

# Communications Between Range Managers and Ranchers A Federal Range Manager's Perspective.

Paul J. Butler

What is the biggest problem facing us today in range management of public lands? Is it biodiversity, riparian degradation, or multiple use conflicts? In my opinion it is none of the above. It is, without a doubt, **COMMUNICATION.**

We are in the most critical period public lands range management has ever seen in its history. Research and experience has provided us with the knowledge and skill to recognize what problems we face as federal land managers. Unfortunately, communication, the key ingredient to successful range management, has been the most often overlooked component.

Of all the jobs in the Forest Service, that of the range conservationist is the most challenging. Many times it can be the most thankless. It has been said that "There are days when no matter which way you spit, it's upwind." Effective, long-term communication with ranchers is possibly the single most difficult goal that we can set for ourselves.

In the 1990's, we must communicate the need to change. We must institute workable intensive management of all public rangelands so that this sustainable resource is available for future generations. In the 11 Western States, 69% of beef and 88% of lamb produced has been dependent to some extent on public lands. It is indeed a critical time for range management.

Many range managers lack training in becoming an effective communicator. Let us look closely at this problem for mid-level management and see how we can develop communication skills that will serve the resource and our constituents.

The deck is often stacked against the range conservationist and rancher in establishing long term communication. In the last 15 years, 50 to 80% of all range managers have come from urban environments of populations of 50,000 or more, many from cities in the eastern half of the United States. It is not easy for people from different cultural backgrounds to communicate.

To compound the problem of our rapidly urbanizing workforce, advancement within the ranks of government agencies is often only possible through transfer of station. This change of on-the-ground administration has often ham-

pered the development of long term communication. It takes a minimum of one year for a rancher to become familiar with a new range manager and at least two years before that range manager becomes familiar with the ground and effective in its management. It must be difficult, at best, for ranchers to endure this process. No two range conservationists are the same, yet we expect the rancher to endure the change, often significant change, of each new administration. The rancher, if he is to survive, must also adjust as much to changes in range administration as he does to the market. We have always looked towards the rancher when we find range conditions that do not meet our objectives, yet have we been successful in communicating to them how we expect the range to be managed?

As an evolving agency, we speak of new blood, fresh perspective, and change of direction. We must learn when to recognize and respect when change will benefit or hinder the resource and its users. We must not just react to the demands of a special interest group or a hidden agenda. I can compare this with the thought that every couple of years we change horses, leaving behind green broke colts that never mastered the flying lead change. We now emphasize ecosystem management, but the success of that management is dependent largely on our ability to communicate with our permittees. The Forest Service must also be cognizant that the job of a range conservationist is not a sacrifice position. It is a position that requires skill, knowledge, and the ability to communicate. If we are committed to improving rangeland resources, then we must insure that qualified and bona fide range managers are managing the range, and not just any one that can fill the grade.

In my estimation, of all our constituents, the ranching community is the most difficult and challenging in which to communicate. However, the majority of ranchers want the same things from us, fact and not emotion. We have come to believe that it is all up to the rancher, but it is not, for we are the leaders. To communicate our long-range goals, whether they be increased biodiversity or strict adherence to permit stipulations, we must be very careful to remember that if we turn our backs on the tenets of basic skills, we may set ourselves up to fail.

Five points must be re-visited on the road to establishing effective communications with ranchers, and each and every point revolves around the range manager establishing credibility:

1. Establish credibility by having intimate knowledge of the land, livestock, and range management principles.

Author is with the Caribou National Forest, Pocatello Ranger District, Federal Bldg., Suite 282, 250 S. 4th Ave., Pocatello, Idaho 83201.

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2. Trust factor.
3. Fairness factor.
4. Consistency factor.
5. Courage factor.

**ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY:** *The person who has had a bull by the tail once has learned 60 to 70 times as much as a person who hasn't. Mark Twain*

To build credibility we must become intimately knowledgeable of the land, livestock and range management principles. We as range conservationists have been on the job long enough to gain knowledge in range management principles, yet we lose the other side of the coin—intimacy with the land. All too often or easily, we become desk-bound and lose the feel for the ground. The result is arm-chair managing.

Why do mid-level managers let this happen? To a certain extent, it is what is expected of them. I am not the only range conservationist that has been told that my time should be spent in the office planning.

It is impossible to effectively plan in an office. The place to plan is in the field. The time to process information is in the off-season.

By planning in the field, we build intimacy with the resource. A range conservationist should spend no more than 5 to 10% of his time in the office during the field season.

It is obvious that there is much fear in dealing with the ranching community. Too many range managers would prefer to avoid confrontation. We lose our fear when we understand ranchers and their business. The key when dealing with range management problems, is simple: You must know the land and resource situation better than anyone else, including the rancher. Paul Ford Said, "It is easy to hold an opinion, but hard work to actually know what you

are talking about."

Time spent on-the-ground with permittees has slowly dwindled over the years. We should tie in with them at every opportunity, whether it is while they are working on range improvements, moving livestock, or shed lambing. All too many range managers do not have the skills needed to establish credibility. Knowledge of ground skills should never be restricted to range technicians. As range managers we should use those skills as a base from which to build credibility. Too many basic skills are overlooked today. How can we expect permit holders to react positively to intensified management proposals when they are forced to deal with unskilled range managers?

