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FEDERAL RANGE LAND AND THE RANCHER IN THE INTERMOUNTAIN REGION

by

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The discussion here presented is broad in scope, but the chairman extended considerable license to those on the agenda discussing range and livestock problems. The general subject is, "Economic Relations of the Public Range in the Intermountain Region to the Livestock Economy of the Region." Any discussion of range economic problems is perforce linked with physical problems of range use. Therefore, this discussion of the rancher and the range, is a discussion of his environment, be it economic or ecological.

In the discussion to follow, I have borrowed freely from suggestions made to me by producers and by officials of public land agencies. Therefore much material contained in this paper is a synthesis of ideas relating to administration and use of the federal range lands.

The administration of federal range lands has been the subject of much controversy. According to the Forest Service the present controversial issues between the federal land management agencies and the stock industry are the culmination of objections stockmen have to restrictions on range use imposed by federal control. This dates from the creation of the first national forests in the West.

The controversy revolves around what constitutes best use of the range - whether the stockman is overgrazing the range or stocking it properly. However, it may be that the controversy goes deeper than that. It is a conflict of attitudes regarding planned use of resources by public agencies and is manifested by control exercised over certain activities of the stockman by the federal land agencies. Some of the points in controversy will be discussed in detail later. This paper will present no solutions to the disagreement as to ideas and attitudes between the federal land management agencies and the organized livestock industry, but the problem can be partially circumscribed and bared for discussion.

The Typical Rancher

One might briefly describe the "typical" cattle ranch and sheep ranch in the Intermountain Region. If all ranches were averaged the ranch described would be much smaller. A description of the typical sheep ranch is fairly standard. Although economic sheep operations vary from 500 to 25,000 or more ewes, the typical operation is of one band size. Approximately 2000 to 2500 head is a typical range sheep operation. An operation of this size owns about 4000 acres and leases about 3000 acres. Most of the acreage is range land but about 125 acres of crops are grown, mostly wild hay with some alfalfa and small grains. 1/

The typical sheep outfit is licensed or permitted to graze about six months on public domain and three months on national forest. During the six

* This paper represents the personal opinions of the author.

1/ From an analysis of individual ranch schedules, 1945 Census of Agriculture.

months on public domain about 20-30 percent of the use is on intermingled private lands mostly on spring-fall range. The average migration between seasonal ranges is about 75 miles and consumes about three weeks each year.

The permanent family-type one-band sheep operation probably has benefited a great deal from the administration of the public domain. Perhaps less so than the cattleman. The Taylor Grazing Act eliminated the tramp sheep outfits and granted some stability to the use of winter range. Also it protected the cattle spring-fall range from roving bands of sheep.

The sheepman is less interested in final disposal of the public range than the cattleman - at least he is less vocal in that respect. He is against raising of grazing fees especially on his winter range because of its extremely low grazing capacity. He feels, however, that it would not be to his advantage to purchase his winter range. Generally he is satisfied with the present situation of public domain lands, barring the question of grazing fees. Sheep operators still protest protection reductions on national forests, and in many instances, because of the organization in bands, and high fixed costs, any reduction in numbers causes a serious financial loss.

The typical cattle ranch in the Intermountain Region has approximately 210 head of all cattle. Land owned is around 1400 acres and land leased about 600 acres. About 210 acres of land is cropped, half being in wild hay and a third in alfalfa and tame hay. About 20 acres are in small grains. 2/

The typical cattle ranch is licensed for about six months on public domain, mostly spring-fall and summer use. The public domain use is on and off with about 68 percent public domain use and 32 percent intermingled private land use. The length of range use depends greatly on the weather, varying from year to year. About four months use is obtained from national forests with only a minor use on intermingled private lands. The remainder of time is spent in winter feeding. The typical cattle or sheep operator, as indicated above, is greatly dependent on forage from public lands to round out his yearly operation.

The individual cattleman is represented by a strong livestock organization. Generally speaking the larger livestock interests are usually the spokesmen for the organization. The spokesmen for the cattle organization have gone on record as favoring sale of the public domain at nominal rates to the present range users. The smaller operators are somewhat apprehensive and hesitant about embarking on such a program, and there are large segments of the industry that are unalterably opposed to this suggestion. Further, the cattle operators are split on such questions as combining the public land agencies. On the question of higher grazing fees they are of one mind - "agin it."

This then is a short description of the typical cattle or sheep operation in the Intermountain Region. As I see it, the typical operation really is the commercial family-size outfit. It includes most of those operations of which cattle or sheep is the dominant enterprise. These are the people who as a group will be most greatly affected by future trends in range administration and public range policy. They are the people we should keep in mind in the discussion to follow.

