Range Management and the Political Process

Rep. E. "Kika" De La Garza, D-Tex.,

I am glad you have given me the chance to meet here today with so many people whose goals I share.

During my years as Chairman of a Subcommittee with jurisdiction over a number of major areas affecting range policy, some of us have often worked together in efforts to make government a more effective partner in range management. Now that I have been given the new responsibility of serving as Chairman of the full House Agriculture Committee, I hope that relationship will continue and improve.

I will no longer chair the Subcommittee with direct responsibility for areas including agricultural and range research and pesticide legislation. But as Chairman of the full Agriculture Committee in the new 97th Congress, I will continue to have a deep interest both in these issues, and in other matters affecting rangeland which come within our Committee jurisdiction.

The new Congress will be deeply concerned with doing everything it can to work with President Reagan and his administration to get inflation under control. That means we are going to see a great concentration on holding down federal spending. And that means, also, that the American people and their representatives in Washington are going to have to make some hard choices.

When we hold down government budgets, we are going to face decisions that will pinch some groups in our society. But if we are going to serve the lasting interests of the whole nation, we are going to have to build a consensus on what our real priorities are.

I think everyone can agree that the answer doesn't lie in cutting everything in sight by some fixed percentage across the board. There are some things the government does, like defense, where our current priorities may call for actually spending more for the present, at least. There are some civilian areas, like agricultural research, where the basic needs of the nation—for today and for the future—add up to a clear need for maintaining and increasing public support.

We have to make priority decisions, even though some lower-priority operations may have to be reduced. And if we are going to succeed, we must show the public that the choices we support really are in the best long-term interests of the whole country.

What I am talking about is the political process.

Some people treat "politics" as a second-class word—about as respectable as stealing sheep. I don't.

Politics is the process through which the American people decide what they want to do.

Politics is the tool which Americans use to decide what things they want to do individually, and what things they want to do together, working through the government they hire.

I am NOT talking about party politics, Democratic or Republican. I am talking about the involvement of individuals and groups of ranchers, scientists and others in providing the information and education which add up to sound national policy. That is an important and vital part of what I call the political process.

As part of that process, we need the expertise your Society contributes on issues like gaining understanding of the many uses and resources of rangeland, both private and public. We need the expert knowledge you can contribute as we develop policy in fields including regulation, research, and grazing. I know the Society has made contributions in these and other areas in the past, and I hope it will make even greater contributions in the future.

The membership of the Society is broad. You include ranchers, research scientists, teachers, people associated with business and industry, government administrators, students and technicians. You have interests and specialized disciplines ranging from wildlife biology to livestock production, and from soil science to economics. You are, in fact, probably the best vehicle available for developing a consensus among all groups in our society which are affected by what happens to rangeland. We need that consensus so we can get on with the business of managing our private and public lands to meet the present and future needs of the American people.

One of the areas in which consensus is important is the field of regulatory policy. Range management is far from the only area affected by regulatory programs, but range management obviously is going to be concerned by where we go in this field. I believe we are moving toward a better, healthier and sounder national approach to government regulatory programs in general.

Every one of us wants effective protection of health and the environment. There are no more dedicated environmentalists than the men and women whose lives are bound up in the quality of the land and water from which we get our food and other basic needs. Nobody knows better than a farmer or rancher that an eroded field will not produce corn, and a poisoned range will not produce cattle or sheep.

But while we want protection, we want it based on sound scientific and economic knowledge, not on an attitude that leads to regulatory overkill with little real concern about the effects on other needs of the public and producers.

Last year, Congress took an action which did not get wide publicity, but which was a welcome step toward an improved regulatory system. That action was an amendment to the law which continued authority for federal pesticide control programs through September 1981. In one section of that law,
Congress set up a procedure under which regulations issued by the Environmental Protection Agency will now be subject to a potential Congressional veto.

The new veto power does not apply to orders banning pesticides. It does, however, provide that many other potentially important future regulations can be killed if both Houses of Congress vote to disapprove them.

The is an authority which I hope Congress never has to use. By creating it, however, I think we have given a signal about the kind of approach which should be taken on regulatory decisions in the future.

The 1980 amendments which established the Congressional veto also provided another step in pesticide regulatory policy. Under those amendments, we have required procedures for peer review of EPA scientific decisions. . . and we have also clarified the authority of the agency's Scientific Advisory Panel.

These amendments underline the continuing concern of the House Agriculture Committee for basing regulatory decisions on a broad and sound foundation of scientific information. I hope the Society for Range Management will take advantage of all available chances to appear before the Scientific Advisory Panel. I hope you will join the Department of Agriculture, and all the affected user and industry groups, in developing the best available information on questions considered by the Panel for the Environmental Protection Agency.

During 1981, the Agriculture Committee will again be considering another extension of appropriation authority for pesticide control programs. The current authorization for spending under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act runs out on September 30th. When our Subcommittee and the full Committee considers this bill, I am sure we will be taking a close look at how the EPA is implementing our 1980 amendments.

One of our goals in the regulatory field should be to give professional land managers the greatest possible amount of flexibility consistent with safety in choosing the tools they use—and that includes the use of herbicides in range management.

In that area, I am informed that EPA proceedings on a possible cancellation of use of 2,4,5-T on rangelands will probably not reach the stage of a decision by the agency Administratory until at least well into 1982. As far as 2,4-D is concerned, EPA has decided after preliminary review that it finds no evidence at present to justify any regulatory steps, although manufacturers have been asked to fill some gaps in data files. More recently, the agency has indicated that some dioxin contamination problems reportedly found in Canadian products do NOT appear to be present in this country.

