The Health of the Livestock Industry

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The health of the range industry—that is a big and broad subject, but one that I am more than a little interested in. That is how I make my living. I could probably prattle on for 13 pages and then only over simplify the entire subject. I am a third-generation rancher from the Ritzville area in eastern Washington. I ranch in the channeled scablands just to the west of the Palouse Country. My family has been ranching in this area since the early 1880's and our ranch has been in continuous operation through wet years, dry years, good markets, and bad. For what it's worth, the range and ranching business has been very good to my family all these 100 years and with a little luck and the help of God, my children and their children will know the joys and the pains of my industry.

As inflexible and opinionated as I may sound, I honestly welcome differing views. I would appreciate views and perspectives from others on my industry and business in the hope that I might better understand and adjust to current trends and opinions as well as what researchers come up with.

To properly discuss the health of the range industry, one must outline the intent of the industry and some of its problems. As I see my industry, its every-day concern is an attempt to convert the maximum amount of usable forage to the maximum amounts of dollars. That is a blunt statement and easily misunderstood by many people. To remain viable a rancher must be able to show a profit or he is doomed. At the same time he must preserve and better the very rangeland he is using. Not only is this possible, it is imperative or failure is just a matter of time.

The problems of the range industry or ranching in general are many and complex. This industry has all the traditional problems of any industry. Being profit oriented, it is suspect by many and its spokesmen are often doubted. The question is often asked, and seldom answered: How can you use the range in a profit business and improve or even preserve its carrying capacity and natural character? Well, properly described, it is a renewable resource. That really says it all. Renewable Resource!!

I hope my children will be able to ranch in an era of more understanding and less categorizing of individuals and their goals and intentions—a time when a fair profit is once again acceptable and not referred to by the media as obscene.

Looking toward the future, where are we going? What will the range be like? No matter what we do now, range will still exist at some level of production. It might all resemble the Mediterranean basin, or it might be lush and pristine, or more than likely if all goes well, we will see the results of long-range planning and care. It is very hard to make long-term plans based on today's ranch economy. We have seen the sheep industry all but disappear as a range user in much of the West. Cattle may go the same way, but the range will remain regardless of its use or abuse. Public range may become strictly wildlife habitat; private range may become game farms, all-terrain vehicle parks, solar energy collection banks, or simply abandoned. I don't mean to sound pessimistic. I personally feel range will always be used as a human food resource, and at the present cattle and sheep are the most available and acceptable means of converting forage to usable food. I wouldn't rule out jack rabbits. The higher energy costs become and the scarcer energy sources become, the more valuable become the renewable resources we have available. Here is where range has an advantage, simply because of the room for improvement over our present levels of production. And that is why we and others attend meetings such as those conducted by the Pacific Northwest Section of the Society for Range Management. We who live and work in this area have the same interests: the preservation and improvement of our rangelands.

The one area I want to avoid is a recital of figures, statistics, etc. It makes excellent reading when the work is done by an expert and he or she is able to present the facts in a concise and interesting manner. I also feel it makes very poor subject matter for a rancher to try to present to anyone but himself. But by the same token the rancher had better be honest with himself and know and digest the facts and statistics. That is the inner workings of any well-operated business.

The health of our range industry at this time is somewhere between poor and depressed. Hopefully, we can get things back on track before the present economic problems start to show up in a diminished return of forage on the range. I honestly feel that much of the damage to the range in the past was not as a result of greed or anything even resembling it but rather a poor understanding of the workings of a plant community by range operators of the past and the sheer immenseness of
the West. Who could have convinced a rancher 75 to 100 years ago that the horizon wasn't limitless? That there was not more grass just over the mountain or across the river?

That was his perspective of the situation. And perspective is one of my favorite subjects. Perspective is defined as the effect of distance upon the appearance of objects and the relationship or relative importance of facts or matters from any special point of view. Every person has his or her own perspective of the range industry. The collective views of people interested in range would in all likelihood make a very workable and beneficial model to industry wasn't being heard or the facts seemed unimportant. I was led to believe that clearing sagebrush from the range was a good range management practice: it provided more soil moisture to the grass plants, increased carrying capacity and had many other overall benefits. We all know that riding the range of sagebrush is tantamount to torturing Bambi and was inspired only by large corporate money-hungry ranchers!

