

Does Any Good Come from the BLM's Planning and Environmental Statements?

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Throughout the West, as here in Utah, the statement is often heard from users of the public lands, "Does any good come from the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Land Use Planning and Environmental Statement (ES) Processes?" While it is common to hear of grazing cuts that put people out of business with no consideration for the local economy, as a result of this process, little is heard of the positive good that can result. Since nearly all BLM land within the state is in one stage or another of the planning and ES process, a look at what is going on may be beneficial.

First, it should be understood that the planning process is now centered around the Environmental Statements that are court-ordered as a result of a lawsuit against BLM by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in 1974. The result of this case was not only the Bureau would do ES's on the land administered by the BLM, but the court order also gave a time limit for this work to be done. It appeared that the best way to make beneficial use of the ES's process would be to merge it with the already existing Land-Use Planning System.

The first step in the planning system is to gather information about the land. For grazing this information gathering is done by vegetation inventories. Information is also gathered on soils, wildlife, mineral, recreation, land and access, archaeology, and other fields. Once the vegetation inventories are completed the next step is to come up with the alternatives that are available for the use of each resource. In Rangeland Management, several questions may surface during this step. For example, how many wildlife and wild horses could graze an allotment if no changes were made in livestock use? What is the most efficient mix of cattle, sheep, wildlife, and wild horses? Where and what type of range improvement projects are possible on the allotment.

In the third step of the planning process the manager looks at all the possibilities for use on a given allotment and makes a recommendation for the best future use of that area. These recommendations for the allotments then become the subject of the Environmental Statement. Simply stated, the ES looks at what the projected environmental effects would be if the manager's recommendation is followed. The ES also looks at the social and economic effects of these recommendations.

After the ES is completed the District Manager considers the ES, public concerns, the area manager's recommendation, and any other pertinent information and makes his decision as to the future use of each allotment. After these



Helicopter spraying sagebrush with 2-4D can increase forage production many times. 80-90 percent kill of sagebrush is common.

decisions have been made, the implementation of the decision begins. In some allotments this has resulted in grazing cuts, while increases have occurred in others. For example, final decision on the planning process completed for Rich County in 1979 would have resulted in grazing increases for

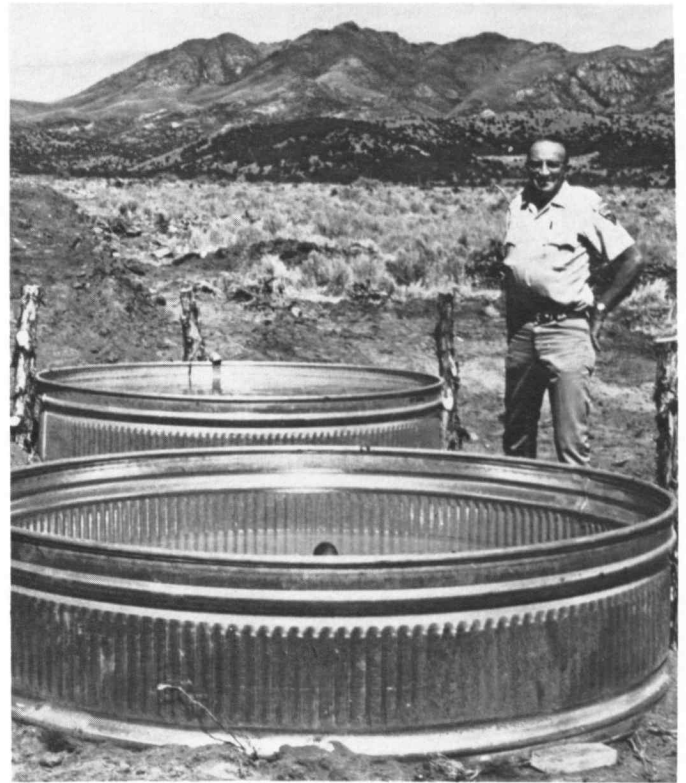


Crested wheatgrass seedings produce more pounds of meat as well as protecting the soil and providing feed for wildlife.

two allotments. Reductions for ten allotments and six allotments would remain the same. Since there is high potential for range improvement both through grazing management and project work in Rich County, which lies in the far north-eastern corner of the state adjacent to Idaho and Wyoming, it was decided to see what the effect of 3 years of improvements would be before the permanent adjustments are made. The permittees in allotments where a reduction was proposed are taking voluntary non-use until the final decisions are implemented. The NRDC court decision had resulted in a freeze on land treatment work in all allotments that were not under management plans until ES's are completed and final decisions made. Work that has been curtailed for so long can finally get underway when the process is completed. The speed and intensity of the improvements is tied to the amount of money that is made available each year by Congress.