Another step which points toward a sounder regulatory approach for the future was taken by Congress late last year.

This was an amendments ordering the Food and Drug Administration to conduct a study of methods of making scientific risk assessments of carcinogens and other public health hazards. We understand that the FDA will soon be awarding a contract for that study. By some time in the middle of 1982, we can hope to see the results—and those results should be helpful to Congress, the scientific community, and the public in considering pesticide and food safety issues, including the Delaney amendment.

I do not intend today to go back over the long controversy over the Delaney amendments, which is now more than two decades old. The key fact is, however, that in its present form it represents a rigid regulatory approach which may no longer serve the best interest of the American people. I believe there is growing sentiment in the country and in the Congress for a new look at the question of how we can protect food safety without ignoring progress in science and technology.

In addition to the wide range of government regulatory programs, there will be many other ways in which government policy will affect our use of rangelands and range resources in the future.

One of these areas is federal policy on agricultural and range research. I want to be very emphatic about this point. To anyone who is concerned about this nation's ability to feed itself and the world in the future, agricultural research must be a top priority issue.

We know that world demand for food and fiber is growing steadily. We have heard repeated warnings that America's production potential must grow if we are to meet those demands a decade or two from now. And we know that if we are to meet those needs, the place we must start is in the research area. Progress toward the growth we expect to need in food supplies must begin in state experiment stations and universities, in private industry research agencies, and in our federal research agencies.

Part of whatever we do about agricultural research in general must be a much stronger range research program. I have tried in the past to encourage expanded range research through USDA programs, and I remain committed to doing whatever can be done in this field.

The House Agriculture Committee this year has pending a bill amending the research section of the 1977 Farm Act. One potential course open to us would be to recommend, in a Committee report on these amendments later this year, that range research be expanded. But whatever tactical steps may be used, I intend to do my best to work with the new Administration toward a stronger range research program—a program based on increasing output of the many resources we get from ranges.

There is one particular research field related to range management which needs special attention. That is the issue of expanded research to develop improved predator control programs.

The need in this area is clear. Predator damage to sheep and other livestock and should be reduced, and I believe this can be done in an environmentally sound manner. We have made some progress in this field, but more can and must be done. I am preparing to introduce legislation which would direct the Agriculture and Interior Departments to develop and carry out a balanced animal damage control program which effectively uses both lethal and nonlethal control measures.

In addition to research programs, everyone affected by range issues involving National Forest lands must be concerned with the treatment they get in the Resource Planning Act documents prepared by the Administration. When those documents came to Congress last year they did not give proper emphasis to rangeland needs.

The Resource Planning Act documents are important because, under law, they are designed to form the basis for future funding requests for forest and rangeland programs. Because of this, everyone interested in ranges should look carefully at what Congress did last fall about the RPA documents.
As part of the current Interior Department Appropriations Act, Congress rewrote the RPA statement of policy. Our version, which is now law instead of the initial Administration version, points out that the federal data base on rangelands must be improved; it states that ranges should be improved so that they can provide 310 million animal units of forage by the year 2030 compared with the current level of 213 million units; and it states that the Carter Administration's high-level program proposals may be too narrow to meet the nation's needs.

The fact is that many of us in Congress seriously question the economic analysis methods which have been used in the past in evaluating ranges. Many of us would like to see a more realistic system of evaluating grazing—and particularly, we would like full recognition of the many other resources and values which ranges provide.

The legislative agenda of the 97th Congress, incidentally, will also include reauthorization of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the basic statute for the Bureau of Land Management. This bill does not come to our Agriculture Committee, but we will be watching developments closely so that we can request a voice in any specific items which may fall within our jurisdiction.

Another area of important interest to range users is the process of classifying government lands for either wilderness or multiple uses. Decisions on classifying land should be made as quickly as practical. Land which does not meet the criteria for wilderness preservation should be released as rapidly as possible for multiple-use management.

As we are glad that Congress last year adopted by reference, in passing the Colorado Wilderness Act, the guidelines the Interior Committee wrote for grazing in National Forest wildernesses. Those guidelines allow, for example the replacement of deteriorated facilities for grazing in wilderness. I regard the guidelines as an important and helpful modification of classic wilderness management.

There is a long list of other areas of government policy which affect the management and future use of rangeland in the country.

Soil conservation policy is important. We have been warned repeatedly that we need to make more progress in this field if we are to safeguard the nation in the long run.

Land use policy is important. Congress has taken the position in the past that the primary emphasis in land use should be to keep decisions in private and local hands as far as possible. I support this and expect that this policy will continue.

Specific questions like predator control are important. Improved control of predators is more than something we should do. It is something we must do in order to eliminate a continuing serious economic drain which can cripple many sheep producers and damage consumer interests.

I was pleased last year when the Interior Department, following hearings on a predator control bill before my Subcommittee, decided to resume research on use of a toxicant in an environmentally safe control program. I hope we can take further steps forward in the future.

More than a year ago, the Agriculture Department issued a basic Statement of Range Policy—Secretary's Memorandum No. 1999. That statement contains, it seems to me, a comprehensive and useful summary of the importance of rangelands to our nation, and a sound outline of the goals we should be moving toward in range policy. The statement recognizes, for example, that while ranges are vital grazing resources, they also produce many other values—minerals, water, wildlife and fish, recreation and even historical and cultural sites.

What is missing now is a better rate of progress toward those goals. I hope that you and I, working together, can help improve that progress.

Editor's Note: Usually we don’t publish talks given at Annual Meetings, but several reviewers and I feel that this one should be published. We do this primarily for the benefit of the 5,000 members who did not hear it.