The Sagebrush Rebellion: A Conservationist’s Perspective

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Conservationists tend to view the Sagebrush Rebellion with a disturbing sense of déjà vu—an ominous feeling that a particularly unfortunate chapter in history of the public lands is about to repeat itself. A brief look at that history may be helpful in understanding both the Sagebrush Rebellion itself and the reaction to it by the Izaak Walton League and other conservation groups.

In the late 1930's, grazing on the public lands was being brought under management for the first time. The Taylor Grazing Act had been passed in 1934 to bring an end to over-grazing, halt the deterioration of the range, and begin the slow process of recovery. By 1940, uncontrolled grazing had given way to a system of grazing districts, permits, and nominal fees, and the new Grazing Service had begun to cut stocking rates on over-grazed ranges.

A few people in the livestock industry reacted by mounting an assault on the new agency and the new program of range management. Their champion, Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada, systematically crippled the Grazing Service by the simple but effective devices of cutting its appropriations and wearing down its leaders through endless hearings. After seven years, the agency’s field staff had been cut from 250 down to 78 people and the Grazing Service had been effectively neutralized.

In 1946, with the Grazing Service under control, livestock interests set out to gain outright ownership of the public lands through a bill to transfer them to the states, and then sell them back to the grazing permittees at highly favorable prices. The attempt was beaten back by a public outcry, led by Bernard DeVoto from the Easy Chair at Harpers. But, through the late 40’s and well into the 50’s, Congressman Barrett of Wyoming and others continued to use the appropriations process and hostile field hearings to keep what was by that time BLM weak and compliant.

With BLM too debilitated to pursue aggressively the mandates of the Taylor Grazing Act, de facto control of range management fell to the local grazing boards composed largely of permittees, which showed little enthusiasm for reducing overgrazing to restore the range. So in the end, the fact that the stockman’s bid for ownership had failed didn’t make much difference in terms of grazing management.

The essential features of this history are that federal efforts to manage grazing precipitated both a campaign to turn the lands over to state and private ownership, and a successful political effort to restrain the agency and prevent effective management. As a result, the business of halting overgrazing and restoring the productive capacity of the public rangelands was largely postponed for more than 20 years.

The current situation has disturbing parallels to the experience of the 40’s. Like the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act in 1976 changed the rules in some fundamental ways: FLPMA marked an end to the policy of land disposal; it changed BLM’s role from temporary custodian to permanent manager; it gave the Bureau a clear mandate to bring all resources under effective management; and it established multiple use as the fundamental management principle.

The effects of those changes are now being felt across the West in the form of interim wilderness restrictions, new planning procedures, increased sensitivity to wildlife and cultural values, and grazing reductions.

Like the reaction to the Taylor Grazing Act, the fears and frustrations engendered by the new management program have, a few years later, given rise to a campaign to transfer the public lands out of federal ownership. Informed by the experience of the 40’s, the leaders of the Sagebrush Rebellion understand very clearly that they do not have to win on the ownership issue in order to succeed. The Sagebrush Rebellion is aimed both at gaining possession of the public lands and at controlling federal management, as long as the lands are in federal possession. The leaders of the Rebellion have been very frank about this dual strategy.

We are, of course, deeply concerned about the possibility that the public lands might be transferred out of federal ownership. But that possibility seems rather remote at present. We are convinced that the greater and more immediate threat from the Sagebrush Rebellion is that it will be used to undermine effective multiple use management, in the same ways that Senator McCarran and Congressman Barrett did in the 40’s and 50’s: by breaking down the barriers that insulate professional land management decisions from political intervention; by controlling BLM’s appropriations; by placing BLM on the defensive and diverting energy away from management; by sapping the agency’s morale; and by winning concessions directly from Congress.

The McClure amendment, which became law last fall as a rider on the Interior Appropriations bill for FY ’80, added substance to our fears. The McClure amendment prohibits BLM from effecting grazing reductions of more than 10% for any permittee—thus arbitrarily limiting BLM’s professional management prescriptions for range recovery.

