Rangeland is the single largest natural resource in Idaho, with 9.5 million acres comprising about 44% of the land base (Hart 1994). We cannot overestimate the importance of rangelands, both public and private, to the people of Idaho. These lands provide a substantial forage base for livestock as well as wildlife habitat, minerals, water sources, water quality, many types of recreation, erosion control, and natural beauty and aesthetics. Rangelands also represent a continuing public policy challenge for landowners, land managers and the people of Idaho.

Different groups have different perceptions about range resources and their management. These perceptions become very real when groups are in conflict over range management policies. The Idaho Rangeland Resources Commission (IRRC) was established in 1994 to use education and research to address the many conflicting perceptions regarding rangelands and their management. The IRRC is unique in that it is a state commission designated to promote responsible management of a resource rather than the promotion of a particular commodity. A major goal of the Rangeland Commission is to understand public perceptions of range issues in Idaho and to use those perceptions as points of departure to educate people about responsible management of rangelands.

Background
Livestock production is a primary industry in Idaho. In 1997, sales of cattle and calves were over $900 million, and sales of sheep and wool were almost $30 million. Cattle and calves represented almost 20% of total farm receipts in 1997. This ranked first among all commodities, just edging out dairy products at 19% of receipts (USDA 1999). Many of these cattle graze at least part of each year on private, state and federal rangelands. However, livestock grazing is only one of the many activities that take place on Idaho’s rangelands. How the people of Idaho view grazing as well as other uses of rangelands will determine the future policy agenda for the state.

A telephone survey of 800 people in Idaho was conducted in July 1997 to gather their perceptions of resource management, including rangelands. Eight percent say they are “very” knowledgeable and forty four percent say they are “somewhat” knowledgeable. About forty eight percent of the respondents indicate that they are “not very” or “not at all” knowledgeable about rangeland issues. Almost half of the respondents have a limited knowledge of rangeland issues.

What issues about range management concern these respondents? Figure 1 displays respondent concerns about range management in Idaho. About one third of the respondents did not have a major concern about rangelands. Overgrazing was a major concern for 14% of the sample. Twenty-one separate concerns accounted for 5% or less of the remaining responses. Overgrazing obviously concerned many people in the sample, although only 8% indicate that they are “very knowledgeable” about range issues. This contradictory result indicates that concern for overgrazing could very well be the result of perceptions rather than exposure to information about grazing. This tension between public perception and public knowledge motivates the educational programs of the IRRC.

For these education programs to succeed, the sources of information and those providing the education must both be perceived as legitimate. Their public legitimacy depends on the public viewing them as credible. Respondents rated the perceived credibility of these organizations and individuals when they make statements concerning controversial issues as shown in Figure 2. Ranchers are ranked as the most credible with seventy percent of respondents saying they “usually feel I can believe” what ranchers say. Fifty percent or more said they “usually” feel that the U.S. Forest
Service, scientists, forest product companies and the Bureau of Land Management can be believed. Only thirty one percent of respondents said they "usually" believe environmental groups on controversial issues.

Survey results also indicate that people generally support multiple uses of rangelands. Figure 3 shows how compatible respondents think habitat protection; hunting and grazing are on rangelands. Combined, eighty-nine percent of the respondents felt that these activities are "very" or "somewhat" compatible. In addition to their attitudes concerning compatibility, Figure 4 indicates that forty two percent of those surveyed think livestock grazing "definitely" should be part of management on private, state and federal lands. An additional thirty five percent think that grazing "probably" should be part of federal land management. Figure 5 shows that when decisions are made about federal land in particular, eighty percent of respondents at least agree that local economies should be given a "high priority."

Attitudes are opinions about what ought to be and beliefs are opinions about the way things are. Summarizing the results shows that about half of the survey respondents believe they have limited knowledge of range issues but believe that overgrazing is an important concern. They also express attitudes that ranchers and land managers can be trusted, that the many uses of rangelands are compatible, that public and private land should continue to be used for grazing, and that federal land grazing decisions should take local economies into account. The IRRC mission and programs are designed to address this mix of beliefs and attitudes so that the public becomes better educated about range issues and can participate more effectively in range policy debates.

