

Whitehorse Butte Allotment—Controversy to Compromise

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Author's Note: This article portrays the history of the Whitehorse Butte Allotment, the intensive coordination efforts of BLM and other persons interested in proper management of the natural resources of the Trout Creek Mountains, the BLM's July 1990 decision and rationale behind that decision. Portions of this article focus on issues (such as the elimination of livestock grazing and the cost of range improvements) raised by George Wuerthner in "Whitehorse Butte Allotment—Poor Public Range Policy" (December 1990, *Rangelands*)

The Whitehorse Butte grazing allotment contains 127,000 acres in southeastern Oregon within the Jordan Resource Area of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Vale District (Fig. 1). Topography is rugged, with elevations ranging from 4,000 feet near the Whitehorse Ranch to 8,000 feet in the Trout Creek Mountains. Willow Creek and Whitehorse Creek with its major tributaries (Fifteenmile, Little Whitehorse, and Doolittle creeks) that originate in the higher elevations and flow north through steep, narrow canyons.

The area is semiarid with cool, moist winters and hot, dry summers. Average annual precipitation ranges from 8 to 12 inches with approximately half occurring as snow from November to February.

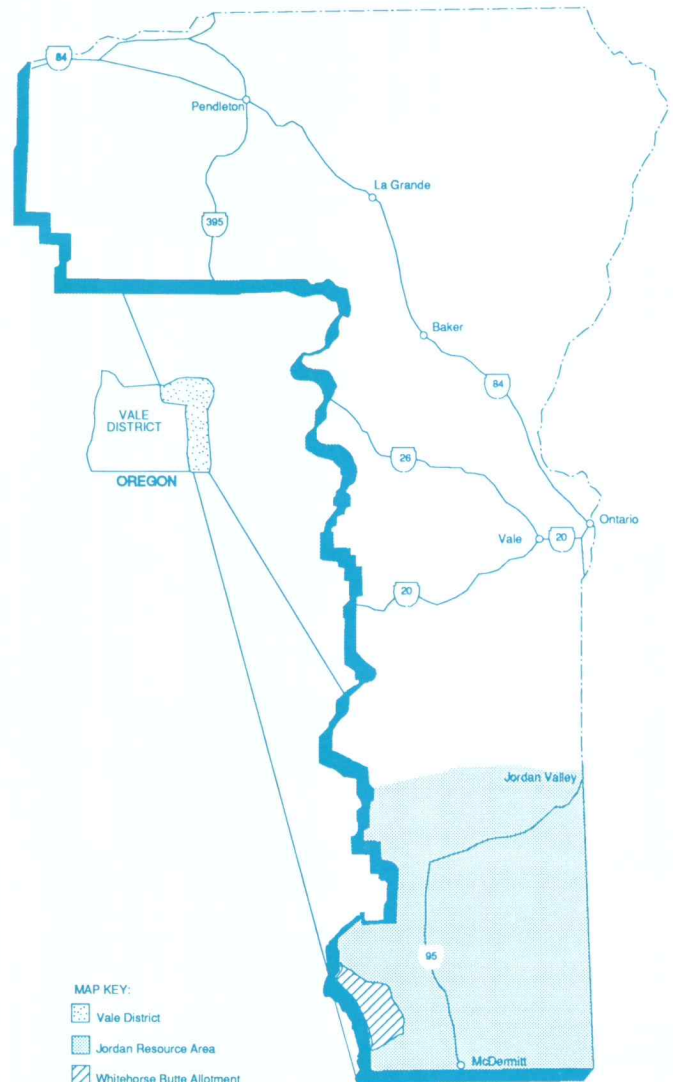
Starting the Road to Recovery

In June 1970, BLM and the Oregon State Game Commission joined Whitehorse Ranch on a two-day horseback inspection of Big Whitehorse, Fifteenmile, and Cottonwood creeks. They found deep gullies with active cutting, little shade from riparian vegetation, and excessively warm water temperatures. These degraded riparian conditions prompted the BLM to develop the first Habitat Management Plan (HMP) in March 1973, for the Whitehorse and Willow Creek watersheds.

