

Experimental Stewardship Program—An Underpublicized Success Story

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An outstanding alternative for resolving historical resource conflicts has been demonstrated by 3 national Experimental Stewardship Programs in Montana, Idaho, Nevada, and California. The Experimental Stewardship Program (ESP) was authorized under Section 12 of the Public Rangeland Improvement Act.

The original legislation directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to implement, on an experimental basis, a program providing incentives to, or rewards for, the holders of grazing permits whose stewardship results in improvement of lands grazed under these permits. Rewards have included significantly improved land management on several federal allotments without reductions in livestock numbers. Since the Stewardship Steering Committee consists of all the various interest groups, permittees' problems are usually addressed and resolved quickly. Original participants involved all concerned interests as required by other legislation into an extremely successful, expanded Coordinated Resource Management program.

Resource managers are at a critical threshold concerning the future of the Experimental Stewardship Programs. We have shown that our process works, but have not done a good job of "marketing" the results. Critics are circling, claiming that we have spent a lot of time and money yet have no concrete evidence to show that we have really accomplished anything.

Now, 10 years into our program, many of the original participants have moved on. Many of their replacements do not understand, or have any commitment to, the process. These individuals, and other interests who do not understand the process, feel more comfortable in continuing to resolve resource management conflicts through the more familiar win-lose process of dictation, appeals, and litigation. However, those of us who have seen Experimental Stewardship Programs work believe the program is too valuable to let it slip into history through lack of interest.

The program has worked. It involves a tried and true process that will work in the win-win atmosphere of coordination, cooperation, and commitment on resource problems, providing participants are interested in seeing these problems resolved in an equitable manner.

The 3 nationally designated Experimental Stewardship areas established following passage of the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 are the Challis, near Chal-

lis, Ida.; the Modoc-Washoe in northwestern Nevada and northeastern California near Alturas, Calif.; and the East Pioneer near Dillon, Mont.

All 3 areas had significant rangeland problems before the Experimental Stewardship Program. Resource conflicts existed, and vegetative condition and trend needed to be improved. Relations between ranchers, agencies, and other user interests were at or quickly approaching the point where no one would even discuss the problems. In many instances, costly legal action appeared to be the most likely alternative for all interests involved. This program essentially forced the different interests to sit down and discuss just what they really wanted for the rangeland areas involved.

All 3 areas developed a "Steering Group" to identify common objectives, direct the program, and make needed decisions and recommendations. Organization within this steering group is key to a successful program. Representatives on the steering groups vary in number from 13 on the East Pioneers to 21 on the Modoc-Washoe.

Three critical considerations appear necessary for structuring an effective steering group:

1. Be certain that all major interests concerned about management of the area in question are represented. Be realistic, too many representatives can render the group unworkable. One individual may have to represent more than one group or agency. It is essential that all interests are represented or they will have to be dealt with outside the process which intensifies the potential for conflict.

2. Representatives must hold sufficient status within their agency or organization to truly represent that interest and must be able to make decisions for the interests they represent. It is also critical that they honor these commitments.

3. Representatives must be willing to understand other points of view and negotiate to achieve desired objectives for the involved area.

Once the steering group has been identified, common objectives must be established. We found that all responsible interests are usually after the same thing—a healthy, vigorous environment capable of supporting multiple resource values and uses. Alternatives must be identified for achieving objectives.

A technical action group, composed of resource specialists, landowners, permittees and representatives from other interests, is the next key group. They review the area's resource capabilities on the ground, identify alter-

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natives, including their preferred alternative, and present this information to the steering group.

The steering group reviews the alternatives. Differences are worked out through the negotiation process with the objective of reaching consensus on a final alternative. Once a decision is made, it becomes a group decision and all interests are committed to its successful application. This alternative is presented to the agency line officer as the "proposed action" for completion of necessary procedural "paper work" and approval, followed by on the ground implementation. Normally no problems are encountered as long as legal and other regulatory requirements are addressed. The "experimental" part of the Stewardship Program can even be considered here, if regulations appear to impede action needed to meet on the ground objectives. As long as laws are not violated, adjustments in regulations may be considered.

As indicated, this process works very well within the Stewardship Areas. The process has been applied to other resource problems with equal success in areas where extreme polarization has not predated the effort. We believe that this process can be applied successfully to help solve essentially any problem involving resource conflicts. However, individuals or interests who are unwilling to recognize and consider the valid interests and needs of others will have a difficult time accepting this process.

The initial legislation stressed the need to identify incentives necessary to get grazing permittees to improve range condition. All groups determined that the real incentive to get participants working together is simply to improve communications and to work in a coordinated, cooperative process where all interests can be heard. Unlike many special programs, significant funds were *not* diverted in an effort to force the program to work. Congress did not appropriate additional funding for the pro-



Fig. 1. A water wheel pumps water to the Dry Hollow pasture of the Vipond Allotment.