What is our knowledge of livestock itself? It may be more important than knowing grazing systems and plant physiology. Livestock is the tool that is used to convert forage to meat on nearly half of the earth's land surface. We are the managers of that tool. I would guess that the majority of range managers know less about livestock and livestock production than any single constituent part of range management.

We must be knowledgeable on diseases, genetics, herd instincts, vaccinations, ranch feed production, and market preferences, to name a few. To know livestock is to understand the rancher. Communication with ranchers is accomplished through realization of common ground. We can expect few of them to converse with us when we speak in scientific terminology. Yet few range managers can converse with ranchers when they speak of livestock production. Therefore, we must seek knowledge that brings us together in a common arena of communication. If we are committed to long-term communication with our constituents, we have an obligation to the resource to be as well-rounded in the field of range management as is possible.



Author Paul Butler on right with sheep rancher, Henry Etcheverry of Rupert, Idaho. Both are examining the effects of explosives used in pond construction.

**THE FACTOR OF TRUST:** *There is nothing so fatal to character as half finished tasks. David Lloyd George.*

Never tell a rancher that you will do something that does not get done. When you have the reputation of being a "doer" you will be viewed as one who can be trusted and can be relied upon.

How many of us have heard ranchers say "The government has been saying that for years and it has never been done." Surprise them by doing. Never promise what you cannot do.

When you have gained the trust of a rancher you will find that they notify you when something is wrong instead of waiting to see if you will find out for yourself. Once you have established credible knowledge of an allotment, most ranchers readily keep you up-to-date. They find that a partnership in management works much more smoothly.

ly than one built on antagonism. Once strong partnerships are developed, share decision making opportunities with permit holders. Bring them into the loop as full-time managers.

**THE FACTOR OF FAIRNESS:** *Sell the problem, then sell the solution. Scrapbook*

Build credibility by being fair. Treat all ranchers equally. Don't use two permit compliance books. When we are delinquent in taking action for permit violations, we condition the rancher to cut corners. Build respect by being firm, build credibility by being fair. When permit action is warranted, it must be taken, but it must also be justified. Show the rancher what is wrong and why, but never without an explanation of how to correct the problem, A permit is a contract. Both parties should treat it as such.

Never take someone else's word for what is happening on-the-ground regardless of who informs you. When you hear that something is wrong, see the problem first yourself, then act. It is a cardinal error to call a permit holder on the carpet without first determining the features of a problem with your own eyes.

**THE FACTOR OF CONSISTENCY:** *If we compromise our values, we may put into play strategies that we might find do not help us achieve our goals or objectives. Hans Bleiker*

The feature of consistency that bothers me most is our inconsistency as an agency. This ties in directly with our ability to communicate down the line.

As a professional range manager, I have at best a vague indication of the future of grazing on public lands. Not because the environmental movement has gathered so much steam, but because it may be quite possible that the Forest Service does not know which band wagon it wants to jump on. Unfortunately, politics dictate decisions which ultimately hurts resource management.

At the grass roots level, we can continue to emphasize to ranchers the importance of intensified management and the need to do a better job. However, they are as aware of the rhetoric from Washington as we are.

As range managers we hold the future of public lands grazing in the palm of our hands. There is no tomorrow if we do not communicate the need to intensify management. If we fail to get this consistent message across to all permit holders throughout the West, there will be no second chance.

In consistency we find success. Ranchers are more apt to respond favorably when they know what to expect from us as managers. We must both be on the same page, although it does take time to lay the groundwork. Sideboards such as stubble height standards or range improvement maintenance should be understood and monitored by both ranchers and range managers together to insure the success of any management plan. We must all be in agreement of the desired future condition and what our lack of success will incite.

**THE FACTOR OF COURAGE:** *Good ideas are not adopt-*

*ed automatically. They must be driven into practice with courageous impatience. Adm Hyman Rickover*

If a range conservationist has the knowledge and field experience to make a good decision, that person will be twice as effective as a manager if he has support from above. Sometimes we must take risks. I respect one who will.

If we are to find long-range success in range management, we must show support for decisions that are made on-the-ground by competent range managers. I am aware of numerous instances where line officers have refused to support permit action. All we are doing is rewarding that small percentage of ranchers who refuse to comply. The anti-grazing coalitions are not focusing their efforts on the 90% of ranchers who are doing a good job. Instead they advertise the failures of those ranchers who refuse to comply. We will have only ourselves to blame if the National Forests are locked-up and used solely for recreation. *You can't test courage cautiously, Scrapbook.*

For the sake of public lands grazing and for the long-term health of the ranching industry, we must insist on full compliance. This is where credibility is especially important. Where ranchers know that our long-term goal is to help them, rather than run them off public lands, they will be much less reluctant to invest in improved management.

## Summary

Communications should be one of our strongest goals in today's rangeland management. It is not enough to institute progressive program direction such as ecosystem management. We must have a balanced mix where advanced rangeland management is coupled with the ability to implement it. We MUST increase our time conferring with the people who graze their livestock.

Think hard about what I am saying. Whether you are a range manager or a line officer, are you doing the job that needs to be done? Richard Shrake, world renowned horse trainer quotes a saying that he hangs in his barn. "It's what you learn AFTER you think you know it all, that really counts."

Many range managers still believe that ranching is one of the last bastions of a way of life that promotes family values and responsibility in caring for the land. In the 1990's we must remember to stay close to our roots, for no matter how much modern technology is available, if we are to maintain the long-term health of the ecosystem and associated ranching industry, we must provide the leadership through communications which will drive us into the 21st century.

## References

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