Why Haven't Farmers and Ranchers Taken to Regrassing?

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MILLIONS of acres in the West are lying almost worthless. With the million dollar new wheatgrass and other grasses having proven their value as the best possible crops for these acres, why is there such a lethargy? Why haven't we ranchers and farmers taken the ball as all the facts and figures show we should?

Selfishness, yes! But it goes a lot deeper. Many individuals who have not been sold on the income-producing values of regrassing are naturally holding back because of the high prices for farm products. Why haven't they been sold? The day of reckoning is near when wheat and other crop acreages must be cut. Many of us will be much sadder than if we had been told in time. And why haven't we? Maybe, because too many researchers read and write only research papers, while ranchers and farmers read or hear only popular farm or livestock articles or reports.

Our Technicians Are Not Salesmen

By very definition, our technical men in the agricultural colleges and various experiment stations are trained for research, for the test tubes and small plots. To them has fallen the job of analyzing and visualizing the problems, and then, *with limited funds, always limited funds*, of trying to get the most enterprising cooperators in their districts to experiment in the field with actual plantings. And too many researchers are not yet doing enough outfield tests. Instead, they are trying to develop a perfect experiment on a limited or non-typical acreage. Then, finding a special problem such as seepage or low fertility, they allow this red herring to get them off the main track.

The best engineers in any industry do not have to sell their own "brainchildren." Mr. Kettering of General Motors probably couldn't sell newspapers in competition with modern newsboys. But our splendidly trained and loyal technicians have been forced to try and get the whole job done. The result—a big array of proven facts on every phase of the regrassing problems is in USDA bulletins, college publications, and available in every County Agent's office. And there they stay. Columns, tables of facts, pages of small print, all chock-full of money for the mere study of them. But they are unused, unasked for—just like Ford building up a daily manufacturing capacity of 10,000 cars without hiring a sales force to sell them.

Technicians Are Conservative

Our technicians are true scientists. They know the results of various new grasses sometimes for years before they will release them. Their training has made them so. They want to be letter perfect with no comebacks. They will not take the calculated risk. In far more important matters, as the winning of wars or our international policies, we must take these risks. Our researchers could merely preface their 99.44 percent findings with "it is believed"—and we out on the ranches and farms will take

them at that, then start and get the job done. We take a 51 percent chance every day with the weather, the wind, and the elements. The technicians should raise their sights and instead of working on a 5 percent level of significance, report their results at a 25 percent or 30 percent level.

Five years ago in those laboratories it was known that intermediate wheatgrass was a wonderful grass, but if I had not heard of it through a keyhole, I'd still be trying to get some seed to plant. I have been raising it now for 3 years. Right at this moment there are probably newer and better grasses, 95 percent proven, that will not get off the small plots and that we will not hear of for years, because the last minutia has not been nailed down.

Lay it on the line and let us decide. There will be failures, but immeasurably more will be accomplished. Take crested wheatgrass. In their efforts to be careful the technicians have sung from the housetops that crested wheatgrass was the perfect grass for the "go-back," or the abandoned croplands, where you can't or wouldn't plant anything else. Actually, crested wheatgrass was always worthy of our BEST LAND. But now with crop acreages to be cut, there will have to be a lot of reselling to get it onto our best wheatlands.

Lazy Mental Acrobats

We ranchers and farmers are generally too cumbersome and mentally lazy to take advantage of the wonderful array of data which has been gotten together for us. We do not like to fight through any article that issues a mental challenge. We generally would rather do without something very vital for our good, if it requires sitting down and having to write a letter or even a postal card (except to a mail-order house).

A leading advertising authority once said, "If you want to get your advertising message across, write it for a 10-year-old mentality." For most of us out in the fields that is a maximum. Most bulletins are written for fellow specialists, not for us. The obligation of state and Federal research should be to get all data to those who can and will have to use it. We need the practical significance. Aim it at us very simply. Put it cryptically, point by point, in short sentences and simple words.

If all these data are to be used, get them to us automatically. Every time I write to a new source for a bulletin, I run into new untapped fields of knowledge. But how did I know? Having some engineering background I am luckily a little tainted too with the technique of research; I wrote Washington for a bibliography of publications. But most of us will not do this, partly because, from Washington down to the local county agent, everything is tuned for the research-minded. Since we will not ask for it, this information should be assembled at timely intervals in a single bulletin or progress report, and funnelled through some agency trained in salesmanship and advertising, direct to the users—the ranchers and farmers.

The Native Range Bogey

In the last dust-bowl days, with poorer methods, we were told it was a cardinal sin to plow up any native range for regrassing. After each war we did plow up native sod, to the tune of $2.00 per bushel wheat, and the plaudits of politicians who glorified our efforts of increasing production. But should we never do it, regardless of the soil, or the size of the area, if the operator is a good one and knows the dangers? Can our efforts to increase our grass for longtime range improvement, be any more dangerous

than breaking out hundreds of thousands of acres for wheat? When sound grazing tests carried on by some of our U. S. Stations have proven that native range reseeded with some of the newer grasses will produce 3 to 4 times as much beef gain per acre as good native range, should we still do nothing about it? Wouldn't I be silly not to plow up some of my native range when for 3 years of testing I averaged over 130 pounds of cattle gain per acre on crested wheatgrass, while on my best native grass, with the same type of steers, I got only 30 pounds per acre. Sure, the new grasses must be used conservatively, but with deeper roots and more stubble, why the delay in doing something about it, and in a big way?