There is evidence that Congress wanted to avoid undermining professional management. But that fact has not penetrated to the field, and BLM employees and stockmen

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alike are making the obvious inference that the McClure amendment was intended as a warning to BLM to lower its profile and become more passive on grazing issues.

Despite the similarities, there are two important differences between the current Sagebrush Rebellion and the attempt of the 40’s. First, they differ in terms of their base of support. The bill of 1946 received most of its support from a segment of the livestock community. By contrast, the current Sagebrush Rebellion has exerted a broader appeal, tapping the wave of anti-federal feeling and gaining support from individuals with the major commodity interests, including minerals and land development, as well as from livestock operators.

The second distinction is that the Robertson bill of 1946 would have sold off the public lands to the permittees, while the current Sagebrush Rebellion nominally seeks to have the lands transferred to the states. However, this difference may be more apparent than real. What would happen to the public lands if they were actually handed over to the states? Would the states manage them for multiple use and a wide array of sustained public benefits? Or would they find themselves pressured into maximizing revenues in the short-run, breaking up the land into smaller tracts, and selling them off into fragmented private holdings?

The latter course is not inevitable. In many states, the constitution requires state lands to be managed for maximum return. But constitutions can be changed. Most public lands states do not now have the planning and management infrastructure to effectively manage these lands for multiple use. But those mechanisms could be developed—over time and at considerable expense. States that took over the public lands would find themselves pinched between reduced revenues—as federal payments in lieu of taxes were halted—and increased costs—as they took over the burden of management. But state officials would have the power to raise taxes or boost grazing fees to meet the costs of management, however reluctant they might be to actually take those steps.

It is clear that the states could effectively manage the public lands for multiple use, if they were willing to spend the money and exert the political will. But it is equally clear that they would be under great political and economic pressure to settle for a lesser standard of management; one that would not involve replicating BLM’s planning and management capabilities at the state level; one that might alter multiple use to make it a policy of sustained use/multiple yield; and one that would be less able to protect resources of national concern or to guarantee access for recreational users.

The question is not whether the states could manage the public lands. The question is whether state management would be in the public interest—in the interest of westerners, or the nation, or the states themselves. I think the answer to that question is no. An example may help show why. The western states are currently confronted with the prospect of rapid, large-scale development of oil shale, coal, oil and gas, uranium, tar sands, transmission networks, coal slurry pipelines, and the MX missile system. Federal management provides the states with substantial protection against the impacts of unplanned development, through FLPMA’s multiple use mandate, land planning procedures, procedural guarantees, and requirements for consistency with state and local plans. Without the protection provided by the FLPMA, the states might find themselves far more vulnerable to precipitate development and less able to manage change in constructive ways.

Who, then, would the winners and the losers be if the public lands were turned over to the states? The big winners would be the mining interests, a few of the largest livestock operators, land speculators, and the energy interests. The losers would be more numerous:

- The states would lose because transfer of the public lands would usually lead to a net drain on state treasuries, rather than the wind-fall they had hoped for.
- Livestock operators would be among the surprise losers, especially if the lands began to be sold off into private hands. Small and mid-sized ranchers might be unable to compete with large livestock operators for grazing lands. And even the largest ranchers might find themselves priced out of particular markets by energy interests and land developers, able to command vast amounts of capital.
- The costs would fall most heavily on western recreationists—hunters, fishermen, 4-wheel drivers, hikers, rockhounds, and others. State ownership would probably bring with it reduced spending for wildlife habitat improvement and recreation facilities. Public access would be sharply reduced where state grazing permitees must post their lands against other users, and could disappear altogether as lands passed into private ownership. And forage might tend to be reallocated from wildlife to livestock. For outdoorsmen, the net effect would include reduced wildlife populations, diminished hunting opportunities, and an end to the freedom of access that has been a western birthright.
- Finally, the average American citizen would lose, for the public lands in the West form an essential piece of his national heritage.

