

# Range Condition in Eastern Washington Fifty Years Ago and Now

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**M**OST of the stories we read and hear about range condition today, as compared to say 50 to 75 years ago, leave us with the impression that range condition today is much lower than it was when early-day stockmen grazed their livestock. Much of the comparative information on the subject comes from pioneer stockmen whom we've taken to calling "old timers." These time-mellowed men deserve the respect we pay to all pioneers certainly, but the prestige of having seen more sunrises and sunsets than most people, has, in the words of a radio commentator, caused some of them to use the English language in a careless and exaggerated fashion.

At the turn of the century two reports on range conditions in eastern Washington furnish us with a fairly accurate picture of what things were like then. "Forage Conditions and Problems in Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon, Northeastern California, and Northwestern Nevada" by Dr. David Griffiths was published in 1903. "A Report on the Range Conditions of Central Washington" by J. S. Cotton was published in 1904. These two men seemed to be endowed with enough scientific objectiveness to make their reports and observations credible and valid. It is interesting to note in passing that some of their recommendations for solving range problems that prevailed in their time are just as good today, and are being used by present day stockmen.

If Griffiths' and Cotton's observations and conclusions are valid, and there is no

reason to dispute them, there is good evidence that range condition in eastern Washington has improved since they made their studies and published their reports some 50 years ago.

Griffiths' report covers more territory, geographically, than Cotton's. Cotton was with Griffiths when he (Griffiths) visited the Okanogan country. However, there's no evidence of further collaboration. Their analyses of what they observed either jointly or independently are in close agreement. Cotton's studies and report, however, dealt with range conditions in Washington exclusively, so in this paper quotations are confined to his report.

In discussing range condition Cotton divided eastern Washington into three regions, (1) The Okanogan Country, (2) The Eastern Cascade Watershed, and (3) The Columbia River Basin; as outlined in Figure 1.

## THE OKANOGAN COUNTRY

Cotton observed, "As yet, the range of the Okanogan country has not been so badly depleted as that to the south. There is still plenty of good bunchgrass upon the foothills back from the streams which, with moderate use, ought to last indefinitely. However, greater demands are being made upon it each year, and in the course of a few years all of it that is not settled up will be as badly devastated as the range in the rest of the State."

Cotton's prediction and fears about the Okanogan country did not entirely come true. There are exceptions, of course, but

as a whole the Okanogan country still ranks as some of the best bunchgrass range country in the State. On a survey

better portions are now under fence and being cultivated, while the poorer parts have been grazed to a point where it is

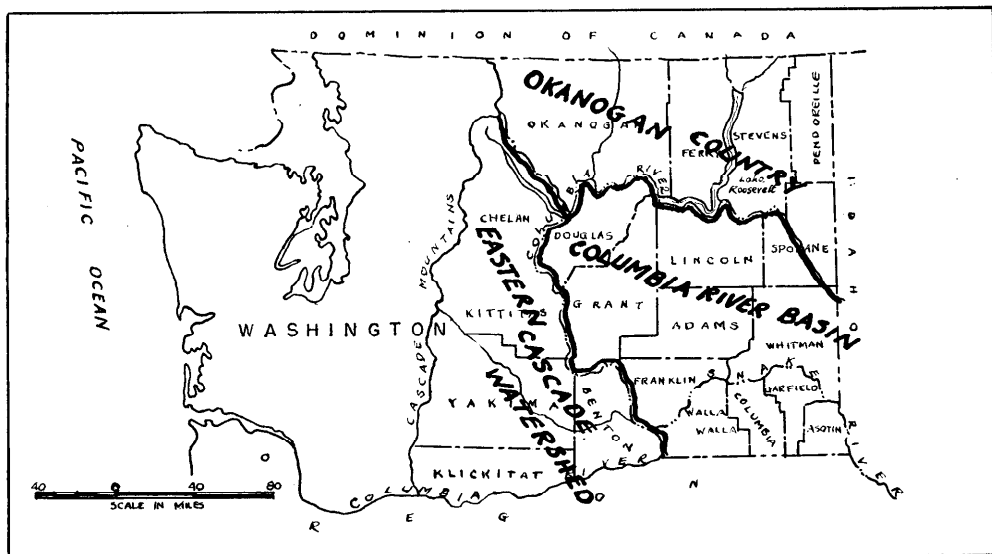


FIGURE 1. MAJOR RANGE REGIONS OF EASTERN WASHINGTON

of 165,000 acres of range in central Okanogan County, the SCS found that 28 percent of the range was in good and excellent condition, 45 percent in fair condition, and the remainder, 27 percent, was in poor condition. This area is in the heart of Okanogan country and seems representative of the rest of the privately owned range land in this section of the state. Incidentally, the Okanogan country is where Loy McDaniels, "The Washington Cattleman of 1950" has been operating for the past 25 years (J. R. M. 4: 122, March 1951).

#### THE EASTERN CASCADE WATERSHED

Cotton's discussion of range condition in this grazing region was confined to the low lying winter range and the mountain or summer ranges.