Even before completion of the 1973 HMP, several actions were taken to improve riparian habitat conditions. Approximately 20,000 willow shoots were planted on 16 miles of Fifteenmile, Cottonwood, and Big Whitehorse creeks. Forty-nine "trash catcher dams" were constructed to improve the stream pool/riffle ratio.

Other improvement projects included fencing and seedings. Rim and gap fencing projects were completed to protect approximately 8 miles of stream; three large crested wheatgrass seedings affecting 13,300 acres were undertaken to develop additional livestock forage to relieve grazing pressure on Willow and Whitehorse creeks as well as adjacent native rangeland. In 1986 several enclosures were constructed, protecting an additional three miles of Willow Creek.

On-the-ground improvement of the Whitehorse Butte area during the late 1970s slowed as the BLM entered a



major land use planning effort. The land use planning process concluded in January 1984 with the issuance of the Southern Malheur Rangeland Program Summary (RPS). This document identified BLM's grazing decisions relating to four million acres of public land in the Vale BLM District including the Whitehorse Butte Allotment.

Controversy

As efforts were begun to implement the 1984 land use plan, BLM recognized the degree of controversy over the Whitehorse Butte Allotment. Moreover, the BLM realized something more paramount—the importance of involving interest groups or interested "publics" in its decisionmaking process in order for the ultimate decision to be accepted or, at a minimum, understood. BLM conducted

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nine two-day tours of the Whitehorse Butte area from 1987 to 1989. The primary objectives of each tour were to allow: (1) each participant to develop an understanding of the resource values, land use conflicts and conditions existing on the ground; (2) an opportunity for interchange of information/philosophies; and (3) an opportunity for input into the development of a long-term grazing management strategy for the Whitehorse Butte Allotment.

Trout Creek Mountains Working Group

Formation of the "Trout Creek Mountains Working Group" was one of the most important events leading to the eventual acceptance of the final decision. This working group grew to include representatives from the Whitehorse Ranch, Oregon Cattlemen's Association, Oregon Environmental Council, Doc and Connie Hatfield (ranchers), local livestock permittees, Oregon Trout, Public Lands Restoration Task Force (Izaak Walton League), Oregon Watershed Improvement Coalition, and BLM. The group's focus was to seek improved management of the many resource values in the Trout Creek Mountains, using a consensus-building process. The group was firmly fixed upon, and was their conviction, that success for this critical area depended upon inclusion of both a healthy trout habitat (watershed) and a viable livestock grazing program. Each member of the group, optimistic that a majority of the resource conflicts could be resolved, volunteered their time and energies to assist in improvement of the area.



Trout Creek Mountains—as beautiful as they are rugged.

exchange of opinion, observation, and scientific research. The group had no charter nor exclusive membership. Each member, at different times, expressed satisfaction, anger, frustration, mistrust, relief, understanding, commitment, and, most importantly, ownership in not only the group process, but the final decision as well.

The BLM and the working group continued development of livestock grazing alternatives (strategies) under the environmental analysis process as directed by the National Environmental Policy Act. Although BLM maintained the final decisionmaking authority, each member of the Trout Creek Mountains Working Group contributed to the strategy and rationale behind the *District Manager's Final Decision* issued on July 10, 1990.

District Manager's Final Decision

The District Manager's Final Decision culminated four years of intense coordination and cooperation. The decision represents an attempt to bring livestock grazing into balance with other resource values while at the same time recognizing BLM's mandate to manage the public lands under the multiple use and sustained yield concepts. Outlined in the decision is a four-year deferred/rest rotation grazing system, associated range improvements, and adjustments in livestock grazing preference. The decision also commits BLM to developing an Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for the Whitehorse Butte Allotment.

Changes in the historical grazing use actually began prior to the July 1990 final decision. One action which set the stage for recovery of the natural resources and the July 1990 decision was the "three-year rest agreement" between the Whitehorse Ranch and BLM in January 1989. Under the terms of the 1989 agreement, the Whitehorse Ranch agreed to rest approximately 50,000 acres of the Whitehorse Butte Allotment for three years to allow improvement of watershed and riparian conditions, while BLM agreed to develop an AMP for the allotment.

Conflict between livestock use and a healthy riparian system is not unresolvable as maintained by George Wuerthner in "Whitehorse Butte Allotment—Poor Public Range Policy" (December 1990, *Rangelands*). Development of a livestock grazing system with the primary objective of meeting the physiological requirements of the



Whitehorse Ranch owner R.E. Naftzger inspecting a "trash catcher" (1972 photo).

