

The Range Story of the Land Utilization Projects

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THE range story of the Land Utilization Projects is one of the unique segments of the history of range management in this country. This bold venture, encouraged by local people and carried out by them and their Government has involved the purchase and restoration of millions of acres of depleted and eroding lands. It has provided new opportunities for thousands of families, and, by vast changes in land use from uncertain crop farming to stabilized grass production, has furnished the basis for a healthy economy to approximately one hundred communities.

This activity is a part of the Land Utilization program originated in 1934 under the authority of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and in the beginning was planned and largely directed by the Land Policy Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Bureau of Agricultural Economics and, since 1938, by the Soil Conservation Service. It involved the reseeding of nearly a million acres of range land, the location and construction of thousands of water facilities, and thousands of miles of fences and other improvements to facilitate improved management. Of even more importance, however, is the fact that out of the experience of the Land Utilization projects came a practical system of cooperative management of grazing lands which, if not new, had never

before been practiced so successfully by any government agency.

You will recall that during the thirties, economic and climatic forces dished out some brutal treatment to farmers and ranchers in the Western states. This treatment was particularly severe on cash crop farmers, many of whom, encouraged by above-average rainfall, had settled in areas primarily adapted to a grazing economy. Several years of complete or near-complete crop failure and low prices forced many of these farm families to seek seed and feed loans and even direct relief. Many ranchers were also hard pressed, not only because of the low livestock prices and drought, but because homesteaders had moved into range areas and established farms on the grasslands upon which their herds and flocks had formerly depended. Such ranchers were forced to move their stock into the poorer and rougher areas or to find grass as best they could on a year-to-year basis. Many others were forced out of livestock farming into greater crop operations.

Those familiar with the characteristics of the land and climate in some of the areas where farming had recently encroached upon ranching territory reasoned that, on the average, farming of much of this land could not be successful. They also felt that as long as the farming of this unsuitable land continued, ranching would be seriously handicapped. From the standpoint of the national welfare, the protection of the land itself as well as the needs of the people required far-reaching adjustments in land use in many of these areas. The sub-

marginal land purchase and land use adjustment program was deliberately designed to restore some of these areas to the use to which they were best adapted.

ESTABLISHMENT OF PROJECTS

During the period 1934 through 1938, 34 projects were established in the Western range area and 5,774,643 acres of land, occupied by 3,262 farm families, were purchased. The Soil Conservation Service is administering 31 of these projects now located as shown in Figure 1. They comprise 5,778,138 acres, in-



FIGURE 1. SCS land utilization projects used for grazing.

cluding public domain lands which were transferred subsequently for administration along with the purchased land. The other three projects were transferred to the Bureau of Land Management of the U. S. Department of the Interior.

The lands purchased were mainly farms that were not suitable for farming, or farms not suited for a livestock operating unit headquarters because of location, size, or other factors. Portions of farms not suitable for cultivation were also purchased, and sometimes grasslands in unstable ownership or control were bought. The main objective was

to remove from farming use those lands not suitable for that purpose.

The job of converting the purchased land on those projects to grazing use and providing adequate water and fences to control grazing was a large order. Fortunately, adequate funds in the form of appropriations for work relief made it possible to complete the most necessary work during the early years of most of these projects. In later years, appropriations for this work have been less plentiful; hence, the projects initiated later, particularly those with major grass seeding problems in the Southern Great Plains, still have considerable unfinished work.

Fortunately, all of the land purchased had not been plowed. Furthermore, some of it had not been in cultivation for very many years and sufficient remnants of prairie grass remained so that the field returned naturally to grass cover and did not require seeding. Over 950,000 acres, many of them subject to active wind and water erosion, had to be reseeded, however, if the areas were to be restored to a productive condition. This was a monumental job of range restoration, the like of which had never before been attempted. At that time many experienced range men believed the only hope for recovery of these lands was by the painfully slow process of natural revegetation. They thought that artificial reseeding was practicable only on areas of higher rainfall with better soil conditions. The workers of the early agencies who set out to revegetate these barren lands deserve a tribute for their vision and courage. They were forced to develop their own seed supplies in many cases, design and put together suitable equipment, and often worked without adequate soils information and many other of the "tools" we take for granted today.