During the land use planning and ES process in Rich County, ranchers soon realized their involvement was critically important. They worked closely with the BLM to determine what effects different proposals would have on their operations. For example, one of the proposals the BLM was considering was to delay spring turn-out onto the public range lands. The ranchers and the BLM worked together to see what alternatives were available and which would work best for all parties. As a result, grazing systems were designed that allowed for early turn-out. Ranchers devoted a lot of time to problem-solving sessions with the BLM.

Rich County's ES and resulting land use decisions were completed in 1980. Since that time, a new level of cooperation has prevailed. Instead of issuing decisions, most of the ranchers signed cooperative agreements for the future management of the public and private lands inside BLM allotments. These agreements include stocking level, season of use, kind of livestock and the type of management to be



Vaun Bennett inspects two 800-gallon water troughs built for cattle use.

used. Over 100 agreements or decisions were issued. No appeals were filed. The money that could have been used in court costs is available for doing range projects.

With the completion of the ES, the Range Improvement Program could again get under way. Here again, the spirit of



Sheep using desert ranges during winter months.

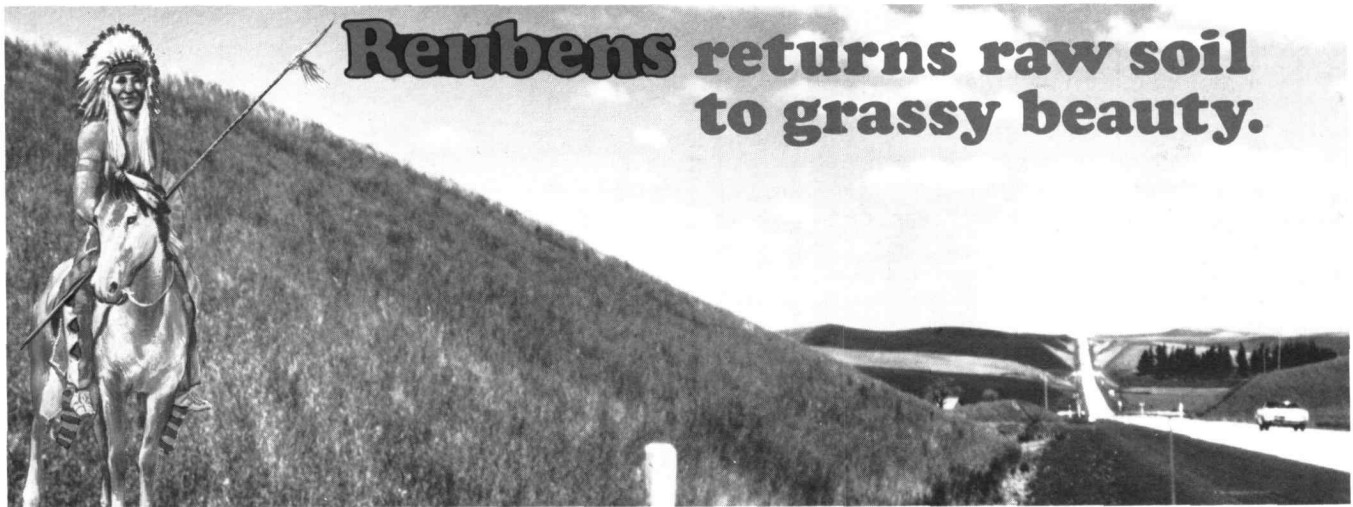


Water is the life blood of the West. Pipelines up to 20 miles long carry water to dry but productive areas. This trough is designed for sheep use.

cooperation has prevailed. The BLM and the ranchers have invested about five hundred thousand dollars in range improvement projects. Part of this money has gone to sagebrush control. The Bureau has treated over 25 sq. miles of sagebrush and the ranchers have sprayed an additional 6 sq. miles. This treatment is expected to at least double the amount of forage produced on the treated acreages. In addition, BLM has built fences, installed water pipelines, developed and rebuilt spring developments and many other projects in Rich County. The monies for the BLM projects have been due to the Congressional support along with the passage of the Rangelands Improvement Act.

Because the grazing system and spray projects may produce enough forage to offset the need for any livestock reduction, those allotments are being watched and no reductions have been made by the BLM. All of the projects have been designed to benefit not only the livestock, but also wildlife, fisheries, watershed, and other uses. The sagebrush spray projects are planned so that sage grouse concentration areas are left. The shape of the project blends with the landscape and watershed and fisheries are enhanced. Without the field inventories, the ES, and the planning, the knowledge of where to spray to get maximum results, and how to work with wildlife and fisheries to make a better situation for all would have been lacking, as well as a host of other information.

So, even though the Environmental Statement and Land Use Planning seem to be an overwhelming obstacle for ranchers and the BLM, much good has resulted from the process. ●



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