

used only when the damage or losses become significant.

Being in the ranching business, I can speak for most ranchers who are growing weary of the pressure placed on us to pay higher grazing fees and provide more habitat for big game animals that, in some areas, have been introduced. If some of the proposals to increase grazing fees become law, those economic impediments will strain the stewardship of public lands.

It is extremely important that big game managers and advocates don't lose sight of the fact that critical winter habitat, which in most cases is private lands, is the limiting factor in the big game life cycle. There is a point that we have to decide. Are the intrusion and obstacles worth the return?

I have yet to meet a stockman who is not interested in or

who does not enjoy seeing big game as he works his farmland or grazing area. I think that livestock operators and big game interests have enough in common that cooperation in dealing with the habitat and opportunity issues is a must.

If the cooperation is not forthcoming, then there is a scenario that sees the landowners selling off their bases of operation. That could mean selling off water rights to urban areas that are crying for more water or breaking up ranching units into small, more densely populated areas. Big game and hunting interests are the losers. The proposed increased in grazing fees would trigger this type of scenario in many areas of the West that depend on public lands grazing as an important link to keeping them in viable business.

Seeking Common Ground on Western Rangelands

K.L. Cool

Is a crisis pending regarding the management of western rangelands? Apparently many people believe so, or they wouldn't be trying to solve it with bumper stickers and slogans: Environmentalists promote "cattle free-free by '93." Ranchers respond with "cows galore in '94."

Perhaps the bumper sticker campaign is aimed at generating support from the vast majority of citizens who do not have a direct stake in the management or use of western rangelands. This great American public, if motivated, may dictate a political response that unfortunately, like the bumper stickers, will be far too simplistic.

Resource managers and public land users have a vested and direct interest in healthy rangeland ecosystems—a common interest in clean water, fertile soils, and healthy plant communities. Without healthy rangeland, there is no forage for livestock; there is no habitat for big game.

State fish and wildlife agencies acknowledge there have always been problems, and there will continue to be differences. Game damage, access

disputes, resource allocation arguments, and other issues all have the potential for honest disagreement.

State fish and wildlife agencies, hunters, and outdoor recreationists also have a vested interest in the success and continuation of family ranch units. Subdivisions, corporate ownership, nonresident ownership, and the uninformed notion of non-consumption—which I define as "no beef, no hunting"—are perhaps the greatest threat to our collective heritage and our future. It is time to recognize the threat the bumper stickers represent and work together to resolve conflicts between big game and livestock, real and imagined. To do this, we must focus on one fundamental issue: maintenance of rangeland.

Wildlife is a product of the land, and choices regarding the land's use ultimately dictate what will prosper and what will perish. Modern wildlife management can be compared to a blender that contains some of the following ingredients:

1. Public ownership of an often-transient wildlife resource.

2. An infinite variety of individualistic landowners.

3. Private decisions on what is done on and to private land.

4. Advice on how this wild resource is to be managed coming from Manhattan, Montana; Manhattan, Kansas; and all too frequently, Manhattan, New York.

5. Animals that don't know the difference between private and public land; wild animals that come and go as they please, burrowing under, jumping over, crawling through, and at times tearing down fences.

In most western states, big game and livestock competition is a subject of long-standing controversy. In Montana, elk are most often involved. All the characteristics that cause friction between livestock producers and wildlife interests are present. We frequently experience severe drought; we have expanding elk populations; we hear from recreationists who be-

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lieve that all public lands are overgrazed; and we have ranchers who have experienced reductions in permitted grazing. Game damage and competition between elk and livestock do occur on private land, and to some extent, on public land—and hunting won't always solve these problems because some ranchers who have game damage are uncomfortable with the choice between too many elk and too many hunters.

In Montana, the Beaverhead National Forest probably has the greatest potential for a public rangeland crisis. Here and on other public rangelands, livestock unfortunately do not distribute according to forage availability. They tend to congregate in riparian habitats. At current stocking rates, even two years of growing season rest may not be adequate to maintain riparian areas on many of the Beaverhead's allotments.

The Beaverhead Forest is currently drafting riparian area guidelines that will be implemented through revisions in allotment management plans. These plans are scheduled for completion during the next 5 to 10 years. It is estimated that 75% of the allotments on the forest either currently meet forest plan standards and guidelines or can be brought into compliance through modifications in current grazing systems. These modifications would focus on influencing livestock distribution. The other 25%, unfortunately, will require both management changes and significant reductions in AUM's. The reduction of AUM's on the Beaverhead will not be uniformly distributed across the forest, and the AUM reduction on affected allotments may be substantial.

How does elk/livestock interaction relate to our Beaverhead example? It doesn't! While many of the affected allotments have experienced increases in elk numbers, elk and livestock are not competing for forage. The AUM reductions that will be required are needed because the riparian habitats do not comply with forest plan standards and guidelines.

A catalyst for this symposium was a recent Forest Service document

titled "Livestock/Big Game Interaction Activity Review." The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks and several other western state wildlife agencies were disappointed with that report because we believe it put too much emphasis on livestock/big game interactions and failed to discuss the importance of rangelands.

The report recommended 15 action items to address conflicts between livestock and big game. We found it curious that state fish and wildlife agencies, the legally designated stewards of wildlife, were referenced in only three of these action items.