By the end of 1951, a total of 850,000

acres had been successfully seeded on these projects; only 100,000 acres remain to be seeded. Ninety-four percent of the needed water development has been finished with 4,479 water facilities installed and 244 additional ones to be completed. A total of 11,069 miles of fence have been constructed or rebuilt, with 1,112 miles remaining to be done. Figure 2 (left) shows a successful grass seeding under adverse conditions using a bait spreader followed by tandem disc drawn by crawler type tractor.

Government. We estimate that the land use adjustments on the nearly 6,000,000 acres of project land has influenced the use of at least twice that acreage of other land.

We, in the Soil Conservation Service, think that the objectives of the sub-marginal land purchase and land use adjustment program rest squarely on the success of proper land management. For that reason the management of these lands has been given special attention. The main objectives of this management

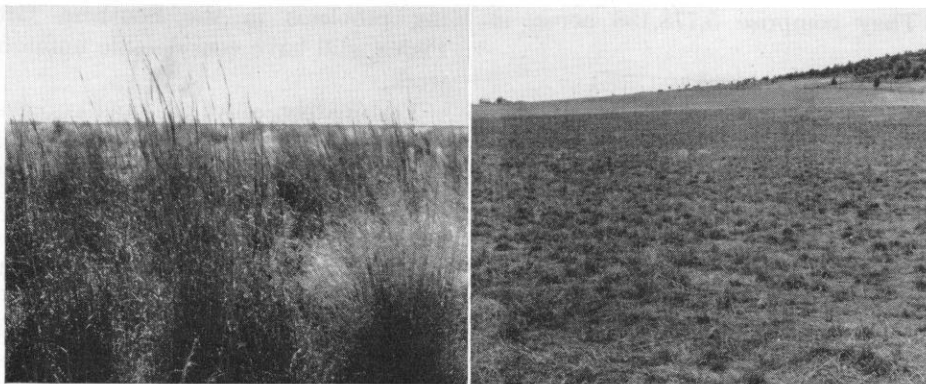


FIGURE 2. SUCCESSFUL GRASS SEEDING. *Left*—Sand bluestem and sand lovegrass on dune land three years after seeding. Dallam County, Texas. *Right*—A 10-year old stand of crested wheatgrass properly grazed. Jefferson County, Oregon.

During 1951 these projects furnished 1,567,000 animal unit months of grazing for livestock owned by approximately 4,480 stockmen.

The example set by personnel on the projects in seeding land formerly in crops to adapted grasses provided a tremendous stimulus to private landowners. It helped encourage them to change their operations to include smaller acreages of cash crops and larger acreages of grass and feed crops coupled with more livestock. Many of these conversions could not have been made, however, had not the private landowners had the assurance that they would have grazing during the summer months on the lands acquired by the

have been two-fold; first, to graze the land within its capacity to produce forage and improve or maintain its productive capacity, and second, to use the land in such a manner as to make a maximum contribution to a sound, permanent agricultural economy for the area. Figure 2 (right) shows a 10-year old stand of crested wheatgrass under proper management.

COOPERATIVE LAND MANAGEMENT

It was recognized at the outset that the use of the government land must of necessity be integrated with the use of the other lands in the community. This had the distinct advantage of spreading

the influence of the project over almost the entire areas within which lands were purchased rather than confining it just to the lands acquired. It also made it desirable to share the responsibility of management with the controller of the other lands and the users of the government land. These were primarily the same people. I will tell more about this phase of management activities later.

Since the lands were purchased mainly to assist in developing a sound permanent agriculture for the areas affected, we were interested in the use made of all of the land in a community. This interest led immediately to a consideration of the needs of the families controlling and using the lands to make a livelihood. Unless the individual families had the use of sufficient land resources to make an adequate living, using the land for the purpose for which it was best adapted, there would be the urge to use it too intensively. This would eventually result in a distressed condition for both the land and the people and be detrimental to a sound permanent agricultural economy. Therefore, special provision was made to help families remaining on the privately-owned lands in an area to secure grazing permits on sufficient land to make an adequate living under average conditions. For lack of a better term, these families were referred to as adjustment cases and the preferences given them were called adjusted preferences.

