Sagebrush Rebellion—Another Point of View

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People have been fussing and even fighting about ownership and control of land in the Western United States beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and continuing to the present Sagebrush Rebellion.

The Public Domain at its broadest extent consisted of three-fourths of the continental U.S. and nearly all of Alaska, a total of 1.8 billion acres. According to Karl Landstrom in the 1958 Yearbook of Agriculture, "the Public Domain was acquired by cessions from the 13 original states, 1781 to 1803; the Louisiana Purchase, 1803; the Spanish Cession of Florida, 1819; the Oregon Compromise, 1846; the Mexican Cession, 1848; the Texas Purchase, 1850; the Gadsden Purchase, 1853; and the Alaska Purchase, 1867."

Disposal of Public Domain was done for one of three reasons: (1) to raise revenue, (2) to encourage settlement, and (3) for internal improvement.

The end result has been that Public Domain is almost nonexistent in the East; almost all of it is in the 11 western states and Alaska.

Some refer to the Sagebrush Rebellion as the Sagebrush Rip-off. Perhaps that is an indication of the emotionalism associated with the issue. Before people get too concerned about "closure of access to Federal lands and loss of multiple use management," they should read Colorado SB 170 and/or HB 1025. Both issues are addressed in each of those documents.

SB 170 specifically "provides that, upon transfer of public lands to the State, such lands shall be administered in accordance with principles of multiple use and sustained yield and with consideration and provisions for public access and conservation."

Another concern is that most states couldn't handle the financial burden and "the eventual sale of public lands to private interests would be inevitable."

SB 170 "directs that no disposal of public lands may occur unless authorized by the general assembly."

Lebaron, Godfrey and Nielson reported on the "Sagebrush Rebellion An Economic Analysis" in the fall 1980 issue of Utah Science. (Also, in February 1981 issue of Rangelands.) Their analysis of the question "Can States Afford Take Over?" As far as BLM lands are concerned, the general answer is a qualified yes if the states obtain all mineral and timber rights. Oregon, New Mexico, and Wyoming would be "in the black" immediately. Utah and Nevada would be "in the red" in relatively small amounts. Other states might be better or worse off. Alaska aside, Idaho taxpayers would face possibly the biggest relative burden.

In fiscal year 1980, $48,986,200 income was generated from 8.3 million acres of BLM land in Colorado including mining, timber, grazing, etc., 7.9 million BLM acres were utilized by approximately 693,000 animal unit months grazing generating $1,107,340 gross income, of which $187,000 was distributed back to Colorado.

The U.S. Forest Service collected $1.8 million in grazing fees in Colorado and returned $444,450 back to Colorado counties. Data on mining and timber income from National Forests are not yet available.

Many questions are unanswered regarding the Sagebrush Rebellion and there are some legitimate concerns.

People who are most vocal regarding the Sagebrush Rebellion; i.e., the Federal agencies maintaining managerial control of Public Domain would not consider allowing or requesting that the Federal Government manage our wildlife populations. The Colorado Division of Wildlife does an outstanding job managing our wildlife. It is just possible that another state agency could do an equally outstanding job of managing our public lands. If we do trust our state legislature and the effort they have put into the Sagebrush Rebellion, is it not possible that this is not a rip-off to get public lands into private control?

Update Note: SB 170 and HB 1025 were passed in 1981 by the Colorado Assembly but were vetoed by the governor.