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## **Federally Owned Rangelands: Are There New Grounds for Common Ground?**

**Mark Rey**

*US Department of Agriculture  
Washington, DC*

I would like to thank the Wildlife Management Institute for providing me the opportunity to speak today about a subject that has become increasingly contentious over the past several years—the stewardship of America’s federally owned-rangelands. I believe that you are an excellent test audience for what some will consider revisionist thinking.

While conflict is not a preferred state for humans, it is, nevertheless, not unusual on the range. Indeed, the range wars of the late 1800s and early 1900s are an important part of American folklore and the western identity.

Today, we have recreated the range wars, using less violent, twenty-first century means, but involving equally passionate views and similarly implacable foes. While some advocates vigorously defend a historic land use, others argue with increasing vehemence for sharp reductions—or even a complete cessation—of such uses, dismissing an entire lifestyle as nihilistic. In the face of such apparently intractable antagonism, some have predicted, with unseemly enthusiasm, the eventual sunset of federal land grazing. Others have advanced the seemingly enlightened idea of buying federal grazing leases as a better approach to improving publicly-owned range habitats.

In my short time as a political appointee responsible for federal range management, I have enjoyed some—and endured many—agency briefings. These briefings typically begin with exposition, followed by a series of findings with conclusions based upon those findings. The process ends with a recommendation with which any responsible person would have little choice but to agree. The inevitability of the process is often enhanced by two or three interruptive phone calls on unrelated subjects and a handy memorandum with an empty box in need of a check-mark.

Over the past few months, I have, with increasing frequency, come to rely upon the use of a single, simple question as a talisman to resist the

hypnotically directed impulse to check the box for option 1. This simple question is: “OK, and then what?” What will happen after we set forth on the recommended—actually, the only logical, no, the surely inevitable—course of action?

As we visit today, many of us have either mentally, figuratively or literally checked the box, pointing toward sharp reductions in federal land grazing. The Forest Service may check the box in the Northern Great Plains National Grasslands. The Defense Department seems to check it here in Texas at Fort Hood.

OK, and then what? Well, the direct answer, as the memos clearly point out, is that we can expect improved federal rangeland conditions with concomitant wildlife benefits. It should be obvious. But, the intellectual elegance of asking “and then what” is that the obvious answer usually begs the next, most important questions: What are we giving up, what are we gaining in return and, if we are not satisfied, is there a better way? With your indulgence, I would like to explore these three questions.

## **What Are We Giving Up?**

The new range wars have been fought with lawsuits rather than Winchester. Hoofed animals still perish. But now-a-days, they are sacrificed to make the briefcases needed by the lawyers who file these lawsuits. Some of the lawsuits are from ranching interests, but they are mostly from those who argue for a cattle-free range.

This ongoing conflict has obscured the fact that grazing is, perhaps, the most fundamental and historic of the multiple uses mandated by law for the federal lands, including the national forests. Most people do not realize that range was far more important than timber for the early US Forest Service.

Ranch families and Forest Service families have shared the same communities for almost five generations. Many of the ranch families were there first. When the Forest Service came into the country in 1905, we depended upon the cooperation of local ranching communities. The works of a number of western writers vividly illustrate the early cooperation between ranchers and the Forest Service.

For example, the Montana writer, Ivan Doig, argues for the rightness of the national forests through the fictional words of an early homesteader. In his

seminal work, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (1996), a sympathetic homesteader observes that, “the national forest was actually the pattern of homesteading, the weave of the land and utility, writ large: lives of logic laid upon the earth, toward the pattern of America. A quilt piece of mountains and grass and water to join our work-worn squares of homestead. The next necessary sum in trying to keep humankind’s ledger orderly.”

Today, the Forest Service manages about 75 million acres of rangeland. That is 40 percent of the National Forest System. In 2000, there were 7,494 permittees on the national forests and grasslands, which includes about 25 percent of the roughly 20,000 small ranchers in the West. In 2000, our permittees grazed almost 2.2 million animals, including cattle, horses, burros, sheep and goats.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, however, we have lost some of the connection between ranch families and Forest Service families. We will continue to lose more of it as litigation becomes our principal means of dialogue. Unfortunately, the public grazing issue is fast becoming to the livestock industry what the spotted owl was to the timber industry. Can we learn from that and do better, or is this a desirable outcome? Worse yet, is it an inevitable process?

## **What Are We Getting in Return?**

That brings me to my second question: What are we getting in return? Unfortunately, the smoke from the public grazing issue has blinded many people to, what I consider to be, the most important environmental issues facing the West. That issues are urban sprawl and new development.