#### *Winter Range*

"The winter range," wrote Cotton, "is at the present time in a very bad state of depletion. Nearly all of the

almost impossible for cattle to make a living, and sheep can find but a few weeks of good grazing."

Cotton then listed the common and scientific names of the more prominent plants growing on the "badly depleted" range. These same species are still present in these winter ranges, but apparently are not as abundant today as they were 50 years ago. For example, on the Anderson Brothers' ranch north of Prosser, Washington, the SCS found that 5 percent of their 23,000 acres was in excellent condition, 40 percent in good condition, 25 percent in fair condition, and 30 percent in poor condition. This ranch located in the Rattlesnake hills is a good example of the range condition that prevails in the winter range area that Cotton described. Close by on the 125,000 acre artillery range now used by the U. S. Army, the percentages ran 19 percent excellent, 45 percent good, 26 percent fair, and 10 percent poor.

On the 85,000 acre High Valley ranch near Ellensburg, Washington, right in the heart of the Cascade area, were found the following conditions: 12 percent excellent, 38 percent good, 36 percent fair, and 14 percent poor.

#### *Summer Range*

"This summer range," Cotton observed, "is also suffering severely from overstocking. At the present time a large portion of it is included in the Mount Ranier and Washington Forest Reserves (now the Snoqualmie and Wenatchee National Forests). In these the stock is greatly restricted as compared with the open range, although it is perhaps a question if they are not still overgrazed."

Permittee ranchers and the Forest Service are both constantly trying to improve the condition of these ranges by improved management practices and reseedling.

#### *The Klickitat Drainage District*

This particular area of range in the Eastern Cascade watershed, Cotton singled out for special mention. It is a timbered range area, mainly western yellow pine. "This entire country," Cotton observed, "has been badly overgrazed, and at the present time the greater part of the free range is so destitute of food that cattle can hardly make a living on it. In the vicinity of Glenwood the range problem is very serious, all the free range in that neighborhood has been so severely overgrazed by numerous bands of sheep on their way to the forest reserve that the cattle belonging there can hardly get any grazing."

Because of economic and other conditions the bands of sheep that pass through the Glenwood country today on their way to summer ranges can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This has made it possible for cattlemen to fence and manage

their land and do something constructive about its improvement. True, there are still areas in the Klickitat drainage area around Glenwood that have never recovered their power to produce the forage they once did. There are, however, other areas where conditions are better than those that prevailed in Cotton's time. This is true on the J. Neils Lumber Company holdings, on the portion of the Yakima Indian Reservation in the Klickitat drainage, and on stock ranches that have been fenced and managed. On an area of nearly 200,000 acres in the locations mentioned above, definite improvement in range condition has been evident over the past 12 years—improvement brought about by forage management practices alone.

#### THE COLUMBIA RIVER BASIN

"In this region," Cotton observed, "the range is already confined to the arid lands that are too dry for wheat raising and to the broken lands in and adjoining the coulees. While there is considerable grass in those areas that are too far from water for the stock to frequent much, all the land not fenced or otherwise controlled shows the same overgrazed condition as in the depleted range areas in the state. The country directly south of Ephrata is especially destitute of forage."

By present day standards of classifying range condition one can feel reasonably sure that Cotton would have graded a good share of the range land in the area he writes about in poor condition. In 1949 a reconnaissance classification was made of range condition in Grant County (in the heart of the Columbia River Basin). Extensive areas of the range were classified in fair condition. A small part of it was classified as good and excellent condition. The heartening thing was the evidence that this range was continuing to improve.

One specific instance of range improvement can be cited on the 23,000 acre ranch belonging to George and Clarence Rosenberg of Wilson Creek, Washington. A 1939 survey showed that 5 percent of their range was classified in good and excellent condition, 30 percent in fair condition, and 55 percent in poor condition. A 1950 condition classification of this same area showed that 32 percent of it was in good and excellent condition, 45 percent in fair condition, and 23 percent in poor condition. This improvement, again, was brought about by careful grass management on the part of the Rosenbergs who, in 1944, switched from a sheep to a cattle operation.

#### *Grazing Lands of the Palouse Region*

"At one time all this land was badly overgrazed," Cotton wrote. "In recent years," he continues, "the greater part of it has been fenced up, and at the present time there are a number of prosperous stock ranches scattered through the region."

Since Cotton did not single out these prosperous stock ranches by name we have no way of pinpointing their location. However, there are still many prosperous stock ranches in the region. This in itself is no criterion of range condition, but usually the condition on prosperous ranches is much better than those that are not being properly managed. The area in question lies in eastern Adams and Lincoln County and western Spokane County. On the Joe T. Smith ranch near Sprague, the Albert Owes ranch near Cheney, and the Harder Brothers ranch near Ritzville, range land totals nearly 125,000 acres. A high percentage of the range on these and other neighboring ranches will grade fair and good condition.