2/ op.cit.

Conflicting Viewpoints

The western rancher is by nature an individualist, he is likely to oppose anything that to him savors of regimentation - especially when applied to his economic activities. He believes that he is a practical conservationist, especially of wild life, perhaps less so of soil. He does not generally admit to any serious soil and plant cover depletion of his ranges except possibly during drought years. He might make an exception for some spring-fall ranges. To him, conservation essentially consists of getting by in the dry years and making up for it in the favorable years. He frequently makes the statement that he has to be a conservationist or he would have to go out of business; that he could not continue to overgraze his ranges year after year without finally ending up bankrupt and with the range forage account overdrawn. However, some stockmen do admit to poor range condition and soil depletion, and have made voluntary reductions in numbers of stock and have instituted range improvement programs and more efficient management practices.

These are the general viewpoints held by most stockmen in questioning public range land administration. Now what are the specific viewpoints? One could not name them in order of relative importance because all seem to be of pressing importance. Most of the complaints bear on him in one way or another. It is not my province to give here a history of the Grazing Service (now Bureau of Land Management) or the history of grazing fees - that perhaps will be done in another paper. However, much of the difficulties of the Bureau of Land Management are directly traceable to the question of the grazing fee. The average stockman did not, and probably now does not object to some administration of the public domain by the Bureau of Land Management. He does not object seriously to the principles of stocking or grazing capacity projected by that Bureau. He objects principally to the raising of grazing fees, and he fears that increased fees will result in more administration which will be followed by greater fees.

It is not my intention to discuss the larger questions of land costs, full forage cost, or the equalization of land charges by manipulation of grazing fees. The subject of fees and administrative costs and land charges perhaps will be discussed by this group in round-table session.

For many years the livestock organizations worked for some effective control of the great public domain. In 1934 they got it and for a short time the honeymoon was on. But as time passed the administrators of the Taylor Grazing Act and livestock organizations saw things differently. In the beginning no great mention was made of that statement in the Taylor Grazing Act "pending final disposal of the public domain." Now the national cattle and sheep associations have endorsed the idea of disposal of parts of the public domain to private ownership. They have organized a joint committee to suggest proposed legislation. However, there is such a variance of ideas among stockmen that the joint committee has deferred any recommendation for legislation pending hearings in the West this fall by the subcommittee of the House Public Lands Committee.

The stockman protests the continued reduction in permitted numbers, particularly on the national forests. There is disagreement between actual users and the Forest Service as to the proper grazing capacity of the land and the proper grazing dates. Many cases in point can be found in hearings before the Senate subcommittee on public lands and surveys.

Now what is to be done, how can methods be devised to bring these diverse viewpoints into harmony? The livestock operator maintains that grazing capacity

standards as set up by public agencies are something of a myth and bear little or no relation to the true grazing capacity of the land. He has small belief in utilization standards that say his range is overgrazed when his stock get fat. The public agencies counter with examples of overgrazing such as some of the watersheds on the Wasatch front where disastrous floods have occurred. The livestock producer suggests that the range land administrator does not know what long-time grazing capacity is and that much more depends on rain than on any other factor. He says that with almost 40 years of national forest administration, protection reductions are still being made and that in many instances the national forest range is in no better condition than surrounding range. These reductions in numbers of stock on national forest ranges have been as high as 50 percent in some areas and further reductions are contemplated.

In reply to these contentions, the range administrator says that protection reductions have always been opposed by the livestock industry. As a result of this, reductions made in the past have been the result of compromise. The consequence has been continued range deterioration requiring more drastic reduction in livestock numbers on public range. The administrator has further urged range users to improve livestock management and handling on the range. He maintains that considerable range deterioration can be attributed to some inefficiency in handling livestock on the range.

A viewpoint as to overgrazing is stated by the president of the American National Livestock Association. "...It occurs to us that the Forest Service has overemphasized grazing abuse and has relied almost entirely upon the easy methods of cuts in range use with too little attention to possible methods of range improvements and an appropriate balance as between domestic livestock and wild life." 3/

The subject of wild life introduces another factor on which there is considerable disagreement. The livestock organizations maintain that the public agencies have allowed the big game population in some areas to increase to the point where it is stangulating the economic life of the stockman. The stockmen claim that in many instances on national forests the reductions in animal units of livestock about equal the increase in animal units of big game. Research has not fully established the points upon which livestock and big game compete for yearlong forage. The exact degree of competition is unknown. But a known and obvious competition is apparent on the big game winter range. This range is normally spring-fall livestock range. In this area of competition is found the weak link in the chain of integration of big game and livestock on the range.