Since many other families were dependent upon the acquired lands because of location, previous use or other factors, recognition was also given to prior use and the need for use of government land in order to round out a practical livestock farming operation.

In order to prevent any one operator from getting an excessive share of the grazing furnished by the government lands, certain limitations were estab-

lished as to the maximum amount of grazing to be furnished one operator. These procedures for adjusted preferences and limitations on the size of preferences have been effective in accomplishing objectives of the projects.

As pointed out earlier, the fact that the use of government land should be integrated with the use of privately-owned land in an area made it apparent that responsibility for the management of government land should be shared with the controllers of the private land, most of whom were also users of the government land. Another condition which encouraged the local assumption of certain managerial functions was the intermingled ownership of summer ranges. Some projects or parts of projects were a conglomeration of government purchased land, public domain, county-owned land, state land, privately-owned land, and railroad and other corporate-owned lands. To provide any semblance of management in some cases required that all of these lands be controlled by one organization. The best possible solution seemed to be to get the users to organize into a co-operative grazing association or a state grazing district. In some cases Soil Conservation Districts assumed this function.

Some state legislatures passed enabling legislation providing for the formation and operation of state grazing districts, encouraged by those in charge of the submarginal land program and others. Many of you are familiar with the Grass Conservation Act of Montana, under authority of which state grazing districts may be formed and operated under relatively detailed rules and specifications as to the rights and obligations of the districts and their members. In other states the enabling legislation is less specific and does not establish any supervisory organization such as the

Montana Grass Conservation Commission, which is authorized to guide and adjudicate certain actions of the districts.

In the opinion of the Soil Conservation Service, it is not only desirable but necessary that local users and organizations participate in the management of federal grazing lands, if that management is to be most successful. Nor should this participation in the responsibilities of management be confined to those areas with a heterogeneous pattern of land ownership. This same approach has been used with equal, if not greater, success for areas where the acquired lands are not intermingled with other land. The point I want to make clear is that the Service leases these lands to organizations of users, including Soil Conservation Districts, because we believe the job of proper land management can best be accomplished in this way. This approach has had more than 10 years of trial in many areas. We believe its success will become more and more apparent and convincing as time goes on.

During 1951, a total of 4,708,495 acres of the 5,777,707 acres within the 31 projects under discussion were leased to 53 local grazing districts, grazing associations, or soil conservation districts. This is more than 81 percent of the lands within these projects. We are also using this same approach in other projects which involve several kinds of land use, including grazing, forestry, and recreation.

With such evidence that the Soil Conservation Service is sold on a system of cooperative management of federal grazing land, you will doubtless want to know the advantages as they appear to us.

We think the advantages of operating through an agency composed of local users may be summed up as follows:

1. It provides a means for bringing

together under one control the land under various ownerships that many of the stockmen in an area depend on for summer grazing. This is particularly helpful where common grazing is involved. It enables the stockmen to deal with one office or agency in securing their summer grazing instead of dealing with one or more public agencies and several private landowners. The landowners are also better satisfied since a larger proportion of this land is leased every year and the receipt of rental payments is usually more regular and certain, particularly in the less favorable years.

2. It tends to make the project more of a local activity and less of a federal activity. With the land leased to an organization of permittees, the directors and many of the members soon begin to look upon the management of the land (including control of trespass, determinations regarding rate of stocking, granting of permits, maintenance of facilities, etc.) as being as much their responsibility as that of the federal bureau.

3. The permittees first look to their own organizations to correct things with which they are dissatisfied. Many of the local problems can be more effectively ironed out by the directors of the local organizations than by a representative of the Federal Government.

4. The directors are frequently natural leaders within the community and, therefore, the permittees are more likely to accept decisions made or agreed to by the directors than decisions handed down by Soil Conservation Service representatives, or representatives of any other federal agency.

5. With all the land under the control of one agency, a more effective check on unauthorized use is possible.

6. Problems of dissatisfactions which sift through the directors are more likely to be presented in correct perspective

than when received and analyzed directly by project conservationists.

