The Future of Our Range Resources

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One of the questions to be considered by this conference is whether the Nation's range resources will be so diminished during the next 25 years as to critically threaten our welfare.

Had this question been asked back in 1928, just 25 years ago, there is little doubt what the answer would have been. The experts of that time contended that conditions were critical even then and dire results were to be expected both to the resource itself and to the Nation's economy if the trends continued. In 1928, vast areas of the range were considered to be eroded, overgrazed and depleted. Officials had long since questioned the feasibility of any extensive improvement through reseeding, and the belief was widely held there was little possibility of either maintenance or improvement of the range unless the livestock population was drastically reduced.

In the light of these predictions, let's take a brief look at what actually took place. First, I believe most people who are widely familiar with western ranges will agree that during the past 25 years there has been marked improvement in range conditions throughout almost all of this area. The startling fact is that this improvement has taken place in the face of almost continuously increasing livestock numbers, instead of the reductions once thought necessary.

Since 1928, the livestock population in the 17 States of the range area has increased 41 percent, from 32,807,000 to 46,510,000 animal units. Moreover, both the improvement in the range and the increase in livestock has taken place in the face of substantial reductions in the area devoted to range use. In the Plains States, many millions of acres of range lands have been plowed and put into cereals, beans and other crops. In the mountains the encroachment of timber reproduction, and in the Southwest the thickening up of other woody species, has substantially reduced the range area.

The happenings of the past probably offer us some valuable clues as to what we may expect in the future. Accordingly, it may be profitable to examine the factors that brought widespread improvement to the range in the past 25 years, under conditions which many thought to be unfavorable for such improvement.

Despite two periods of severe drought, generally favorable weather and growing conditions that stimulated natural recovery was undoubtedly one such factor.

An increasingly prosperous livestock industry, with its members possessed of funds for reseeding, fencing, water development, and other improvement measures, and, of equal importance, convinced of the need to use their cash for these purposes, was another.

The perfection of machinery for seeding and harvesting grass, chemicals and machinery for eradicating useless brush, and a host of other such developments have vastly increased forage production, even on some of our least productive lands.

Probably the factor most important of all has been a change in the attitude of people—a change from a philosophy of indifference to one of determination that conditions can be changed for the better.

Much of this change appears to have stemmed from the depression-born efforts of the government to alleviate the ills of agriculture in the early 30's. As these efforts succeeded, sometimes to the surprise of their sponsors, they were not only increasingly adopted, but opened up new possibilities for improvement. These, in turn, convinced more and more landowners that range conservation measures are not only good for posterity but also are sound business for the present generation. The results of this change in attitude are seen on every hand. Congress has recognized the importance of conservation to the national economy, has created new agencies to furnish technical and financial assistance to landowners, and has supported such work with generous appropriations. States have passed laws to facilitate local cooperation in conservation activities. Livestock associations have taken an increasingly active interest in conservation work. Industry has responded with funds for research on many critical range problems and landowners have organized hundreds of soil conservation districts in order to work together to improve their ranges.

Time will not permit citation of even a few of the remarkable accomplishments in range improvement.

that have taken place in the past 25 years. These are sufficiently substantial, however, to indicate that we are only beginning to become aware of the possibilities ahead of us.

Estimates indicate that the 759 million acres of private and publicly-owned ranges in the 17 Western States can still be improved from 150 to 300 percent (Table 1). This would provide the equivalent of more than a billion and a half acres of range in their present condition, more than double the present available area.

Neither the progress that has been made nor the promise of future improvement is any cause for complacency, however. There are still many critical problems ahead of us if our range lands are to do their part in supporting the expanding demands of our national economy.

Not all operators are aware of the extent to which their ranges can be improved, nor are they convinced of the necessity, or of the financial advantage of the measures that will bring it about. From 80 to 125 million acres remain to be reseeded, with the needed seed supplies of improved species not yet in sight. Many ranges need more fences if satisfactory management is to be practiced, and there are still some areas that are too poorly watered to allow efficient use of the forage.

A great deal more, and decidedly better, research is needed to find the answers to a number of important range problems. Among the research needs are studies of ways to reduce costs of production that will help maintain the range livestock industry in a prosperous condition and continue to make private funds available for needed conservation measures. More investigations are needed to determine the costs and benefits of conservation practices themselves, as a means of speeding up their use. The development of more selective herbicides not only offers profits to industry, but promise to landowners for more effective ways to rid their lands of noxious woody plants. The development of better forage grasses, which has barely started in the last decade offers great promise for more nutritious forage, more of it, and for a longer period of use. The use of certain fertilizers has given marked results on some range types and such studies need to be expanded to determine the conditions under which this practice can be used on other areas. Nor should we overlook the importance of economic research which will provide reliable costs of all of these measures so that the landowner may decide upon their practicability and suitability for his own conditions.

At the same time, we need to realize that research is of little value unless means are found to get its results out of musty publications and into use by farmers and ranchers of the country. A few scientists had known for twenty years, for example, that crested wheatgrass was adapted to the climate and soils of the Great Plains. It wasn't until the action agencies of the U. S. Department of Agriculture were developed, however, that this and similar information was translated into a reseeding program that has doubled and quadrupled the forage supply on more than 15 million acres.

Accordingly, technical assistance to acquaint landowners with new developments and to help them get started in the application of appropriate conservation practices is desirable for some time into the future. It should not be necessary, however, to continue such assistance at the present scale indefinitely. With technical assistance, needed research, a prosperous industry and an increasing number of landowners who are improving their range, certainly there is no necessity for our range lands to be in a critical condition 25 years from now. On the other hand, there is every reason to believe they will be considerably improved over the present situation.