The public land administrators in general, insist that they are managing all lands for the greatest good and the greatest number. As such, they must heed the demands of the wild life and sportsmans' organizations for preservation of the big game or maintenance of sufficient numbers for satisfactory hunting. It must also be remembered that the United States owns the land but the states own and exercise control of the game thereon. Many times the public land administrator cannot move as rapidly as he would wish in the direction of reducing game numbers. He must deal with state laws and public opinion.

Disregarding the question of grazing fees and the value of the forage harvested from public lands, the principle disagreement comes from the question of what constitutes grazing capacity, what constitutes indicators of overgrazing, and standards of range utilization. The Forest Service presented its viewpoint

as to the condition of the western range in Senate Document 199. The American National Livestock Association countered with the pamphlet, "If and When It Rains."

One can appreciate the position of a public land manager. He is entrusted with the mission of protecting a public resource. Soil in itself is an irreplaceable resource and the Nation cannot afford to gamble on the loss of this basic resource. It is protected by the plant mantle, and the public land administrator is attempting to preserve that plant cover. Where the lands include high watershed values his is the job of protecting the water supply for people and lands in the valleys. In some areas the watershed values are so great that all other land uses must become subordinate. Elsewhere, watershed values are not so obvious and other values may be concomitant with them.

The stock interests maintain that they can have no economic stability if they are faced frequently with reductions of their herds on the public lands. Sometimes extreme fluctuations in precipitation forces liquidation, but that is a gamble which must be taken. Their position is that the range is not retrogressing, but is maintaining itself - not of course in its pristine condition, but in a satisfactory condition - except in periods of low forage production. And even then, "normal" precipitation brings the range back to adequate forage production and soil protection they believe.

A contrary argument is made that if livestock operations were well-balanced there would be little need for reductions in livestock as all segments of the range would be properly stocked and in good condition. This argument overlooks the fact that most of the ranges are seasonal in character and the ranch may be unbalanced by poor forage conditions on one range and have plenty of grass on another.

How do the stockmen support this position? They point out that their turn off - the weights of lambs, and calves, and wool - is greater than previous production. They say all of this cannot be attributed to increased efficiency of breeding, and that if the ranges had deteriorated to the point alleged they could not even maintain previous levels of turn off. Then as his clincher the stockman states that he must be by necessity a conservationist or he cannot stay in business.

How can we collate the foregoing with the research of the plant ecologists and botanists? Research indicates that the climax cover of the region contained certain plants and associations and now the cover has changed to subclimax or less. It is pointed out that sagebrush has encroached on vast areas of bunch grass range and the principle cause can be attributed to grazing or overgrazing, if you like. Much land supports annual vegetation such as cheat or broncho grass - invaders from fire or overgrazing. The range managers tell us that a stable grazing economy cannot be predicated on an invading annual grass range in the Intermountain Region.

Here, in brief, is a resume of the conflict of ideas on the use and status of this western resource. Of course the problem has not here been stated in its entirety. The physical factors of land management are complex. However, in general the land administrator looks at the range from its physical aspect and the rancher thinks first of the economic aspect, that is, his dollars and cents return. Here is a fallow field for the agricultural economist, the land economist, and the range economist.

Range Economic Studies

Much of the difficulties and problems that have been enumerated above are owing to lack of application, understanding, knowledge, and gaps in our research activities. A competent body of knowledge has been constructed by the range management specialists. Their studies of ecological and watershed influences have shown us much on the physical management of land. But the actual range management research i.e., the use of this land as an economic activity, is rather scant. Aren't agricultural economists and social scientists much behind the physical scientists in contributing to the solution of problems of range land use, particularly where large areas are in public ownership or under a complex ownership pattern?

It is true that numerous ranch organization and enterprise efficiency studies have been accomplished. These studies are organized to answer questions of organization, costs, and returns on ranches. But they do not answer many of the perplexing economic questions of land use; integration of land ownership, type of land use, seasonal use of ranges, just to mention a few. Perhaps it is a provocative subject, but certainly studies aimed at determining the economic effect of public land administrative policies would help us and the administrator to understand better the position of the stockman. One has but to talk to the average rancher to discover his feeling of frustration at having his means of livelihood reduced by depletion of his range resource, by reduction in livestock grazed on public land or shortening of his season of use. Even though reductions are necessary for purposes of soil conservation, the rancher's economic problems of adjustment remain with him.

Studies made in the yearlong range area indicate that it is highly profitable to stock properly, or even below fall grazing capacity. But on seasonal ranges we have not yet convinced the rancher of what is proper stocking. The problem of proper use of seasonal ranges is most difficult to solve because one overgrazed seasonal range may be the weakest link in the yearly operation and the rancher has no apparent alternative but to continue over using this range.

