Range Fifth-Columnists

We, the people who use the range, are not the fifth-columnists to whom I refer, so hold your fire. We who live in this world have merely created the conditions making it possible for fifth-columnists to flourish, whether they be plants or animals.

My terminology refers to the great mass of so-called noxious weeds which invade our range lands. Their tactics are less scrupulous and more enduring than the human enemies of free men. They are just as difficult to cope with in the order of the plant kingdom as it is to deal with the plotting Communists of 1951 in the kingdom of man. They are a tough lot, unsurpassed in silent, unobservable infiltration tactics, and once established, they are here to stay.

About 60 years ago we reached our peak in the use of range by livestock in the United States. Since that time the peak load has been gradually reduced, and in many sections of the West the decline is still with us. For example, Oregon's sheep population reached an all-time high about 1910, with 2,700,000 sheep, almost entirely dependent on range. Today it is less than 700,000, and a large percent of these graze in relatively small pasture flocks on farms and ranches west of the summit of the Cascade Mountains. I am not questioning the fact that the peak load was probably far in excess of the ability of the range as a whole to carry, or the fact that many acres were unwittingly plowed and taken out of range production for a time, or the fact that our big-game load is much greater than it was 60 years ago. I am merely emphasizing the point that there was at least enough forage at that time to permit the development of a load far in excess of anything we could imagine carrying under present range conditions.

It has been estimated that of the 800 million acres or so of range in the
West, 500 million are in poor condition with uncertain trends in condition. If this estimate of condition is half accurate, there is and has been a whale of a lot of country made available for the settlement of the fifth-columnist horde of noxious and undesirable plants. And believe me, these invaders have used every opportunity to take over, to become permanently fixed as part of the landscape, and to expand in many instances at the expense of good, sound plant citizens. They are still aggressively at it.

Let's look at a few of the leading range fifth-columnists in the West. Our good old enemy St. Johnswort, alias Klamath weed, alias goatweed, and scientifically known as Hypericum perforatum, a native of France and England, arrived on the east coast of the United States in about 1700. Its first appearance in the West of record was near Ft. Seward, California, about 1900. Since that time it has done an effective expanding job. In 1913 it first appeared in the Snake River country north of the Wallowa Mountains in Oregon. In 1924 it was discovered on the Bison Range north of Missoula, Montana, and several years ago it was reported as far east as the headwaters of the Musselshell River in central Montana. Today this fifth columnist can boast of thousands of acres of range land as being well invaded in northern California, western and northeastern Oregon, and northeastern Washington along with adjacent Idaho. It is a rootstalk-producing perennial, is practically worthless as a forage plant, and is poisonous to all kinds of livestock; especially injurious to animals with white skin.

At the present time no comment on noxious weeds in the West would be complete without mentioning the most popular newcomer, Halogeton. This late arrival, which was discovered first near Deeth, Nevada, in 1935, has lost no time in becoming well established in the general areas east and south of that concerned with Klamath weed. Maybe the invaders have a treaty on territorial responsibilities. Since 1935 Halogeton has invaded in force the sagebrush and shadscale ranges in northern Nevada, southern Idaho, and northwestern Utah. It has a good toe hold in southeastern Oregon, northeastern California, a few counties in eastern Utah, and a spot or two in Montana and Wyoming. There has been much publicity on this plant and more will be written. It's an annual, is poisonous to livestock, is drought resistant, has very strong seeding habits, and looks somewhat like Russian thistle.

Halogeton and St. Johnswort are just two of the clan. There are many more. Some may be less spectacular in a regional sense but of more concern locally than the two mentioned culprits. Recently an Interagency Committee composed of representatives of state and federal land-managing agencies in the Columbia River Basin was organized to analyze the noxious-weed situation in the Basin. At its first meeting, the committee decided that over 20 plants were sufficiently important in their effect on cultivated and range lands to place them on the noxious list. A preliminary survey of national forest ranges in the Columbia River Basin revealed that over 500,000 acres are infested with these plants. I don't have the information on other lands in the Basin, but I know that this represents only a small percent of the total area infested.