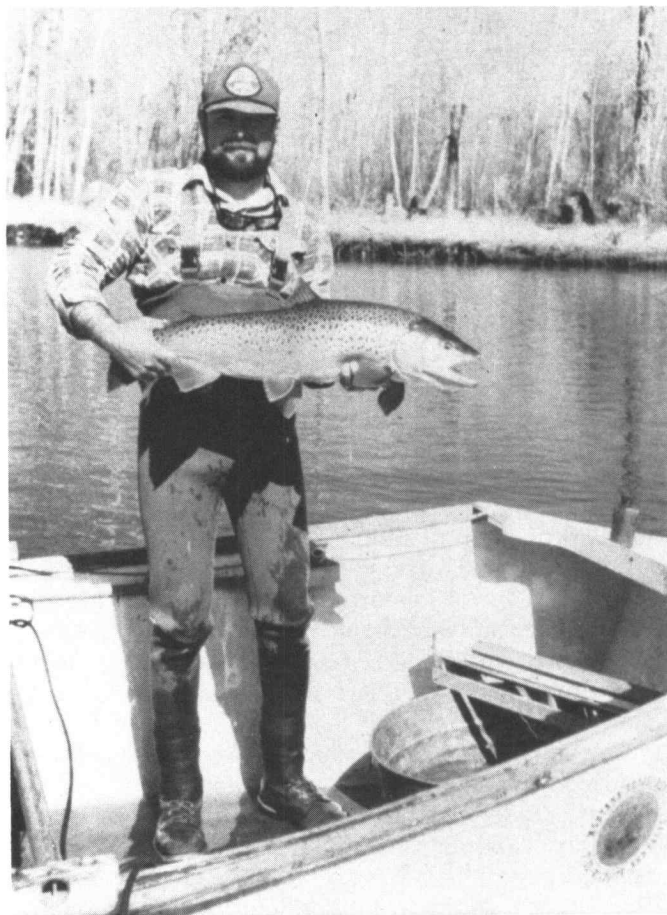


Fig. 2. Big Hole River is a nationally important trout fishing stream.

gram. In the East Pioneers, an objective was to "make do" with available funding to avoid creating an "artificial" program supported by special dollars that are not available in normal circumstances.

Costs under the Experimental Stewardship Program have been less than in non-Experimental Stewardship Program areas. Table 1 illustrates expenditures in East Pioneer grazing allotments and comparable non-Experimental Stewardship Program allotments for involved interests. Note that the average expenditure per animal month in the Experimental Stewardship Program allotments was \$16.15, compared to \$17.41 for the non-Experimental Stewardship Program allotments. We do not view \$1.26 as a real significant difference. However, the unquantifiable costs of appeals, litigation, and lack of commitment that have been avoided by the process must also be considered.

All 3 areas made no attempt to restrict incentives and rewards to grazing permittees, but recognized the valid interest held in rangelands by all user interests. Specific effort is made to keep everyone involved. Most important of all, the basic rangeland resources have benefited, as have the user interests who have worked *together* to make it happen.

Table 1. Summary of expenditures on East Pioneer grazing allotments and comparable non-ESP allotments.

East Pioneer Allotments						
Allotments	Number of AUMS	FS Costs	BLM Costs	SCS Costs	Permittee Costs	Total Cost Per AUM
12 FS	17,624	\$165,469			\$66,540	\$13.16
24 BLM	7,021		\$114,289		\$43,038	\$22.41
(3)SCS*	(6,810)*			\$8,600		\$ 1.26
Total	24,645	\$165,469	\$114,289	\$8,600	\$109,578	\$16.15
Non-East Pioneer Allotments						
19 FS	24,066	\$274,696			\$128,403	\$16.75
23 BLM	15,449		\$221,457		\$ 63,311	\$18.43
Total	39,515	\$274,696	\$221,457		\$191,714	\$17.41

*Three allotments and related 6,810 AUMs are already included in total AUM numbers on Forest and BLM where SCS assisted in ESP.

Allotment Management Planning was a major job. Involving all concerned interests helped expand other resource consideration. Commitment and coordination were necessary to make these plans meaningful. Implementing allotment management plans means little unless the results are monitored. Evaluation of 41 monitoring stations on the Beaverhead National Forest indicates that 27 show an obvious upward trend. This improvement has occurred in spite of 5 years of serious drought. Four stations show no discernible trend. Of the 10 indicating a downward trend, 8 are in areas where sagebrush was treated in the past. The primary reason for the downward rating relates to the return of sagebrush, which is a natural successional process in sagebrush habitat types. The Forest Service trend evaluation standards consider the re-establishment of sagebrush as undesirable, hence the downward trend.

Review of the 91 studies on 16 BLM allotments indicates key plants and the total ground cover is being maintained or improving slightly in most instances. All areas have experienced 5 years of serious drought conditions, coincidental with the number of years most allotments have been under improved management, which has hindered measurable improvement.