The West is the fastest growing and most urbanized region of the country. According to the last census, the top five states in terms of percentage growth in population from 1990 to 2000 are Nevada at 66.3 percent, Arizona at 40.0 percent, Colorado at 30.6 percent, Utah at 29.6 percent and Idaho at 28.5 percent. Also, more people in the West live in urban areas than in any other region. The West is also the region of the country with the largest percentage of public lands. Consequently, development pressure is concentrated on a relatively small portion of the available land base. The heavily targeted lands are flat and well watered—in other words, private ranchlands.

Studies have shown that most family ranchers want to stay on the land, but gradually are forced to sell. From 1982 to 1997, more than 3.2 million acres

of rangeland were developed for condos and ranchettes.<sup>2</sup> This fact has not garnered a lot of attention or concern. By contrast, entry into inventoried roadless areas, which have been released by state wilderness bills and which have certainly gathered attention, concern and controversy, has only totaled approximately 2.8 million acres during the same time frame. The pressure on ranchers to sell has been documented by Paul Rogers, a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter with the *San Jose Mercury News*. As Rogers states, “mounting debts, drought, and environmental lawsuits have taken a relentless toll on the roughly 20,000 small ranchers in the West.”<sup>3</sup> From 1988 to 1999, the number of ranchers leasing lands managed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management dropped by 19 percent.

The exurban growth into the wildland or urban interface—translation: the conversion of ranches into subdivisions—is a critical concern, which is driving a number of environmental and land management problems, including wildland fire policy, water rights conflicts and water quality degradation. The issue that concerns the most people here, though, is wildlife. So, let us talk about that. The subdivided ranchland often contains critical habitat used by many species. For example, large animals, such as elk, use national forest lands in the summer and migrate to lower elevations in the fall. They need private rangeland at lower elevations to survive harsh winter conditions.

As ranchers are forced to sell, the winter range for wildlife is being fragmented and lost. The net effect is that we lose habitat needed to maintain viable populations of native wildlife. But, large ungulates are just one example. As ranches turn into ranchettes, as rural subdivisions erupt across the West, many native species are declining and being replaced by species adapted to human habitations. One scientist who has studied the problem is Richard Knight, a wildlife conservationist at Colorado State University. He states: “Rather than lark buntings and bobcats, we will have starlings and skunks. Rather than rattlesnakes and warblers, we will have garter snakes and robins. Is that the West we want?”<sup>4</sup>

I think the answer is no. I think most Americans want to conserve our heritage of the West. Americans want to conserve native species, but they also want to conserve the tradition of family ranching. They do not want to force people off the land, giving them nowhere to go and no hope for the future. We need to conserve our western wildlife and our western lifestyle. Both are part of what it means to be American.

## **Is There a Better Way?**

That statement brings me to my third question: Is there a better way? I believe that the greatest environmental contribution I can make is to foster initiatives that keep private ranchlands in ranch family hands and out of developers' plans. Fortunately, I oversee two agencies that can contribute to that objective.

## **Natural Resources Conservation Service Initiatives**

With the Farm Bill now before Congress, the Natural Resources Conservation Service will have increased opportunities and resources to do a couple of things, which are important to the objective of keeping private ranchlands in the ranchers' hands.

One of these opportunities is the new grassland option that is included in both House and Senate versions of the 2002 Farm Bill. This option is a counterpart to the existing Farmland Protection Program, which utilizes perpetual easements. The grassland versions call for options ranging from ten years to perpetual easements. We do not have the money to buy them in fee simple, nor to provide for perpetual easements on all acres. Nor do I think that it is necessarily a good idea. Circumstances can change a lot, and perpetuity is a very long time. Although the federal government will help fund the easements, they are usually held by local governments or nongovernmental entities such as the Nature Conservancy who provide funding for the local share. The Farmland Protection Program has proven to be both successful and popular in dealing with urban sprawl where the lands at risk are primarily cropland. When Congress passes the Farm Bill, we will have the capability of expanding the program to include grasslands—that is, ranchlands.

Another opportunity is the provision of technical and financial assistance to support rangeland improvements and to develop and implement manure management plans to address air and water quality concerns. Measures such as cross fencing, water development and distribution, and other rangeland improvement practices can help family ranch operations to remain financially and environmentally viable.

The manure management option will assist confined animal feeding operations to plan, install, and manage comprehensive nutrient management

plans that will be helpful in improving air and water quality. This is largely new territory for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), although after a few months in my present assignment, I am feeling increasingly expert in manure management.

