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PROCEEDINGS

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SOME TRENDS IN THE WESTERN RANGE AREA

H. R. Hochmuth

Past Problems of Range Use. The history of the western range can be separated into three periods: (1) 1860-1890, the period of livestock expansion on range forage; (2) 1890-1930, the period of expansion of cropland culture; and (3) 1930 to date, the period of adjustment of a reduced fluctuating range forage supply to the cultivated feed supply. It is this latter period, and with the balancing of the feed and forage supply, that we are most concerned in this discussion.

The problems involved in using the public ranges and the complementary supplies may be viewed from two or more angles. One viewpoint holds there is no inherent instability in range use; that the large range have not been declining progressively; that the range grazing capacity fluctuates because of climatic conditions. The other viewpoint is that ranges have deteriorated because of over-stocking or improper seasonal operations, and a lack of range control which forced the operator to get to range as early as possible to graze the grass before his competitor. This is the historical perspective of two types of thought.

We might review briefly the reasons for the thinking of these groups. Livestock producers have sincerely felt that over all range deterioration myth, that it is only a local problem. They feel that the admitted condition of the range during the 1930's is due mostly to the drought period, and with the return of "normal" precipitation the situation correct itself.

The stockman's viewpoint is well put in a pamphlet published in which maintains that the major cause of recent conditions is the unprecedented drought, that the stockman dependent upon range not willingly destroy it. In instances where range destruction took place, it was due to inability to control the open range and to transient factors.

The conservationist's viewpoint grants that climatic fluctuation is the greatest deterrent to range stability but that the stockman has failed to realize its significance on a long-time basis. General overgrazing occurs on the range during drought periods, and the resumption of "normal" precipitation finds the range recovering more slowly than previous droughts.

Whatever the basis for argument as to causes of range deterioration--whether from extended drought or overgrazing--it is generally agreed

and When It Rains. The Stockman's View of the Range Question. American National Livestock Association. Denver, Colorado, 1938.

Western range reached the nadir of forage production in the middle. At the present time some degree of recovery seems evident, and is shared alike by conservationists and stockmen. The point is, in light of the above statement, how can we best apply our physical and information on range and livestock production in creating stability?

What is to be done? We have now entered a new era in the many eras of the Western range. The insistent cry that a great natural resource had been subjected to destructive exploitation has been muted by the Taylor Act. Sufficient information is now available regarding the nature and extent of the range resources.

The job is now one of attempting to equitably distribute the range resources, to determine the extent of the complementary relationship between the public range and private pasture and croplands. The determination of the extent of public range grazing privileges to be allotted to the public is by no means a small undertaking. Although a determination of the relationships between public range and private lands may be based on economic resources, the desired result is largely economic.

It would be unjust to accuse the range administrator of lack of interest toward range economic problems. He is faced constantly with the effect of his decisions on the livestock industry. An encouraging feature is the voluntary seeking of information by the range administrator regarding the economic implications of his programs. This is our challenge: Can the agricultural economist contribute to the stability of the range industry? In what fashion can we take the factual information collected by the range management technicians and convert it into workable practices on the range?

Certain difficulties are evident in our analyses of physical and economic relationships between public and private lands in range areas. A satisfactory method has been devised for determining the physical carrying capacity, i.e. grazing capacity, of the range under the varying conditions to be met over a number of years. Past records of animal numbers are always known or reliable. Furthermore, changing methods of operation and crop feeds have assumed greater importance in the year's feed program, which may confuse any determination of past numbers supported by rangelands.

On the economic side we lack information regarding the effect on farm production and income when reduction in range use is required on public lands. For many years there has been consistent reduction in stocking on public lands. We know what this reduction is in terms of months of forage, but do not know its effects on farm organization. The interest of the stockman in the economics of conservation is one of the significant trends in the range area. A recent survey by the Department of the Interior shows that the adjustments in the range area to meet war impacts supports this interest. The producer is less interested in increasing stocking on the range and more interested in increasing his turnoff. More stability and less fluctuation is now the program of the range area.