

Developing Effective Rancher and Range Technician Working Relationships

ARNOLD HEERWAGEN

Range Conservationist, Southern Plains, U. S. Soil Conservation Service

MANY range management graduates employed by governmental land-use agencies during the 1930 period were initially assigned to range survey crews or to positions concerned principally with the application of various range improvement practices such as range reseeding. Such employees generally were not required to work directly with ranchers on the strictly management phases of their operations.

More recently, an increasing number of range graduates are being employed in positions that require them to work closely with ranchers in developing technically sound and practical range management and improvement plans geared to the needs of individual ranching units. Experience indicates that such plans, to be effective, must be prepared with the full participation and concurrence of the rancher. The rancher and range technician pool their knowledge and experience to develop and carry out management plans which effectively correlate basic range management principles and practical ranch operation methods.

No range technician in this category can be expert in all of the detailed phases of the various plant and animal sciences involved in a complete ranch enterprise. Of necessity, he must be a general practitioner rather than a detailed subject matter specialist. He should be well grounded in basic range management principles and practices and in range ecology. He should have a good working knowledge of range livestock management practices and of ranch organization and operation methods.

It is only natural that some range technicians, newly employed in this type of work, are concerned about their ability to contact and establish satisfactory working relationships with individual ranchers. Some feel that the average rancher will think of them as too young and inexperienced for this type of work. Others feel that unless they can convincingly talk, dress and act like bona fide cowboys, they won't "fit in" with ranchers. To truly act and feel at home in ranching circles is certainly a desirable attribute, but, in itself, is not the only or final

criterion of a successful range technician.

It is not possible to draw up exacting specifications for a range technician who is to work directly with ranchers. Because of wide variations in individual personalities, what may be an attribute in one individual could conceivably be a detriment in another. However, field experience indicates certain qualifications that are desirable.

The ability to win friends and influence people is not equally inherent in all individuals. Regardless of the individual technician's ability along these lines, it is essential that he has a genuine sincerity of purpose, professional integrity, keen interest and tolerance. Ranchers do not automatically agree with all of the concepts proposed by range technicians. However, they are more inclined to respect the opinion of the man who is sincere and steadfast in what he believes to be true. Controlled but enthusiastic interest in range management is essential to continued professional self-improvement. Interest and increased knowledge go hand-in-hand. The range technician should continuously observe and interpret range problems. He should develop a sense of feeling at home on various kinds of rangeland and various range conditions. Such an understanding and feeling is essential if the range technician

hopes to make sound and practical interpretations of range management principles which otherwise might seem complex and theoretical to many ranchers. Tolerance for the opinion of the rancher and consideration of his experience is definitely necessary. In no sense of the word can successful management programs be developed by a one-way flow of information from technician to rancher.

An academic background of the nature provided by recognized range management schools and those providing closely related curricula, is of inestimable benefit to the technician who is to work directly with ranchers on range management problems. In no manner does this imply that high calibre range technicians have not been obtained or developed from other sources. A considerable number of professional range managers in this latter category, have developed into capable range technicians, by means of field experience and conscientious self-improvement. The so-called minimum curricula developed by the American Society of Range Management provide a well-rounded academic background for the kind of range technician herein considered. The value of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of

basic plant, soil and water relationships cannot be over-emphasized.

While still in school, the range management student should utilize every opportunity to gain practical field experience. Some schools offer valuable summer field courses. Governmental agencies frequently provide summer employment, in some cases on a student trainee basis. Ranch experience is invaluable to those students without a ranch background. While valuable experience can be gained from a variety of sources related to the field of range management, the student generally will profit most from positions closely related to his chosen phase of range work. If possible, the type of work should be selected in which field experience is most needed.

If, after graduation, the student is employed by governmental land-use agencies, he will be in a probationary or training period during the first year. During this period he should attempt to secure a comprehensive understanding of the overall program of the particular agency. However, he should also make every effort to obtain maximum experience in his particular field. Consultation with his supervisor and training officer is essential to obtain this objective. He should not hesi-

tate to "get his feet wet" in the field of rancher-technician relationships. This is the best method of determining what he needs to do to improve his abilities along these lines. When confronted with specific problems that are new to him, a frank "I don't know" is better than an incorrect snap judgment.

Range management and improvement plans jointly developed by ranchers and range technicians are not simply a matter of routine technical procedure. Many additional factors are involved in successfully carrying out such plans. Progress can not be measured directly in acres, structures or cubic yards. The technician must frequently "gird his loins" to avoid discouragement when all of his recommendations are not immediately effective. By objective self-evaluation he should analyze and improve his ability to present practical interpretations of range management principles and practices. He should make every effort to secure and utilize applicable quantitative data that indicate the value of the concepts he advocates. The extent to which ranchers rely on his judgment in technical problems pertaining to range management, is the measure of his success. His reward will show on the land.



General view of the Soil Conservation Service Nursery at Pullman, Washington, the center of development of conservation plant material in the Northwest. Photograph by JOHN L. SCHWENDIMAN, Pullman, Wash. First prize, Color Photo, Photography Contest at Omaha, Nebraska annual meeting.