Also, at the Administration's request, the bill offers a new program designed to encourage private capital to invest in farmland and rangeland protection. It will give NRCS the authority to work with agribusiness concerns. It will allow agribusinesses companies to use an agreed upon logo for marketing purposes, in exchange for their contribution to the farmland protection program and the purchase of conservation easements to reduce development pressures.

## **Forest Service Initiatives**

With regard to the Forest Service, we must more actively engage ranchers as partners. For that to occur, we will need to be reacquainted as friends. But, we will also need to overcome some of the procedural roadblocks to collaborative management that we have experienced in recent decades. If you agree with my assessment that the most immediate and significant threat to the environment in the West is urban sprawl, then let me suggest a ranching philosophy that ought to guide this endeavor—that is, anything that makes ranching more difficult, rather than more productive, deserves some healthy scrutiny.

We are reviewing our procedures under the National Environmental Policy Act and, along with our counterparts at the Department of the Interior, consulting out procedures under the Endangered Species Act. Our objectives include streamlining the decision making process to: (1) get decisions made more quickly and (2) better respond to new information and developments.

We especially want to encourage local collaborative stewardship efforts to reduce the number of conflicts that drive too many national forest decisions. That encouragement is a priority for me. The Forest Service is already engaged in some promising partnerships and initiatives.

## **Quivira Coalition**

The Quivira Coalition was started in Santa Fe, New Mexico about five years ago. When ranchers and environmentalists got tired of endless battles,

they decided to see whether they could work together and found that they could. Today, the coalition has about 850 members, evenly divided among ranchers, environmentalists and government land agency staff.

The Quivira Coalition has developed a concept called the new ranch, based on the radical notion that good ecology, good ranching, and good business go together. New ranchers do things like graze herds for shorter periods of time to give the land more rest. But before they got to that point, they had to get rid of tired, old preconceptions ingrained in all three sides by decades of conflict. All sides decided to “get back to the ground,” or see how the sun, rain, soils and other components of the land interact to make rangeland. All sides decided to forget about process and to focus on results.

The ranchers discovered that grazing is not always good for plants on every piece of ground. The environmentalists discovered that cattle-free range can be range headed for trouble, since grassland evolved with grazers and needs periodic disturbance to flourish. The ranchers learned that bare ground is the real enemy, not predators or environmentalists. And the environmentalists learned the need for respect to the ranching culture. Results, so far, are encouraging. Under new ranching, ranches are becoming stronger and more profitable; the range is becoming healthier and better able to support habitat for otter, elk and other wildlife.

## **Grassbank**

The other idea I hope you will endorse is the grassbank. The Malpai Borderlands Group, in southwestern New Mexico, started the first grassbank in 1994 on the 321,000-acre Gray Ranch. Ranchers bring their cattle to the grassbank, placing a conservation easement on their own ranch. The rancher gets to use an amount of grass equal in value to the easement. So far, the Malpai grassbank has protected 25,000 acres on five ranches. Ranchers have taken advantage of the rest period to complete restoration projects on their properties.

Based on the Malpai model, but tailored to public lands, a second grassbank, or a forage reserve, was founded in 1997. It is called the Valle Grande Grass Bank, and it is located on the Santa Fe National Forest, in northern New Mexico. It was started by a partnership led by a nongovernmental organization, The Conservation Fund. The partnership bought a local ranch and managed an adjacent 36,000-acre grazing allotment. Permittees from other



allotments can place their cattle on the Valle Grande allotment while their home allotments are rested and rehabilitated.

Twenty-one ranchers have participated so far, placing 1,065 cattle on the grassbank. It is an arrangement that fully integrates environmental and economic goals. It is also in line with the social and cultural traditions of the region. In fact, the grassbank idea is now spreading across the West. A Conservation Fund researcher has identified 22 different grassbank initiatives in 10 western states, reaching from New Mexico, to California, to Montana.<sup>5</sup>

The Valle Grande Grass Bank is a partnership that brings together people who usually do not spend a lot of time talking to each other—ranchers, environmentalists and the Forest Service agents. Like the Quivira Coalition, grassbank initiatives can help people bridge their differences for stronger ranches and healthier ecosystems. And, open, healthy rangelands are what thriving populations of native wildlife need more than anything else.