#### *Cow Creek Country*

This country begins a few miles east of Ritzville and extends south to the Palouse River. "In the early 90's," writes Cotton, "this country was so badly overgrazed by sheep that some of the settlers, finding they would soon be forced to leave unless something could be done to improve the range conditions, called upon the Northern Pacific Railroad for relief. As a remedy, the railroad company suggested that all those who were grazing stock upon land belonging to the railroad be compelled to lease that land (as a means of reducing trespass). This system of leasing the land has been a great help to the stockmen, as it has given them a chance to control, to a great extent, their range."

To get an idea of the present day condition of the Cow Creek Country, all you need do is visit a few of the ranches in the area. Take, for example, the range on the McGregor Land and Livestock Company. This outfit was one of the first in Washington to begin revising their management system. Through fencing and water developments, they have made better and more efficient use of their range feed. By range reseeding and conversion seedings to alfalfa and grass on their wheat land, they and many of their neighbors have improved the condition of their grazing land and at the same time increased their per-acre meat yields. The 1938 range survey of the McGregor ranch showed that 18 percent was in good and excellent condition, 25 percent in fair condition and 57 percent in poor condition. A 1948 survey showed 26 percent in good and excellent condition, 36 percent in fair condition, and 38 percent in poor condition.

It is regrettable that Griffiths and Cotton did not set down a more clear cut definition of what they meant by range

condition, but then we didn't get around to that problem ourselves until just a few years ago.

#### REASONS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN RANGE CONDITION

The improvement in range condition has been brought about by many factors. The three most important reasons are (1) ownership and control of the range through fencing, (2) mechanized farming, and (3) the actions resulting from the growing conservation consciousness on the part of stockmen developed through the formation of livestock associations, participation in Forest Service advisory boards, and the formation of local soil conservation districts.

##### *Ownership and Control of the Range Through Fencing*

It was quite obvious even fifty years ago that control of the range through fencing was a prerequisite to management and improvement. Cotton observed that whenever the range is fenced and controlled by some individual stockman or company, the condition is immediately changed. This is a sweeping statement, but Cotton later tempered it with the observation that "fencing is not always sufficient." At any rate, Washington stockmen discovered that their range resources were not inexhaustible and that "getting there fustest with the mostest" was detrimental to their ranges and their pocketbooks. And when they also saw that a positive and constructive improvement program was necessary, range condition in Washington took a turn for the better.

##### *Mechanized Farming*

When tractor farming replaced horse power on the large wheat ranches adjacent to the ranges, a sizeable portion of the

grazing pressure from horses on Washington ranges was relieved. The state of Washington is a big wheat-producing state and in the days when all the farming work was done by horses the range on the fringes of the famous Palouse and Big Bend wheat country supported the horses in the months they weren't being worked. In many cases when these wheat farmers started buying tractors to do their work, a good many of them didn't immediately get rid of their horses but pensioned them off on grass. These broom tails along with the roaming "cayuse" constituted as big a range scourge as ever visited Washington range lands. As late as the early thirties, these worthless grass burners had eaten themselves into a dustbowl existence in the Horse Heaven country near Prosser. On a 200,000 acre block of range where Archie Prior, Stanley Coffin, and Frank Lenzie operate stock ranches, half, or 100,000 acres, would have formerly graded poor condition according to Frank Lenzie, a former range administrator for the Indian Service. That same 100,000 acres was classified in good condition in 1949 and 1950. The factor most responsible for this improvement was the shift from year-long use by countless wild horses and domestic livestock to carefully managed winter grazing. Today year-long use again prevails in the case of cattle, but it is done by moderate use and deferred and rotation grazing.

##### *Conservation Consciousness*

I like to interpret this as "grass consciousness" on the part of stockmen, although I realize that such a statement smacks as an insult to the rancher's intelligence. It is not intended as such, for this reason. Out of research and from experiences of practical stockmen has grown a vast body of information regarding range management and improve-

ment techniques. This information has been reaching stockmen through the many channels of communication and education available to them. The most important of these communications and educational mediums have been the effective and organized livestock operator groups such as county and state livestock associations and the groups formed under range improvement programs of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Stockmen in the state of Washington have recognized the need for a complete program of range maintenance and improvement.

The statement has been made that more has been done to manage and improve the condition of western grazing land in the last 15 or 20 years than at any time before. The statement is verified by the incontestable evidence furnished by an increasingly larger number of stockmen not only in Washington, but in other states as well.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There is good evidence that some important grazing areas in Washington are

in better condition today than they were reported to be in at the turn of the century. Washington ranges have improved because (1) the range has been brought under control through extension of private ownership and fencing, (2) the homeless horse has become a rare sight on Washington ranges, and (3) the conviction on the part of stockmen that the responsibility for the proper use of land under their control rests in their hands, and that better management pays off.

Great progress has been made toward the improvement of range condition. Even though present day range condition is superior to what it was 50 years ago, there is still much to be done before all the range lands in Washington are producing the kind of forage—ultimately meat—they ought to produce.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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