The stated purpose of the review was "to assess the interaction between livestock and big game and how forest land management plans and their implementation could deal with the conflicts." The report found that some forests are tardy in bringing allotment plans into compliance with forest plan standards and guidelines. Yet, the development of such plans, a clear responsibility of the agency writing the review, was not identified as an appropriate action item.

The review suggested that monitoring has not kept pace with implementation of forest plans. Although the recommendations suggest more monitoring, we feel they are vague about what should be monitored and how the information will be used. Monitoring should be structured to evaluate success in accomplishing management objectives—in this case, healthy rangeland systems—and to determine why management is or is not successful.

The review suggested a lack of quality information and a limited capability to acquire it. We concur and support the recommendation to develop this information.

The review also noted deficiencies in allotment management plans. Yet, the recommendations took aim at big game population objectives and coordinated forest and state agency plans. These activities are worthy, but will not resolve the concern for big game/livestock interaction unless they are linked to rangeland objectives and management actions cap-

able of accomplishing them.

We believe the best way to find common ground, build partnerships, and solve problems on federal rangelands is to develop allotment management plans, in concert with wildlife management plans, in an open process.

Allotment management plans, like all actions under forest plans, must be consistent with forest plan standards and guidelines. Objectives for healthy rangeland supersede objectives for using the range, and criteria for healthy rangelands must be in the forest plan. If we first establish rangeland objectives, it will then be possible to answer questions about allocating the use of those rangelands.

What are state wildlife agencies doing to seek common ground on western rangelands? Colorado's Division of Wildlife is addressing these conflicts on private and public lands through a habitat partnership program. Arizona's Game & Fish Department is developing herd management strategies for elk. These states, and New Mexico, are implementing a team strategy which includes agency personnel and people from the private sector who work together to identify competing uses, develop appropriate solutions, and monitor habitat where problems between game and livestock have been identified.

In Montana, we are working on a statewide elk management plan—a plan with numbers and strategies to maintain elk populations. Generally, our plan proposes to maintain statewide elk numbers at or near the current level. That objective is embodied in 35 individual elk management units. At the unit level, our plan calls for increasing elk numbers in places where they will be compatible with other uses, while reducing numbers and encouraging redistribution where elk conflict with private land interests. This plan will provide documented elk population objectives—definitive information that can be incorporated into allotment management plans.

We recognize that our elk management plan and the management plans for the various Montana national

forests may not be in harmony. However, a cooperative planning process will include the opportunity to constructively resolve most of these differences.

State and federal agencies operate under a mandate of open government. State wildlife agencies accept that mandate, and we understand that cooperation is essential to finding common ground, building partnerships, and managing western rangelands. We believe in that philosophy

and the necessary process that assures the involvement of all parties in resolution of these natural resource management conflicts.

Can these programs actually work on the ground where it really counts? On several of our wildlife management areas we have developed partnerships with ranchers and the Forest Service that provide workable solutions to management of sensitive areas. The Fleecer Wildlife Management Area is a case in point (Frisina

and Morin, *Rangelands* 1991). The grazing systems in use today at Fleecer can be a model for the cooperative management of federal rangelands and for dismissal of the notion livestock and big game cannot coexist or must exist in conflict.

As additional evidence that wildlife agency/private rancher partnerships are possible, I'd like to share parts of a letter I received last week from Doug and Zena Ensign, owners of a ranch near Livingston, Montana:

Dear Mr. Cool:

Mike Frisina has worked hard to help us establish a rest-rotation program on our Mission Ranch near Livingston. This ranch has been continuously grazed for at least the last 40 years. Predictably, the value of this range has diminished significantly over this period. Our new grazing system will help us reverse range deterioration and restore it to its former productivity. Erosion will be checked. Indeed, we are already seeing the benefits of this system on the pastures that we have rested.

Greater range productivity not only holds benefits for our cattle operation but for the numerous antelope, mule deer and whitetails that graze there. It is our belief

that our range resources can be used well by our cattle, by wildlife, and that everyone will benefit from appropriate care for the resource.

There are those in Montana, in official positions and in special interest groups, who would place stockmen, sportsmen and environmentalists into polarized opposition to each other; environment to the exclusion of ranching and ranching with little concern for conservation. Neither of these extremist positions is correct, beneficial, or realistic. Extremist positions are selfish and harmful to all but a select few. Mike's management recommendations feature conservation of resources which benefits both industry and environment and harm neither. Rest-

rotation is a system which utilizes grazing to improve the range, not to ruin it. Let us point out that we are speaking as ranchers who understand that abuse of our resource is self-destructive, as well as harmful to the future of Montana.

Mike's work engenders understanding and cooperation between stockmen and environmental concerns: common ground for opposing points of view. The common ground is where most productive solutions are found. The fact that Mike, who represents Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, is working with us and for us as ranchers, causes us to become more sympathetic to the concerns of sportsmen and environmentalists.

As the Ensigns point out, healthy rangelands support domestic livestock, big game, upland birds, waterfowl, fish, and a host of other recreational and aesthetic experiences. While all of these beneficial uses are possible, none can be maintained unless we first agree to focus on the care of the basic resource: rangeland. Healthy rangeland with its fundamental components—fertile soil, clean water, and healthy

vegetation—is the basis for finding common ground on western rangelands.

State wildlife agencies are stakeholders in seeking common ground on western rangelands. We are committed to be part of the solution and not contribute to the crisis.

Without healthy rangeland there is no forage for livestock, and there is no habitat for big game and the myriad of other wildlife species that can live together in harmony.