## **Southwest Conflict Assessment**

The Southwest has been the location of numerous contentious lawsuits on grazing issues. One of the major challenges facing the Forest Service, particularly in that region, involves the ability to continue to provide opportunities for livestock to graze while meeting legal obligations under the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and other environmental laws. In an effort to try and find resolution to these issues outside the courtroom, the Forest Service last year asked the Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (Institute) to conduct a conflict assessment on issues in the Southwest. The goal is to develop an understanding of the core interests of the parties involved in this polarized debate to enable the Forest Service to more clearly focus on those issues where negotiation and/or mediation might be successful. After interviewing over 70 people, the Institute identified, not only areas of disagreement, but many areas of agreement and common ground as well. The final report on this conflict assessment will be the basis for a follow-up workshop to be hosted by the Institute this summer, which will bring parties together to discuss the next important steps. There are several areas where there is wide agreement regarding grazing and rangelands. People find that they can work together on monitoring rangelands and the effects of activities, like grazing.

## **Roundtable for Sustainable Rangelands**

The Forest Service, along with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Agriculture Research Service and Colorado State University, has sponsored a significant effort, with over 30 partners, to develop criteria and indicators for determining what constitutes sustainable rangelands. By the summer of 2002, the Roundtable for Sustainable Rangelands will be more than halfway through the collaborative process of identifying indicators of sustainability, based on social, economic, and ecological factors to provide a framework for a national assessment of rangelands and rangeland uses. This effort will result in a report on the nation's progress towards sustainable rangelands in 2003.

## **Rangeland Vegetation Classification**

Congress has directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to charter a group to develop a 10-year plan for completing rangeland vegetation classification and standardizing methods for rangeland inventory and monitoring. Having all the agencies within these departments conducting work in a similar manner across multiple rangeland jurisdictions will move our nation ahead in understanding the state of our Nation's rangeland resources.

## **Invasive Species**

One of the issues which we are struggling to address with relatively limited support is the problem of noxious weeds on rangelands. The Forest Service has worked with many state organizations to stem this invasive tide and implement a combined strategy to combat this insidious problem on many fronts: prevention, education, detection, control, inventory, monitoring and research. The agency's noxious weed program funding has nearly doubled in the last year, from \$8 million to \$15 million due in large extent to organization and governments working together to bring remedies to this problem. At the same time, this issue—however critical on the ground—is suffering from lack of interest group attention.

Let me close by offering you my answers to the three questions I posed. First, what we are giving up is an irreplaceable part of both our natural and

cultural heritage. Second, what we are gaining in return—largely by default—is not something that will shine proudly upon our children when we are gone. Third, if we can coalesce our thinking around the biggest problem, there are ways we can work together to help ranchers and wildlife both stay on the land.

I sometimes think that decision-makers fail to ask “and then what” due to a sense of foreboding. Yet, this is the key question that dedicated conservationists have always insisted must be asked. Aldo Leopold was clear about this when he observed in 1939 that: “Conservation, therefore, is a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence or caution....I have no hope for conservation born of fear.<sup>6</sup> For Leopold, the answer never was to banish livestock from the land. It was, instead, to exercise skill and insight in grazing management. Through initiatives such as the Quivira Coalition and the grassbank, we can help people exercise skill and insight when managing the land based on what they have in common.

Let me reiterate what is at stake—nothing less than the future of our western lands and our western heritage. Rangeland is a renewable resource. Through new ranch techniques, for example, ranchers are finding that they can repair damaged land and restore lost habitat for wildlife. But, we cannot repair rangeland after it is gone—after it has been subdivided, roaded and converted into condominiums.

Let us work together to keep our ranchers on the land. As strong a wilderness advocate as Wallace Stegner saw a place for ranching on the land. In 1960, he stated: “I have known enough range cattle to recognize them as wild animals; and the people who herd them have, in the wilderness context, the dignity of rareness; they belong on the frontier, moreover, and have a look of rightness.<sup>7</sup> No one since has said it better.

## Endnotes

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2. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, *National Resources Inventory: Highlights, and Acres of Rangeland Converted to Developed Land, 1982-1997*, [http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/land/meta/m5\\_101.html](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/land/meta/m5_101.html).
3. Paul Rogers, “Bit Players Losing Home on the Range,” *Mercury News*, November 7, 1999, p. 28.

4. Sherry Robinson, "Finding Common Ground," *Albuquerque Tribune*, January 28, 2002.
5. Claire Harper, *The Grassbank Movement, 2001*, The Conservation Fund, February 6, 2002, p.5.
6. Baird, J. Callicott and Eric T. Freyfogle, eds. 1999. Aldo Leopold, The farmer as a conservationist. Page 164 in *For the Health of the Land*, Island Press, Washington, DC.
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