There doesn't seem to be much question about the practicability of handling the situation on cultivated lands. It was said at the Western Weed Conference at Bozeman, Montana, several years ago,
“In most states, someone, somewhere, is doing something about weed control on cropland, but little is being done on range lands.” This may not be entirely true, but it does spell out in a very few words the crux of the situation. Many private operators and public land administrators are quite skeptical about the economics involved in the control or eradication prospects on range lands. Perhaps they should be skeptical. The costs are high, but I wonder about the basis for determining the economics?

For example, during the summer of 1950, a cattlemen using the Chelan National Forest grazed 500 yearling heifers and steers on his forest allotment. The cattle were weighed before they entered the range and again two months later when they were taken off. The gain amounted to 90,000 pounds of beef on the hoof. As you would suspect, the native mountain range which produced this average gain of 3 pounds per head per day is in very good condition and free of noxious plants. This is a lot of production for one range, especially at the present prices of beef. But now comes the pay-off: our red friend St. Johnswort was discovered last season for the first time in the Okanogan Valley in Washington which is the location of the headquarers ranch for the 500 grass-fat yearlings. In fact, one of the areas infested was actually on this operator’s ranch.

Now in determining the economics, do we assess the control charges to the few acres infested, or do we distribute it over all the adjacent range lands which are threatened? I vote for the latter. There is more at stake than just the few acres now taken over by this plant. The range economy of the entire valley is concerned. The problem is comparable to that with the human Reds. The best solution is to stop them before they get started, and to eliminate the conditions which are favorable for their development. This means that someone will have to do something now, and on a scale which will effectively nip the infestation in the bud and prevent its spread to other areas.

The Director of Agriculture for the State of Nevada told me that had sufficient funds been available in the late 30’s, he could have corralled and made our foe Halogeton impotent. Maybe yes and maybe no; I’m not sure that the job could have been done, but it would have been worth trying. At least the rancher in Idaho who allegedly went out of business because of this plant would have thought so. I don’t believe the eradication job after Halogeton was first found should have been the responsibility of the State of Nevada only. Also, I don’t believe it should have been left up to the landowner on whose land it was found nor to the railroad responsible for hauling the seed. The responsibility should rest with all of us, and the objective of the American Society of Range Management definitely places a responsibility on this organization.

There is not space enough here to prescribe a specific course of action to deal with these range plant fifth-columists, even if I had one to prescribe. However, I do believe that the seriousness of the situation justifies its consideration as a concrete project for the Range Society to promote and carry through to a satisfactory conclusion. In other words, the Society should chart the course and do what is necessary to get the job done.

Who knows when a new Halogeton or St. Johnswort will arrive? Perhaps we, the Range Society, should take a page from the book of the foresters of the
Northwest. Last year, by cooperative arrangement among private, state, county, and federal foresters, almost one million acres of spruce budworm infested timberland was successfully treated in Oregon and Washington. Perhaps this all-out approach is something to think about for the control of the noxious plants now absorbing range lands. Members of the Society should think it over. The problem is a real challenge to all of us.—Fred H. Kennedy, Assistant Regional Forester, Division of Range and Wildlife Management, Pacific Northwest Region, U. S. Forest Service, Portland, Oregon.

GRASSLAND FARMING

In the recently published Department of Agriculture appropriation hearings for 1952, the Honorable Charles F. Brannan, Secretary of Agriculture reports: "We need still greater emphasis on conservation and sound land-use practices. It is not advisable for farmers to plow up land which can better, or more safely be used for pasture. Nor should farmers endeavor to increase livestock production unless they have, or can reasonably expect to get, necessary feed supplies. Expansion of grasslands farming is needed both for the present and for agriculture's long-range future. We need more meat now. But we will need continued expansion of the livestock industry in the future. Grasslands farming helps produce meat and also preserves land resources."