

Wyoming Panel Discusses Role of SRM

Dick Hart

What is the proper role of the Society for Range Management in the management of public and private rangelands. Representatives of three producer organizations (Wyoming Stock Growers, Wyoming Wool Growers, and Wyoming Mining Associations) and three Federal agencies (Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Soil Conservation Service) discussed this question at the annual meeting of the Wyoming Section in Casper, Wyoming, November 20–22, 1980. Because members of these groups are the “customers” of SRM, several points of the discussion should be of interest to SRM members everywhere.

The intent of the discussion was outlined by Fee Busby, panel moderator, head of the Range Management Division of the University of Wyoming, and director of SRM, when he said,

Today we are not in any kind of situation where the producing groups have any bones to pick with our Federal land management agencies. Every one of these people has a common bone to pick with our Society for Range Management, YOU, the Wyoming Section. We've asked them to speak specifically about what the Section should be doing in the state of Wyoming that will be of assistance and benefit to the groups, the organizations, the activities, and the programs that are represented.

Despite the wish that a “common bone might be picked,” it soon became apparent that the producer organizations and the management agencies had rather different views of the role of SRM. The producers urged SRM to support their positions when conflicts arose over management decisions, while the agencies felt SRM should provide information but should remain aloof from decision-making.

To Be or Not to Be Involved

Max Lieurance, Wyoming Director of the BLM, staked out the latter position when he stated, “SRM cannot be a watchdog. While we as individual members of SRM may have strong feelings about . . . issues, SRM is not the vehicle for involvement.” He advised that SRM meetings should include “programs that do permit views that may address politically sensitive or controversial issues, but that keep the Society, as a society, removed from taking sides.”

On the other hand, Jessie Baker, Executive Secretary of the Wyoming Wool Growers Association, chastised SRM for not stating publicly its position on the Sandy and Seven

Lakes Environmental Impact Statements, and on the wild horse problem in the Red Desert of Wyoming. However, she complimented SRM on its predator control resolution adopted at the 1980 Annual Meeting. Bill Budd, Executive Vice-president of the Wyoming Mining Association, affirmed that political involvement by SRM was not only desirable but nearly inevitable. “If you are going to do anything with mining people, you are going into the political area”, he said. “I think that our political system requires that people speak out, that people take positions and certainly take positions about things that they know about.” Budd admitted, however, that SRM members could become involved personally without politicizing the Society. He recommended that SRM members provide technical information not only when asked by a public agency or private land manager, but that they volunteer to provide such information when a need exists. Examples include attendance and testimony at public hearings on land use controversies.

A closer identification of range professionals and the SRM with the goals of producers was advocated by Bob Budd, Executive Secretary of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. He stated “The business at hand . . . should be production agriculture”, but “the (producer's) first impression (of professional range managers) is that of a bureaucrat who has little or no knowledge of just what it is we're trying to accomplish in the livestock business.” As for educators, “All they do is study!” As examples of the sort of studies which anger the livestock industry, Budd cited the Powder River Basin Coal EIS and USDI's draft of “Desertification in the U.S.” Budd proclaimed “People in the cattle business do not have the time or desire to run a ranch . . . and come back in and review, . . . review the comments, and make more comments on a lot of this type of document.” Furthermore, ranchers feel that range managers and range scientists are responsible for these reports they find so threatening. Budd recommended that managers take some time to become familiar with the goals and problems of the livestock producer.

Are ‘Bureaucrats’ Trustworthy?

Another source of dissension between producers and public land managers was identified by Jessie Baker. She asked, “Can you (the managers) be objective, can you honestly divorce yourself from the agency or the bureau or whoever it is that hands you a monthly paycheck? Ranchers who are public land users are skeptical about accepting advice from the same federal or state people who are charged with implementing rules and regulations they (the ranchers) can't live with.” Bob Budd, exhibiting a talent for asking pointed questions, challenged: “Admit your goals. Are they proper management of the range, or vertical movement within your organization?” However, Max

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Editor's Note: Seems the Wyoming Section, SRM, has the right approach for members to become more exposed and involved in range and range management problems and benefits. It's at the Section level right out on the ground where the most good can be achieved. This discussion is worthy of publication if for no other reason than to impress upon other Sections what can and is being done in one to get things stirred up and going.

In a year or two the author will write a follow up on this panel discussion to let the world know what if anything has happened regarding the problems and ideas discussed and expressed in 1980.

Lieurance pointed out that these are complementary, not opposing, goals. He urged SRM to "provide the kind of meeting atmosphere where our professional or any agency professional can feel free to express his own views." This should reassure range users that agency employees are not hampered by their own organizations in their efforts to provide the best possible management advice.