I think we all know enough about the dangers of blowing for each of us to do regrassing work within our own limitations. When I told one leading grass technician that I planned on breaking 100 acres of native range for regrassing, he said wryly, "Swell! But don't talk about it. We could get our throats cut for that!"

Let's let our technicians be honest. There will be failures, but the benefits will far exceed the damages. Tell us about the use of fertilizer on dry land. There must be some formula for its safe use where precipitation is 15 inches or less per year. What about the studies on legumes which have been in the nurseries for 10 years, but still are not ready for field use?

Lack of Seed

The bottleneck is the lack of seed, and it will always be, until we get the ideas across. If we have a problem of surpluses, it will become worse before it gets better, so this is no time for too much theory. 1951 will be bad. 1952 will be terrible; dust-bowls everywhere or farmers suddenly awakened to the fact that their income is gone. And all in a matter of months, not years. We know enough to start the job NOW. Give us efficiency experts who will act as liaison to take the data from the technicians and sell it to the men out on the land. Free them from red tape, except the urgent job which must be done. In 1949, there were 200,000 acres seeded in Colorado, but 600,000 acres will go out of wheat in 1950 and 1951. At least 3,000,000 and maybe closer to 5,000,000 acres need seeding. We'll never catch up at the present rate and not a minute should be lost in selling the program.

The Production and Marketing Administration, knowing that something should be done, has decided to support the price of grass seeds in a similar fashion to the support of other crops. Among other grasses they placed a support price of 10 cents a pound on crested wheatgrass, but only if it was just about perfect seed, with 95 percent purity and germination, and if beautifully bagged and delivered to the PMA warehouses. Wheat is still supported at $1.85 per bushel, or somewhere near that figure. But the grass seed to supplant wheat, to save our hides and keep us all happy and thriving is supported at a price that wouldn't even interest a banker. That is no support price if we want action. It is an open invitation to a certain loss. Such seed quality does not often happen except in a nursery. So, who is being fooled, if we really want the job done, and quickly?

The Brannan plan does not pretend to know within billions of dollars what its program would cost; and yet many, up to and including the President, herald it as a panacea for our ills. By the same accurate method of figuring, let us spend just as many unknown dollars on a carefully thought out, non-political program of regrassing. If half is a complete failure

the balance will still be here for cattle forage 100 years from now.

What to Do About It

Get eight men of the right type together around a table, have them decide each step that should be taken—then let's go. Get eight men of the Billy Mitchell and George Patton type—men who know their subject better than anyone else; who will take a court martial rather than be "yes" men, and who do do not have to worry about their jobs, if their ideas do not happen to jibe with Department of Agriculture regulation No. PBX73. In 60 days they would have the program visualized and the organization set up to carry it out.

In an attempt to help these eight men, the following suggestions might give them a starting point.

1. Let's do as we preach. How many higher-ups in the bureaucracy have land and have planted any of the new grasses, or undertaken any of the newer methods?

2. Let the right hand know what the left is doing. Let's have some liaison. Take the fetters away from our technicians and let them say what they know and think, but make them keep up-to-date too!

3. Organize the whole effort with duties where they should be; technical matters and experiments to be conducted by those who know how; promotion and selling of the ideas to be in the hands of men who know just as much of those phases of the problem—with all the wonderful results achieved by the technical men put at the disposal of this master sales group.

4. Remember the market. The selling approach hasn't been too effective. Ranchers and farmers are now rather dubious, so some reselling is needed.

5. Have bulletins timely and on time. If a new idea has a 50-50 chance, don't hold it up because of some petty insignificance. Grab a hold of present problems like one U. S. Station which picked up the gossip that a light colored steer did better than a dark colored one. They quickly proved it did if it was of better quality originally but not because of color. That data was in the hands of the ranchers as soon as the experiment was completed.

6. If a bonus of $5.00 per acre for every acre planted is needed to encourage regrassing, then pay it. What would $5,000,000 for reseeding amount to compared with the increased value on 1,000,000 acres? Especially when we are going to spend $200,000,000 on some irrigation projects in Italy, and billions all over the world for the help of all underprivileged! Let's give the "offal" of all this money to our own right here in this country.

7. If the price of grass seed needs support so that it will be planted, it should have enough of a support that will get results.

8. Spend some of this for more grass nurseries, land capability classifiers, agronomists, economists, farm planners and range managers.

9. Give the State of Colorado, and maybe your state too, *just one Extension Range Management Specialist.* Three-fourths of this state is chiefly suitable for grazing; income from livestock exceeds all other crops (most of it comes from grass), and there is no one authority functioning on this tremendous industry from this standpoint.

10. Be honest about regrassing. Take the halo from the native grass and put it where it belongs. Give us a better chance to compete with "wheaties" and the "macaronis" and reduce the price of meat, by doubling our yield per acre. The new grasses will do it.