This working group was involved in numerous meetings and on-the-ground tours enabling interchange of information, values, perspectives, organizational positions, personal feelings, and ideas. Members worked to understand the views of others and to openly discuss the objectives of other group members, who had in some cases in the past been considered an "adversary." Evolution of such a dynamic working group was not an easy process. In its infancy, the group consisted simply of a number of individuals having the interest of the natural resources of the Trout Creek Mountains in common. They evolved into an effective working group reaching decisions through consensus, open dialogue and free



Tour stop on Big Whitehorse Creek.

vegetation is the key to solving the conflict. It was this very principle that served as the driving force behind the BLM's July 10th final decision. A grazing system which enables plants to synthesize and store food for maintaining plant functions, to form vegetative structures for renewal of top growth, to maintain a healthy root system, and to produce viable seed will produce and sustain a healthy riparian system.

The historic grazing use of the Whitehorse Butte Allotment did not follow the plant physiology principle. Too many cattle (1,900 head) grazed the upper elevation pastures during the hot season (June to September) year after year. The range condition from this type of use was unacceptable and had to be improved. The July 1990 decision not only reduced the number of livestock grazing in the upper elevation riparian pastures by 63 percent but also reduced the duration of grazing from 105 days to a maximum of 60 days each year.

Equally significant with the reduction in livestock numbers and grazing period is the change in the *timing* of use in conjunction with *periods of rest*. Changing livestock grazing use timing from June through September to no more than 60 days from April through mid-July focuses livestock grazing use in the cooler portion of the season. Livestock use of riparian zones is still expected to occur under the revised grazing program; however, the cooler weather, more abundant water and succulent upland herbaceous vegetation will encourage livestock to distribute more evenly into the upland areas, thus substantially reducing the impact to riparian areas.

An important aspect of the July 1990 decision is the amount of rest the upper elevation riparian pastures will receive. During the course of the four-year grazing cycle, each upper elevation riparian pasture will receive 450 days of deferment/rest (which includes two consecutive years of total rest) versus 120 days of grazing.

The amount of deferment/rest and proper timing of grazing use relative to plant physiological needs will result in increased plant production and vigor, increased ground and bank cover, increased shading of streams, moderating of water temperatures (lower summer/warmer winter), improved water quality and fisheries habitat, and increased late season flows. Monitoring will serve to iden-

tify and facilitate any adjustments necessary in the future.

Range Improvements

Range improvements such as stockwater developments and fences were proposed after considering consistency with wilderness study area guidelines, wildlife needs, wild horses, and special management areas. Further, these range improvements were determined to be the minimum necessary to successfully implement the proposed grazing system, to properly control livestock movement, and to obtain proper livestock distribution and forage utilization without degrading or compromising the integrity of other natural resources. Many project proposals were eliminated based on this rigorous test.

Undoubtedly, developing range improvements is costly. This is largely due to costs in addition to those for materials used, time spent, or vehicles used. The total expenses associated with range improvement development also include costs for survey and design to meet engineering, safety standards, and longer life for projects, administrative contract, considerations to assure compliance with resource programs such as wilderness, and cultural and threatened/endangered species clearances required by law. There are also travel costs—an operating cost resulting from the remoteness of southeastern Oregon.

Costs are normally paid by four primary funding sources: (1) direct appropriation from Congress; (2) BLM's range improvement program; (3) County Grazing Board funds; and (4) direct contribution, generally from livestock permittees. The only source which directly affects the taxpayer is direct appropriation from Congress to BLM.

Some object to that source of funding. Yet, public bodies throughout the country have a history of shouldering costs for remedial environmental work when both the original cause and the remediation are seen to be in the public interest. Many actions taken in the past, although done with good or at least neutral intentions, have led to unforeseen problems later. When grazing of the public range lands came about in the last century, it seemed the right thing to do. The way it was done, initially, was incorrect. Now, the lands adversely impacted by that improper grazing need to be fixed.

Production and use of red meat continue to be accep-

table activities in America. Congress continues to recognize livestock grazing as an appropriate use of the public lands, a use that contributes to the overall good. Thus, it continues to fund the management of that activity on the public lands.