Jack Booth, Supervisor of the Big Horn National Forest, expressed dissatisfaction with the implied division of SRM members into producers and "everyone else", pointing out that all of us are working toward better range management. He encouraged SRM to do a better job of telling rangeland managers how the Society and its meetings can supply their needs. "I'm going to be really motivated to help people attend these meetings if I know . . . matters (will be) discussed that will help me solve land management problems that I'm faced with every day . . . or if I know there's going to be 15 or 20 bright University students available for next year's hiring", he said.

Bob Budd was asked how a range manager should deal with conflicting goals of multiple range users, to avoid any appearance of bias. "You should do what your professional training tells you is right and let the chips fall where they may", he replied. "If you're right 90% of the time, that's going to build a base of credibility with the public, with the regulators, with everyone concerned."

This underlying confidence in the ability of professional range managers, in spite of occasional disagreements, was reflected by other speakers. Jessie Baker suggested that SRM or the Wyoming Section should appoint a committee to work with ranchers, the BLM, and everyone else involved in the preparation of Environmental Impact Statements, so that the completed document would be based on "professional compromises rather than emotional decisions." She also suggested that a representative from SRM should work as an advisor to each of the State District Grazing Boards, which rule on expenditures of grazing fees rebated to the counties under Section 3 of the Taylor Grazing Act. She asserted, "Wyoming landowners . . . have experience and you (the agency managers) have the professional knowledge. If you listen to each other some good things can be accomplished."

More evidence that the public generally believes in the competence of the management agencies was presented by Frank Dickson, State conservationist with the SCS. He cited surveys showing that Americans feel the loss of soil and water resources are serious problems, and trust government agencies to provide leadership and assistance in conservation. Dickson continued, "Those who hold the power to develop and fund conservation programs . . . need and readily seek good reliable information. SRM as a professional organization has a responsibility to lead (in providing information)." He suggested that SRM form a committee with representatives from each natural resource agency. Each member would report on the programs and practices to be emphasized by his/her organization. The committee would then recommend a program to assist the organizations in achieving their goals. Dick Hart, member of SRM's Range Inventory Standardization Committee, pointed out that this committee is developing just such a program for determining range sites, condition, and trend.

Max Lieurance recommended that SRM members enhance their credibility by continuing to maintain high professional standards. One avenue toward this goal is involvement in the planning and evaluation of the research, teaching, and extension activities of the universities. Frank Dickson agreed, encouraging SRM to continue active support of a strong range curriculum in the universities. Fee Busby noted that SRM encourages high professional standards by offering awards, and asked whether any organization gave awards for excellence in disturbed land reclamation. Bill Budd replied, tongue in cheek, "Well, the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality lets us keep mining!"

Time for Individual Initiative

The consensus of the panel and the audience seemed to favor greater participation by individual SRM members in the political and technical decision-making processes dealing with public lands. However, because of the great diversity of SRM membership and the need to avoid even the appearance of bias, the input of SRM as an organization to these processes should be restricted to providing technical information. Greater participation in SRM by members of the public land management agencies and a freer flow of information should result if SRM refrains from an advocacy position, except in cases where such a position is supported overwhelmingly by the facts of the case and by a very large majority of its members.

In the concluding discussion, several members offered suggestions for an expanded role of SRM and SRM members. Lou Engstrom, reclamation engineer with Kemmerer Coal Company, first divined that 83 SRM members were present, then declared, "I think we should have 83 one-man or one-woman committees, self-appointed, that in the next 8 months participate as a member in some other convention or group or meeting that has something to do with range, other than SRM itself. Work with these different groups; you'll use your expertise, you'll enjoy it, you'll help yourself and the range."

Fee Busby also urged individual action: "The Section isn't going to walk out of here and do a single thing. It's what WE as members do, individually and collectively, that finally gets something done and we can't forget that."

Jack Booth admonished SRM members not to become discouraged when problems were not solved easily and immediately; he pointed out that not all problems can be solved or are worth solving. He expressed confidence in SRM and the Section, saying, "This really isn't any downstream Society!"

The session was wrapped up by Wyoming Section President Dick Loper, who reiterated the need for individual responsibility for education and communication. He pointed out, "More communication happens one-on-one at coffee breaks than in big meetings." Loper endorsed the idea of SRM advisory committees and identification of groups with which the Society and the Section can work. He concluded, "I don't think we've got an 'energy crisis' in the Society. We've got a tremendous wealth of information and energy in people. So help us do the job the way you think it ought to be done."