Grassland Agriculture—A Challenge

The American Society of Range Management is dedicated to promoting progress in the conservation and greatest sustained use of soil and forage resources. Getting this job done will take more than our usual day-to-day operations: running a ranch, carrying out our duties as an administrator or technician, teaching a class in range management, or the variety of other activities in which our members use their time, their talents, and their energy on matters affecting the welfare of the range.

We need to translate this ideal into a practical goal—the establishment of a system of agriculture in this country that will strengthen our economy, better feed our people, improve our land, and support, not merely our present livestock numbers, but a vastly increased population of both cattle and sheep, in short, a grassland agriculture.

We have all heard about “grassland farming” in England, and the fine pastures of Holland, Denmark, and Switzerland. However, these are countries with small farms with more rainfall and they are able to use intensive methods. What would an agriculture built around grass and livestock do to our economy? What are the benefits that we would get from such a revolutionary change in our traditional history of land use? Let’s take a look at some of them.

Think what such a system of agriculture would do to that perennial headache—farm surpluses—the millions of bushels of wheat and corn that we can’t eat, and which in normal times we can’t sell at a profit on the world market. Some authorities still hope to find the solution to this problem in a planned economy and controlled markets. Others are convinced that we already have the facts to show that we can do away with this bugaboo of overproduction by turning these so-called surpluses into usable animal products. One study, for example, has shown that if, for each year during 1930–1948, we had only 1.75 percent increase in livestock in the United States, we would have had no surplus wheat. Less than a five percent increase in our livestock population would...
have taken care of all our corn, wheat, and other surpluses during this eighteen-year period.

What about improvement in the American diet? Nutritionists agree that well balanced meals should be based on animal products, supplemented with the protective foods, fresh fruit and vegetables. One famous nutritionist has said, "the average dog and cat in America is fed a more nutritious diet than are our children, not because we don’t know better, but because we have done so little about it." Statistics show that the United States has never produced enough in terms of animal products to provide more than half the nation with the kind of a high grade diet that could be provided if we geared our production to do the job. In simple language, this means that we need twice our present production of meat, milk, and other livestock products—a production we can hope to achieve only with a real grassland agriculture.

There is no question but that the demand for meat and other protein foods is increasing. The shorter work week and fewer working hours in much of business and industry are changing eating habits toward a reduction in the consumption of such foods as potatoes and cereals, and the use of more livestock products. Improved refrigeration facilities in rural areas and small towns, and better and more flexible transportation are also helping to increase the availability, and hence the demand for meat products of all kinds.

In thinking about the demand for meat, we had better look, too, at the number of people who are going to want it in the next few years. The population of this country has increased 19 million since 1940, and is expected to increase another 18 million or more in the next decade. This will necessitate producing more meat just to maintain the present per capita consumption.

How far can we go in applying this idea of an expanded, and improved grassland agriculture in the West—the West with its low rainfall, its periodic droughts, its thin and rocky soils, its steep slopes, its shortage of irrigation water?

What about the “countless slopes, once covered with a rich soil and dense cover of herbaceous and browse plants capable of profitably supporting millions of cattle and sheep, so wasted by sheet and gully erosion following depletion of the vegetation that they now support far less than half the number of livestock that once grazed upon them?”

What about the grazing capacity determinations made by all the leading agencies of two great Departments of the Government some years ago that “proved” that hundreds of thousands of acres of range lands are overstocked?

What about the “adjustments”—ranging up to total exclusion of all livestock believed to be needed on 5,000 of the 10,000 individual allotments on national forests?

In the face of all this, does anybody think livestock numbers on Western range lands can be materially increased?

We have all heard of “sit-down” strikes that hamper production and avoid the real issues. Are not “depletion,” “erosion,” “over-grazing” and “overstocking” equally descriptive of a “sit-down” attitude? Isn’t it high time we paid less attention to the ills and diseases of the range, and directed more of our energy toward measures to improve it? There is every reason to believe that the possibilities for such improvement are enormous.

Range condition surveys throughout the seventeen Western States during the past eight years have, for the first time, given us a pretty clear picture of some of these possibilities. These studies of the range have given us information on soil conditions, and a far clearer insight into plant changes than was provided by the
old range surveys. This more precise knowledge on range condition, which is now available in many areas, has shown us where to direct our efforts first, given us a pretty clear notion how much improvement can be expected, and enabled us to determine how much we can afford to spend on the job. The experience of several thousand practical ranchers has contributed to our knowledge of how to improve the range and produce more livestock. Collectively, they are far out ahead of the Federal agencies in some respects. As proof of this is the record that in the last ten years Western ranchers have successfully reseeded over 36 percent of the privately-owned lands that can be improved by this method, as compared with 6 percent of the reseeding job completed on Federal lands.

Recent production records in cropland agriculture furnish a good example of the progress that can be made where enough people set out to do the job. Six years ago, committees of some of our best agricultural experts in the land-grant colleges and the U. S. Department of Agriculture came to the conclusion that a fifteen percent increase in crop production could be attained. This despite the fact that yields had already been increased 25 percent over pre-war averages. In their judgment, this 15 percent increase was attainable by 1950. It was reached in 1948. Today the same group would undoubtedly add another 15 percent to their estimates of increases possible within the next five years. Despite the advances in insect and disease control, mechanization, good growing conditions, and more fertilizers, much of this increase came from improved managerial skill and more attention to conservation practices. Are not ranchers and range men of this country fully as competent?

These facts, and many others, lead to the conclusion that we are slowly working in the direction of a grassland-animal agriculture, an agriculture that will see our ranges in a vastly improved condition, supporting better livestock, and more of them.

The American Society of Range Management should meet this challenge and as professional range men, we should be in the forefront of that movement, leading it, and speeding its accomplishment. Let's open our eyes to the evidence all around us that ranges can be improved, that forage supplies and livestock production can be increased; and let's recognize the sizable accomplishments already made. Let's recognize that range improvement doesn't always have to start with livestock reductions. It may be just as easy—and more profitable—to increase the amount of forage. Let's speed up the job of interpreting the results of our own research, and be less conservative in adopting the methods and practices we have found will work. Let's have more faith—faith in Nature to aid us if we have the wit to work with her—and faith in our associates, technicians and stockmen alike, in putting our experience to the test.—F. G. Renner, Chief, Range Division, U. S. Soil Conservation Service, Washington, D. C.