It is important to note that both the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management monitoring stations are all on upland sites. Recently, monitoring stations were installed in riparian areas.

Success Stories

The following examples are from our East Pioneer area:

- Critical elk winter range was identified on the Vipond Allotment where livestock water development was planned. The water was not developed to help reserve forage for wintering elk.
- Lack of water seriously restricted livestock distribution on the Dry Hollow pasture on the Vipond Allotment. A water wheel was installed to pump water over 900 vertical feet with minimum maintenance. Water is held in a storage tank and distributed as needed to water troughs on lands administered by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Departments of State Lands. The SCS cooperated in survey and design

of this and 2 other water systems (Figure 1).

- Noxious weed invasion became a serious problem. A coordinated program was implemented to control weeds on all ownerships. Landowners, utilities, agencies, and sportsmen have taken an active interest in seeing this program succeed. It has proven very successful in controlling noxious weeds, and is being used as a model for expanding this type of program throughout Montana and other states. The state legislature used it as a model when passing legislation resulting in additional funding for noxious weed control.

- The Bureau of Land Management administers a significant river front area along the Big Hole River, a nationally important trout fishing stream. Efforts to develop a recreation plan to guide management along this river corridor had encountered opposition. They requested assistance from our Steering Committee. Using this approach, the plan was completed in less than 1 year without further opposition (Figure 2).

- Vehicular travel management is a major program for maintaining wildlife security, during hunting season, and preventing the spread of noxious weeds and soil erosion. Our Stewardship Committee helped the BLM, Forest Service, and Montana Department of Fish and Wildlife and Parks revise the Interagency Travel Plan for Southwest Montana.

- An experimental program was initiated to transplant beaver back into streams where they were trapped out in the past. The objective of this program was to improve riparian values and increase water storage in the headwaters to achieve late season water flow. Hopefully this opportunity can be expanded in the future (Figure 3).

- A technical action group was assigned to evaluate bighorn sheep re-introduction into a historic use area. An increasing herd exists in part of the Experimental Stewardship Program area, but an additional herd may be added (Figure 4).

- One of the first proposals obstacles considered resulted in disagreement. The proposal was to remove livestock from a major Forest Service allotment and place them on rangeland managed by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, while evaluat-

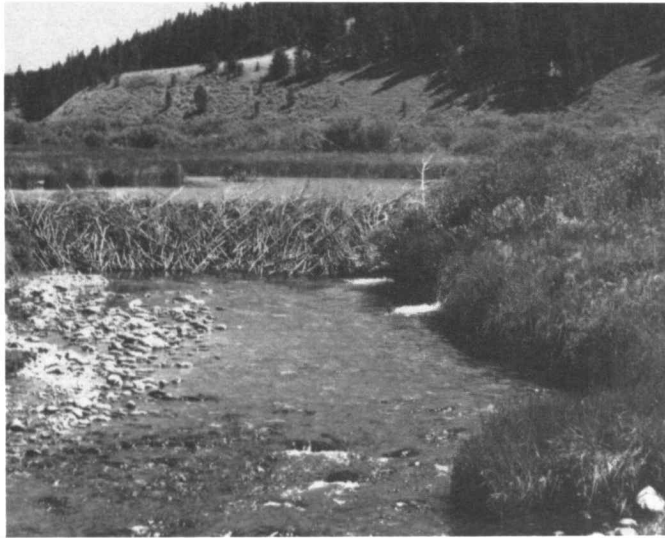


Fig. 3. Beaver Dam in the Upper Big Hole Watershed.



Fig. 4. A nationally significant bighorn sheep herd exists within the East Pioneer Experimental Stewardship Area. (Jack Jones photo).

•ing elk response to the livestock removal. Thankfully, this disagreement did not discourage participants, allowing many subsequent successes.

• Changes in personnel occasionally result in forgotten commitments. For example, in the Lost-Willow Allotment Management Plan, agreement was reached that some sagebrush/tree encroachment needed to be burned, but the Allotment Management Plan was not site-specific. When it came time to evaluate the burn, the Forest Service district utilized normal procedures, ignoring the Experimental Stewardship Program process. An appeal resulted. Successful sagebrush burning programs have been conducted elsewhere where opposition by some interests was likely had it not been for Stewardship Program evaluation.

• A continual problem is getting new people who come into the area to understand and utilize the process. Private interests apparently don't want to take the time, and some agency administrators seem to fear the process will somehow endanger their decision making authority.

We are pleased with the progress we have made. The program does not just include the livestock permittees and leasees, as identified in the original legislation, but the agency, wildlife, environmental, and other interests are directly involved in management decisions on the ground!

In conclusion, we have learned a great deal as an Experimental Stewardship Program and would like to provide information that might be useful to others solving resource problems.

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