Our Forgotten Rangelands

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Range resources played only a small role in the first round of national forest plans, the Society for Range Management believes, and the Committee of Scientists' proposal for identifying lands suitable for values other than timber production is still vague. But the committee's strong appeal for a collaborative approach to planning, the opportunity for involvement at multiple levels, and the emphasis on local input will help ensure that range managers can become involved. If they can't, controversy resulting from the past lack of direction for rangelands may continue.

The range management profession has followed the land and resource management planning process on the national forests with great interest since its inception in the early 1980s. We have also had a number of concerns with the way the current process affects rangeland ecosystems and issues. Because of these concerns the Society for Range Management made comments available to the Committee of Scientists for use in developing their recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture.

The current approach to forest planning, as represented in the first round of plans, has proven cumbersome, time consuming, and expensive. Although some of this may have been unavoidable because the process was being developed along with the first plans, our fear has been that revisions and the new plans would continue on this same path. One problem with the current approach has been that the separation of planning from management and implementation has funneled both funding and personnel into planning—at the expense of other management activities.

Our recommendation was to look at planning as a continuous process in which revisions would be completed incrementally as landscape assessments were completed. In this approach, planning would be part of the continuing work process rather than an expensive special project. The Committee of Scientists' proposal for a multi-level approach linked to funding, implementation, and monitoring would package the job of resource management into one continuous flow, rather than set up planning and field programs in competition with one another for people and dollars.

Another concern has been the misunderstanding about the use of guidelines in place of objectives in efforts to implement present plans. This happens when plan prescriptions do not clearly articulate the desired condition that the guideline was designed to achieve. A planning process should lead to the development of clear objectives or desired conditions. Guidelines would then be used as monitoring tools for management practices designed to move toward the desired conditions. Obviously the committee recognized the importance of a clearly stated desired condition at each planning level, and that concept is among the recommendations.

The subject of suitability has been difficult in planning for rangeland ecosystems. The current regulations are directed at developing criteria and mapping areas suitable for timber harvest but are not particularly clear on suitability as range. This has led to litigation on some national forests in recent years. Under the current concept, forest plans should identify areas capable of and suitable for grazing, but the terms have been misused and misunderstood. Capability analysis is the identification of areas with physical characteristics conducive to livestock grazing: that is, areas that produce adequate forage and are accessible to livestock. Suitability analysis is the identification of areas already determined to be capable, where grazing is found appropriate considering economics, environmental consequences, rangeland conditions, and other uses or value of the area.

The committee has commented on the determination of suitability for various resource management practices as an activity that would take place at the large-landscape planning level. Again, the determination of lands suitable for timber production is covered, but determinations for other resource use are still vague. Since this question has been an issue subject to appeal and litigation in the past, it should be clarified more directly in future regulations.

The current approach to fish and wildlife planning is based on the selection of management indicator species, the presumption being that population changes will be indicative of both the effects of management activities and overall ecosystem health. The use of this approach has been controversial, and its scientific basis has been questioned in some instances. As an alternative we have recommended that planning focus on habitat, in terms of composition, type, structure, and quality required to meet the needs of species. The committee's recommendation of selecting "focal species" as indicators of ecosystem health, even though used in tandem with the assessment of ecosystem composition, structure, and process, seems to be similar to the current approach and may have some of the same weaknesses.

In many instances range re-
Most people would support the idea of managing for sustainable ecosystems, but nevertheless it is not going to be easy to get general public approval. There are two words that in the course of my career I have learned to avoid when I explain resource programs to many groups: “ecosystem” (the e-word) and “sustainability.” What these terms mean to many is “limitation” and “regulation.”

As the Committee of Scientists has stated, planning and management must proceed in the face of legitimate but often divergent interests. I hope the future will bring an increased understanding of these concepts by all interests and that resource management will take place in a less controversial environment.

It is encouraging that the committee is recommending the collaborative approach to planning. This is a concept that the Society for Range Management has supported for many years. Collaboration by its definition will create the cooperative environment necessary to ensure that all parties have opportunity to participate. We continue to sponsor workshops in coordinated resource management, which we feel is an effective and successful collaborative process. One caution, however, is that some participative projects can actually create new levels of bureaucracy, which may have negative effects on planning and implementation. I have seen this happen with some advisory committees.

The planning approach recommended by the Committee of Scientists includes most if not all of the elements needed to move national forest planning to a more effective level.