Moreover, management of the public lands, especially in a dynamic environment, requires proactive interaction on the part of federal agencies. This proactive interaction has and continues to be recognized by Congress as an ongoing need.

The remaining three funding sources are derived either directly or indirectly from livestock permittees grazing livestock on public land. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, FLPMA of 1976, and the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 each legislate that a portion of the grazing fee be directed back to the county and/or BLM district from which the fee was paid. These fee monies are directed to be used for on-the-ground range rehabilitation, protection, and improved forage condition which benefit wildlife, watershed protection, and livestock production. By policy, these monies cannot be spent on maintenance of existing range improvements but must be spent for construction of new improvements. Funds from the County Grazing Board and direct contributions from livestock permittees are generally directed to specific projects at the discretion of the funding entity.

Current BLM policy requires maintenance of range improvements to be borne by the parties deriving primary benefit from the improvement. Thus, maintenance costs for the 18.5 miles of fencing, 18 miles of pipelines including their associated source structures, and one spring will be borne by the livestock permittee, the Whitehorse Ranch. Maintenance of a two-mile riparian enclosure on Little Whitehorse Creek will be the responsibility of BLM because the benefits of the enclosures will be derived by the fish, wildlife, and watershed resources.

Exclusion of Livestock Grazing

Considering the cost of range improvements and the severity of impacts to riparian zones and fish habitat which have resulted from past livestock grazing management practices, why not eliminate livestock grazing from the Whitehorse Butte Allotment? The Whitehorse Butte Allotment presents range management professionals with a complex ecosystem involving many variables including topography, vegetation physiology, animal behavior characteristics, a multitude of native wildlife and plant species, weather and climate, sensitive native fish species, recreation and other human activities, laws, and land use planning guidelines. Each element in the ecosystem affects and influences the others. The adverse range/riparian conditions leading to the BLM's July 1990 decision were not attributed to livestock grazing, but rather to *improper* livestock management practices. Although past livestock grazing was identified as a contributing factor, it cannot be isolated as the only factor leading to the riparian problems. Simply eliminating livestock grazing will not achieve the biological diversity objectives sought by

BLM and others. BLM believes that proper livestock grazing practices, appropriately balanced with the other elements of the ecosystem, will achieve management objectives established for the riparian and other natural resources.

Secondly, BLM can not simply eliminate livestock grazing from the Whitehorse Butte Allotment. The 1984 Southern Malheur Rangeland Program Summary, BLM's primary direction for livestock grazing management in the Jordan Resource Area, identified livestock grazing as an authorized use in the Whitehorse Butte Allotment. This land use plan, developed with substantial public input, identified the Whitehorse Butte Allotment for multiple use and sustained yield management. Elimination of livestock grazing would not be consistent with this land use planning direction nor with the BLM's commitment to manage public lands.

Although total exclusion of livestock grazing from the Whitehorse Butte Allotment is not considered to be consistent with the land use plan, exclusion of livestock grazing from portions of the allotment was seriously considered during the analysis and decisionmaking process. Before making his final decision, Vale BLM District Manager William C. Calkins called his professional resource staff together to assure himself that a limited grazing alternative in the upper elevation riparian pastures would achieve the management objectives as outlined in the land use plan. Based on their knowledge and experience, BLM resource professionals agreed that well-managed livestock grazing was indeed compatible with the other resource values found within the Whitehorse Butte Allotment.

Conclusion

Maintaining a healthy riparian ecosystem does not require total exclusion, but rather *proper management* of livestock. A grazing system designed to meet the physiological needs of the vegetation will not only allow livestock and a healthy riparian ecosystem to function together but will also allow improved water quality, reduced erosion, enable additional recreational opportunities, and improve wildlife and fisheries habitat. Proper management requires appropriate and regulated control of livestock through development of range improvements and monitoring implemented over time to ensure objectives are being met.

Success in the Whitehorse Butte Allotment is not only success for the natural resource but also for *all* people who have been actively involved in this process—people who are willing to share their "visions" and to listen to others—people willing to step forward with innovative ideas, not step back and criticize. These people will benefit from knowing the ecosystem is improving and that they are a part of that improvement.

Bibliography

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