**Mission**

A major social and political need is to educate the public about policies that balance economic and environmental outputs from Idaho rangelands and sustain Idaho communities. The IRRC's enabling legislation reflects the nature of this challenge. The IRRC is developed "...to promote the economic and environmental welfare of the counties and the state by providing a means for the collection and dissemination of information and research regarding the management and uses of the county's and the state's public and private rangeland resources and the livestock grazing industry."3

The survey results reported above indicate that significant opportunities exist to educate the general public about their economic, social, and ecological relationship to the rangeland resources of Idaho. These opportunities require that the Rangeland Commission maintain its integrity and credibility by gathering accurate, factual and timely information. Three strategies for using this information to meet educational goals have been developed. One strategy is educational communication through mass media. Potential target audiences for these efforts include decision-makers, news media, opinion leaders and resource managers. Specific audiences and messages are developed and targeted through public surveys and other information. The second strategy is the funding of education and research projects, which further the goals and mission of the Commission. Finally, the Commission carries out all of its activities in cooperation with federal and state agencies and entities. This cooperation allows these agencies and the IRRC to share information and professional knowledge.
Current Projects

The IRRC has current projects in two basic areas: education and public awareness/relations. In the education arena, the main thrust is raising the profile of range issues in Idaho schools. The Rangeland Commission cooperated in three major teacher workshops. First, the Commission sponsored an in-service training on rangeland topics for Idaho Agricultural Science & Technology instructors. Second, in conjunction with the Idaho Forest Products Commission, the Commission co-sponsored a teacher workshop on Fire Ecology. An existing educational program in Idaho is Project WET in which IRRC has recently become a partner. This project promotes awareness and stewardship of water resources through the development of classroom teaching aids and materials. The IRRC contributed information concerning riparian ecosystems, watersheds and grazing practices to this well-known teacher education project. Additional education projects include hosting the first annual Youth Range Camp in the summer of 1999, and the creation and distribution of “Rangelands of Idaho” and “Range Plants of Idaho” posters for classroom use.

The IRRC has primarily utilized radio and television media to increase public awareness of range issues. Two radio spots were produced and aired in 1998. They consisted of a talk show format entitled “Wildlife Forum” where various animals related how important private rangeland is to a variety of species in providing critical habitat. The aired television spots focused on ranchers as responsible stewards of rangeland. New radio and television projects are planned for 1999 and beyond.

The IRRC has other projects as well. “Opinion leader” range tours are planned for the summer of 1999. These tours bring media and policy makers together for on the ground discussions of range issues. The commission is also funding a research study on the economic values derived from Idaho rangelands.

Organization

The Commission funds its education and research projects using revenues gathered from livestock producers. This funding arrangement is reflected in the IRRC’s organizational structure. The governor appoints five Commission members that are nominated in one of three ways. The Idaho Cattle Association offers nominations for two (2) seats, the Idaho Wool Growers for one (1) seat, and the Idaho Rangeland Committee for the remaining two (2) seats. In addition to the Commission members, the legislature appointed a permanent advisory panel. This nonvoting panel includes the representatives of the federal land management and conservation agencies, the Land Grant University, state agencies, and a representative of the Idaho Rangeland Committee.

Fees assessed on private and public rangeland fund the IRRC. These assessments are:
1. $.02 per acre on private dry land grazing land.
2. $.10 per AUM on active use BLM and USFS AUM’s.
3. $.10 per AUM on active use of state grazing lease AUM’s.

The fee is refundable, all or in part, if the landowner so requests within thirty days of payment. Request for refunds are currently about 7%.

Challenges

Debates over range management in Idaho are often heated. The primary challenge for the IRRC is to educate the public about rangelands in general, and to increase public understanding about how we can manage them to derive a variety of uses. Sound research and accurate, factual and timely information are vital to accomplishing this educational goal. If the IRRC meets this challenge, the Idaho public will benefit from sustainable management of rangelands and the enjoyment of rangeland for many uses.

Supporting Literature


Appendix

1. The Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission’s web page address is: http://www.irrc.state.id.us/irrc/

Endnotes

1Idaho Statutes Title 58, § 58–1401 (1994).
2A private firm conducted the survey. The sample was chosen via random digit dialing and weighted by population for each county in Idaho. The sampling error was ± 3.5%.
3The Idaho Statutes describing the duties, authorities, and powers of the IRRC are Idaho Statutes Title 58 § 58–1408 (1994), and they can be found at http://www.idwr.state.id.us/idstat/TOC/58014KTGC.html

Authors are assistant professor, Department of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology, University of Idaho, Moscow Ida. 83844-2334; Executive Director, Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, P.O. Box 126, Emmett Ida. 83617