7. Range management plans, including such practices as utilization checks, determinations as to rate of stocking, distribution of stock, rotation grazing, etc., are worked out with the directors of the permittee organization. Many of these men can and do contribute valuable information, experience, and recommendations on these management details. The Service collaborated by furnishing the necessary technical information. The resulting joint determinations are more generally accepted than if made by Soil Conservation Service personnel alone.

8. The directors, in explaining to the permittees the practices agreed upon, can make many more range conservation converts than can one project conservationist. Our aim is to make every permittee a conservation rancher so that all of the land he controls will be used in accordance with good range management practices, not because he has to, but because he believes in it and wants to. Under such a circumstance, a stable agricultural economy for the area is assured in so far as the condition and use of the land resources can influence such stability and prosperity.

HOW WELL IS SYSTEM WORKING?

The proof of the pudding, of course, is in the eating. There are a few areas which are being managed directly by the Soil Conservation Service that are making more progress toward good management than some of the areas leased to organizations of users. These exceptions have not shaken our faith in this approach to land management.

It also is true that some boards of directors of local organizations have objected to certain terms of the leases, particularly those terms requiring that the lands be managed according to Service

policies regarding use, distribution of use privileges, and the like. We believe these requirements are fundamental in accomplishing the purposes for which these projects are established. Also, we believe just as strongly that such policies can safely be discussed, and, if conditions justify, modified for the joint benefit of the land and the land users who depend on the land for a living.

An occurrence on one project leased to a local organization of permittees points up some of the items discussed above. In the spring a group of Service range and land management officials were examining the pastures of a project for general condition, degree of utilization the previous year, rate of stocking for the current year, etc. The project was divided into several community pastures. Each director of the local organization was in charge of one or more community pastures, but the decisions for the use of each were made by the board as a whole. The previous growing season had been unfavorable because of lack of rainfall.

As the party visited one pasture after another it was agreed that some pastures had been much more closely grazed than others. This raised questions regarding the rate of stocking the previous year. Also, in checking the permitted rate of stocking for the current year there appeared to be variations not justified by the relative conditions of the pastures. The rate of stocking in each case was less than the previous year but the percentage reduction in some cases was heavier than appeared necessary, and in other cases not as heavy as the examining group would have recommended.

These discrepancies were discussed. The project conservationist pointed out that the determinations regarding rate of stocking had been made both years by the directors sitting as a board. The

directors took into consideration the opinion of each one present, including the project conservationist. The opinion of the director in charge of a particular pasture under discussion in some cases influenced the decision more than it should have, but the project conservationist did not think the rates were sufficiently inconsistent to make the matter an issue. He felt that experience would soon help to iron out these inconsistencies and he thought that some of the discrepancies had been eliminated in the decisions made that year over the previous year. As a matter of fact, he was pleased with the decisions made by the board to reduce the rate of stocking in each of the pastures, some as much as 25 percent without any undue pressure on his part. Each of the directors seemed well satisfied with the decisions made by the board and sold the cuts in stocking to the permittees using his pastures in such a convincing manner that they were accepted gracefully.

The group inspecting the project concluded that perfection could not be attained in every case. Also, they agreed that the fundamentals of range conservation secured in this manner would do more good and produce more real progress than if the decisions had been handed down by the most expert of federal range technicians.

The Land Utilization program pioneered in some important phases of range restoration and in bringing about major changes in the land use and the agricultural economy over large problem areas in the West. This was an important and worthwhile job. Of greater interest, and possibly greater importance, is the pioneering work being done in developing a new concept of public land administration. This involves the deliberate assignment of management responsibilities to the users of the land. The progress stockmen and their organizations have made in managing federal lands within the Land Utilization projects might well justify wider application.



ECONOMY IN GOVERNMENT

I place economy among the first and most important virtues, and public debt as the greatest of dangers to be feared.—*Thomas Jefferson*.



There can be no economy where there is no efficiency.—*Beaconsfield*.



After order and liberty, economy is one of the highest essentials of a free government. . . . Economy is always a guarantee of peace.—*Calvin Coolidge*.



Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship.—*Franklin*.