, weigh your harvest and see how many hours it would take to sustain a cow for a day. Almost all of these lands with little forage were allotted for grazing. They had to be. The USFS had shortened the seasons, the rancher couldn't leave the cattle on his hayland if he was to harvest any hay for next winter, the Senator said, "Or else!"



The Prince specified using livestock as a tool to improve rangelands. Will that really work? YES, on most public lands. But some areas have been invaded by woody species that have formed a closed stand. No room for any other plants.

Both big sagebrush and juniper are famous for forming closed stands which kills all understory vegetation. In addition to the competition they cause, these plants also dry the site by crown intercept of precipitation. A recent doctoral study in Oregon found that the initial half-inch of a precipitation event is intercepted by the juniper tree crown and evaporated. Check the daily rain records in your area to see what percent is lost. Usually it figures to about 25%.

Once the stand is closed, juniper or sagebrush will thrive until fire-storm conditions occur. The site will continue to deteriorate until then.

It is cheaper to buy the ranchers out than to try to remove woody vegetation and replace it with grass. I once estimated it cost over \$100 dollars an a.u.m. to do so. (Nearly got fired for suggesting the option). The cost is much higher in 1997 dollars. Only if other values are considered, such as watershed or wildlife, will the renovation be cost-effective.

Another area where livestock manipulation won't work is in the lower end of the semi-desert. An early researcher in Arizona found that any area below 2,500 feet elevation will not support commercial grazing. More land to remove from grazing. Can we solve this problem of cattle grazing on waste land?

NO. Because it isn't the problem, it was the SOLUTION.

Can the advice of the Prince be implemented? Yes, it could be, on many allotments. The vast majority of public land acres lie in between the two extremes of brush-choked land and the desert. Livestock used at the proper time of year in proper numbers can improve the plants you want and help eliminate the plants you don't, to reach some particular goal, be it for recreation, wildlife, watershed, or grazing livestock. Since the particular grazing regime needed may not benefit the livestock, we may need to defray the rancher's losses.

Next time it rains on a weekend, think about it.

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