The Sagebrush Rebellion is rooted, in part, in some very real deficiencies in federal land management. The federal government has not been a good landlord; it has not made the investments nor exercised the management that a prudent landlord should have. Too few dollars have been invested in range improvements; too few federal managers have been spread over too many acres and too much paper work. There have been too many delays in processing routine permits.

These problems are serious, and they must be solved. Any effective response to the Sagebrush Rebellion must ensure that the public lands remain under federal multiple use management. But it must also ensure that federal management is improved—that it is better staffed and funded, more efficient, and more responsible to the opportunities to restore the productivity of the public rangelands.

Over the past several years, with unprecedented support from the livestock industry, the conservation community, and the Congress, BLM’s range management program has been set on a 20-year schedule of investment in range rehabilitation and improved management. At that level of effort, and guided by the policies laid down in the President’s Environmental Message of July, 1979, BLM has a good chance of improving management in ways that will be an effective response—and an effective counter—to the Sagebrush Rebellion. But those goals will not be realized if the Bureau’s budget fails victim to the politics of the Sagebrush Rebellion, nor if range management efforts continue to be hamstrung by
chronic shortages of personnel. The lack of field personnel has caused exactly the kinds of delays and frustrations that are feeding the Sagebrush Rebellion, and it has prevented the direct, personal contact in the field that is needed to adjust policy to local circumstances and to gain landowner support for management programs. Over the next several years, personnel levels, even more than funding, will determine success or failure.

In conclusion, our position (Izaak Walton League) can be summarized briefly:

- We are committed to the principles of multiple use and sustained yield, and to the type of balanced management those principles require.
- We are committed to the goal of restoring depleted rangelands to their full productivity, to benefit all users.
- We support an active, professional management style that stresses a good neighbor policy, but that will also make hard decisions where needed to protect the resource base.
- We support ranching as an important use of the public lands and want to protect the fabric and economic base of western rural life.
- We believe these goals can be achieved if the public lands remain in federal multiple use management. We believe these goals are most unlikely to be achieved if the lands are transferred to state or private ownership.
- Although we have sympathy for the frustrations and economic fears that have attracted stockmen’s support, we do not see the goals of the Sagebrush Rebellion as a legitimate solution. The public lands belong to all Americans; they form an essential element of our shared national heritage. They are not up for grabs.

A far better solution is for all users of the public lands to cooperatively focus their energies on making federal multiple use management more effective and more sensitive to the needs of all interests.

The Savory Grazing Method

Allan Savory and Stanley D. Parsons

_Civilized man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints._

—Anon.

With our knowledge of today this statement is known to be true of vast areas of the world and we now know that simple range deterioration played a bigger part in the destruction of past great civilizations than did any barbarian hordes. In fact, Carter and Dale wrote an excellent account of the fate of past civilizations in their book _Topsoil and Civilization_ (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1976). In it they warn Americans that their rangelands have deteriorated at a staggering rate in the last 200 years and that, regretfully, it has not ceased.

Range deterioration continues to be one of the major problems facing agriculture and indeed civilization throughout the world. We personally have heard of many examples in the southwestern United States where the carrying capacity of the range has decreased considerably in living memory. In one or two notable cases, it now takes 100 acres to carry a cow where previously 10 acres of the same land carried a cow.

Despite the fact that universities, research stations, extension services, and ranchers have over the last century or so spent many of millions of dollars researching the problem of range deterioration and productivity, we still see the range deteriorating at an alarming rate, or at best just holding its own at great expense. This is not a problem that has concerned only the American people. It is one that is of concern to all developed and developing countries throughout the world and no less so in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), a much younger country than the United States and inhabited by commercial ranchers practicing so-called advanced grazing methods for a far shorter time than many parts of the United States. Nevertheless, even in this short period of time we have seen tremendous degradation of natural rangelands. Flash flooding and droughts have increased as available rainfall has become less effective through increased runoff.

In Rhodesia, the senior author was fortunate to have an opportunity few trained ecologists have had, being able to witness parts of Africa almost uninhabited by man that still carried vast game herds. Years of observing these herds...