I am not taking a position on this matter, but I do plead for types of research that will aid the stockman to adapt and adjust his operation to desirable land use and will guide the land administrator in applying any necessary adjustments. Perhaps some research already accomplished can be adapted to solving these perplexing questions.

The economist can aid in the application of multiple use concepts to range lands. And when reference is made to range lands a considerable acreage of wild lands in the Intermountain Region is included. Few situations exist where use of the land is exclusive. The exclusive use of land results from demands by larger interests than the immediate users of the land. The principle example, of which everyone is cognizant, is found in lands of high watershed value. Generally lands of exclusive use occupy a minor portion of the range land area, unless the desert sheep ranges are considered exclusive by reason of physical factors. It is with the lands of multiple use that we should be most concerned, I should say.

An administrator of multiple-use lands generally assigns a priority of use to the lands under his direction. In addition he knows that the lands generally can be adapted to several uses at the same time. The land economist should have some interest in the priority of assigned multiple use. Personally, from highest to lowest use, I would assign them as follows: (1) Watershed protection (soil conservation), (2) recreation, (3) free access, (4) mining, (5) crop production, (6) timber production,

and (7) grazing. Many will take issue with this array.

That grazing is placed at the bottom of the list should not alarm the rancher. I would give grazing the lowest priority because of its extensive character. Grazing lands have low productivity and generally the large areas of grazing lands have no alternative measurable economic use. If the requirements of watershed protection and wild life are met (whatever they are) grazing has no other competition for the use of the land.

Economic research should lead to further analysis of size of unit that is most dependent on extensive grazing land. Coexistent with this type of research would be an analysis of possible changes in ranch organization in areas where seasonal ranges are not well-balanced. What do we know about minimum size of units to use public ranges efficiently? A persistent and difficult problem for the Forest Service is the large number of small permittees on some national forests, which are livestock enterprises well below any economic minimum for extensive range use.

The Forest Service has attempted in every possible manner to assist these small permittees to obtain a satisfactory economic status. However, available range is limited and there is a point beyond which reductions cannot be applied to economic operating units to obtain increases for extremely small units. It now seems apparent that this policy has been detrimental to all concerned and does not aid in raising or maximizing the income of the area. Economists should continue with renewed vigor the effort to seek new alternatives of intensive enterprises as a substitute for the small extensive range livestock enterprise.

We have not begun to explore the full economic use of wild lands as a source of revenue. Income to land from grazing can be measured with some accuracy - the same applies to timber cutting, mining, and like activities. But in recent years with increase in population, higher living standards, and more leisure time for recreational activities, persons other than the immediate users or occupants of wild lands are making tremendous demands on those lands. To my knowledge we have offered little to methods of measuring the income to lands or to an area from use of these lands for recreation in all of its aspects. The economic features of wild life as a revenue producer in this region are untapped. Perhaps here is a field in which we can assist to maximize income in areas where the range livestock enterprise is so small and the population pressure on the land so great.

Range reseeding, principally on the depleted spring-fall ranges has come into prominence recently. Years of research now bear fruit in showing what grasses to reseed on what soil types and in what plant associations. But the reseeding normally requires exclusion of stock for a certain period. Do we have any information on how the rancher can reorganize to aid the restoration of his range? Do we have any costs figures on reseeding? Not actual costs of revegetating the range, but the results in actual ranch income?

More or better information is needed on the economics of range land conservation. What types of land should be in, or revert to, private ownership and what types should remain in public ownership? On lands with no great watershed values, is it heresy to entertain the idea that it might be desirable that they be in private ownership? The Federal Government has let lands more valuable than these go to patent in the westward development of the Nation. Of course these are not proposals for action. They are points offered as examples to indicate that without adequate information it is difficult to know what avenues to follow.

For some time now the Federal Government has subsidized conservation on private lands for the benefit of all and certainly for the benefit of the land owner or user. Some may raise the question as to whether it would be desirable to propose payment (charged to conservation) to ranchers who must take protection reductions on public lands? The individual user of our public range lands usually suffers economic loss by reductions but the Nation gains. We do not have an adequate research program organized to study methods of aiding the rancher and alleviating the economic losses suffered by public range land users in order that our national soil heritage may be preserved.

One could go on with this list of desirable research on our public range lands and the economic stability of the users of these lands. Economic knowledge is meager and lags way behind the mountain of facts presented by the physical scientists in their attempt to aid the administrator in managing the public range lands. Economists have something to offer both, the public land manager and the rancher. Never was the question of desirable range economic research more timely.