What will become of the West?

The winds of economic, social and environmental change are blowing in the western United States. What will these changes mean for America's wide-open spaces?

Dan Macon
AgResource Solutions
February 1, 1998

Recently, National Public Radio's Morning Edition featured reports that touched on two modern themes in the American West: conflicts over the use of public lands and the impacts of the information age on the West's environment. At first glance, these issues may seem unrelated. Closer inspection, however, reveals insights into the challenge facing westerners and into the prospects for resolving these challenges.

The West has always represented opportunity to Americans. The vast expanses of unpopulated rangelands, forests and mountains west of the 100th meridian have historically served as an outlet for a growing U.S. population. The region's vast resources fueled America's economic growth in the late 19th and 20th centuries, and its aesthetic qualities and recreational opportunities have attracted the likes of John Muir and Bill Gates. The combination of a wealth of natural resources and natural beauty has long created conflicts over the uses of the West and divergent views on the future of the region.

Until the dawn of the information age, resource-based industries, like ranching and farming, timbering, mining and fishing, dominated the West's economic landscape. These industries largely provided food and raw materials to fuel the rest of the country's economy. As new technologies have improved our ability to communicate, however, new economic endeavors have become an important part of the West. With cellular phones, laptop computers and satellite communications, financial advisors can work in Wyoming as easily as on Wall Street. As our cities become more crowded, quality of life becomes an important recruiting tool for many companies. The employees of high technology firms often prefer the Sierra Nevada foothills or Seattle's Puget Sound to the industrial/urban northeast. Improved transportation systems allow greater flexibility in locating manufacturing and distribution centers.

The "quality of life" that draws so many companies and individuals to the West bears closer examination. The very qualities that have allowed the West's resource-based industries to succeed contribute to the region's aesthetic attractiveness. Clear streams, mountain meadows, thick forests, and stunning coastlines now must provide more than water, grass and timber. The West's newer inhabitants want hiking trails, wildlife habitat and parks: "resources" that contribute to their quality of life. Different ideas about the use of the same resources have created many of the current conflicts over land use and management.

Another source of potential conflict in the West is the myth that the region is a haven for the rugged individualist. Measured by any criteria, success in the West has always required cooperation and community. From the development of water projects to the management of rangelands, the West's past economic success has always required cooperative effort. Despite this record, westerners have always valued their perceived self-reliance. The prospects for individual freedom are equally attractive to the West's newer residents. The cowboy-based myth of the "rugged individual" has the potential of creating conflicts between the region's traditional industries and the emerging emphasis on environmental preservation.

The demographic and economic changes in today's West are in fact creating tensions between resource-based industries and those who value the role of aesthetic beauty in providing for quality of life. Ranchers are accused of abusing rangelands and feeding at the government trough of "cheap" public lands. Environmentalists are accused of being "anti" everything and of seeking to control all economic activity. Those who are already here are accused of wanting to lock the gates behind them to preserve any remaining open space and natural beauty. We expend huge amounts of time and money suing one another over the appropriate use and management of western lands. The future of the West, however, depends upon our ability to see beyond these conflicts to the cooperative efforts that will provide both economic opportunity and environmental health.

Western ranching provides an important illustration of the relationship between economic and environmental values. Many ranchers in the 11 western states utilize public rangelands to provide enough forage to make their operations economically viable. In addition to providing grass for sheep and cattle, these public rangelands are home to numerous species of wild plants and animals. They improve water quality by filtering sediments and nutrients, and provide a wide variety of recreational opportunities. To qualify to use these public lands, ranchers must own enough pri-
vate land and/or water to sustain their livestock for part of the year, and these private lands are equally as important environmentally. Many of the wild animals that spend summers on public lands rely on private lands for winter habitat. Private ranchlands provide most of the remaining privately owned open spaces in the West. If ranching becomes unprofitable (for whatever reason), many ranchers have no choice but to develop their lands. Houses and strip malls obviously provide less habitat than ranches.

A number of communities and organizations have begun to recognize the interdependence of economic and ecological well being. The Sonoran Institute in Arizona was founded on the principle that the ecological integrity of protected lands and the economic aspirations of adjoining landowners and communities are mutually compatible. Environmentalist and author Mark Reisner (Cadillac Desert) has proposed providing discounts on irrigation water for farmers who agree to keep their lands in agriculture for a long period of time. "Nearly every bird, mammal, amphibian or insect is apt to prefer a farmed field to a treeless new development or shopping mall," Reisner recently told the Los Angeles Times. Each of these success stories is based upon the recognition that the challenges of the West require cooperation.

The need for cooperation, however, does not end with the conservation of private and public open space. History tells us that growth is inevitable in the West. We must also seek cooperative solutions to our need for more housing and jobs. Eliminating development to protect our environment is no more sustainable than using all of our resources as if we had an unlimited supply. Partnerships between the West's urban centers and rural communities must find economically and environmentally viable solutions to growth.

The natural beauty and abundant resources of the American West provide the foundation for the region's economic success and quality of life. Many westerners have realized that prosperity and environmental health are not mutually exclusive, and yet we still face numerous conflicts over the use and management of our natural resources. As we face the prospect of an increasingly diverse and numerous population, we must seek and support the examples of cooperation and collaboration that are successfully resolving these conflicts. Our past tells us that cooperation is essential; our future demands a new commitment to such cooperation.

AgResource Solutions, based in Penryn, California, is a consulting firm dedicated to providing common ground solutions for agriculture and natural resources. The company provides conflict resolution, resource management and communications services, as well as ranch and farm diversification advice. Comments on this article can be sent to Dan Macon, AgResource Solutions, 2660 Taylor Road, Penryn, CA 95663 or e-mailed to: dmacon@pacbell.net.

granite SEED
• Pasture & Range
• Erosion Control
• Alfalfa
• Custom Seed Blends
• Over 300 Species in Stock
• Fast, professional service

Call or Fax for our Catalog (801) 531-1456, Fax (801) 768-3967
Granite Seed Co., P.O. Box 177, Lehi, Utah 84043