I have been reading of the plans to reintroduce the timber wolf to much of the intermountain West. And the fact that any human activity that might interfere with this plan will have to be curtailed. I have an idea that the ranchers with grazing areas adjacent to these proposed reintroduction sites are horrified but what they might have to say will be of little consequence. This reintroduction plan is using the same law that has caused some of the wild horse problems on the BLM ranges. I am not opposed to wolves or wild horses but do we have to abandon years of progress to accommodate those advocates of wildlife that attach human qualities to every animal that exists?

work from and with. But unfortunately the membership of the Society for Range Management and the range operators themselves make up a pitifully small percentage of the total population.

My perspective of the industry is limited in its scope. I am probably too close to it to get a proper feeling for the overall public and political thoughts concerning my livelihood. All children know that if a cowboy wears a white hat, he's a good guy, and if he wears a black hat he's a bad guy. Hopefully, we have all matured beyond that point. But still, as I look out at the real world, my view is always altered by the fact that I am looking through the corral fence. It is a blessing in many ways because I am able to realize that my view of someone else's operation is also altered by looking back through his fence.

Every conceivable cause that you could dream up whether coming from a truly sincere thought backed by everything that is right and proper or based on the most selfish outrageous unjust cause, you could gather a following. A group of people that would adhere to the tenants of that philosophy and spend tireless hours promoting their thing.

One of the major problems with the range industry is its lack of dedicated people from within its ranks that will go forth and do battle, if you will, for those causes that we know are right and proper. I don't think this is a lack of caring or lack of capable individuals. I think it is a lack of realizing just how badly out-numbered and how many different causes are being heard while we stand silently by and wonder why these things happen to us.

I am not aware if there is a "save the sagebrush" foundation, but if there is it surely points out that the range


Jake Harder in center showing off his tall wheatgrass planting. (SCS photo)

It is so easy for me to get started on many of what I feel are examples of my industry not speaking out or, more important, not being heard, or could it be just my perspective on the subject?

Today, we have many professionally trained range people—men and women who sought to be educated in range management and related disciplines. Their perspective of the range industry is different from mine. Our goals are not all that different when rendered out to the final product. The range provides both of us with a livelihood and our hope is to see constant improvement and cooperation. These are the kinds of people who should be in a position of making the judgements and decisions on the management of our public ranges—not a pressure group made up of bored housewives in tennis shoes and a federal judge somewhere.

Let's go back to the professional's view of range. It has been my experience working with range experts over the years that the more differing areas a
fellow has worked with, the better his overall knowledge of range becomes. By that I mean he has the ability to see the individual problems facing a particular ranch. An example is the peculiarities of the animals grazed. On one ranch gentle cows are just the ticket. In the next situation gentle cows won't cover certain part of the range. At different times of the year cattle will congregate at different areas. A good range man or woman knows this and it helps in his or her suggestions, and makes that person a valuable asset and a real help to the rancher. This understanding of the workings of a ranch make up part of their perspective. Education and knowledge gained through work research balance it out. But once again these kinds of people are a minority. If every range expert, every member of the Society for Range Management, every rancher and all their children spent tomorrow knocking on doors telling the story of range, we wouldn't have half the impact of one celebrity on one afternoon talk show making one offhanded remark either pro or con. Therein lies what I feel to be another of the major problems of the range industry. Let's get the story told and told right!

Like it or not the health of range industry is geared to the acceptance and price of red meat and the public's perspective of the range user and his product. Improving the public's perception of the industry will do more for our goals than any other endeavor we undertake. Quite frankly I am sick and tired of reading about rich land barons, wealthy ranchers, and corporate giants of the industry. These worn-out phrases appear all too often in outdoor columns and every other kind of publication. The story of the rancher trying to improve the deer herd in his area or the man trying to help establish any type of wildlife habitat is not told. All the public sees are the no trespassing signs at the end of the lane. No one is out there telling our story.

**Quite to the Contrary**, we are subjected to advertisements trying to sell a particular product that take a cheap shot at all of agriculture. The most common of these are the ads extolling the virtues of the farm-fresh taste with none of the supposed hazards of the farm product. This type of advertising is in poor taste, as poor as would be a company selling a product at the expense of Extra Strength Tylenol. Yet we stand by and let these people run rough shod over our products with little or no reaction from our industry or its allies. I would hope our industry would never repay in kind. I am totally opposed to those kinds of tactics. They have no place in our society and maybe one day we will see the last of them.

Not all is gloom on the north forty. How could you describe a better life than ranching. It is the ultimate environment in which to raise a family. Ranch children from pre-school to young adults are part of the every day work force; Little folks standing behind the wheel of a truck helping dad feed stock on a cold winter day, riding a gentle old ranch horse gathering cows and calves for branding. Older kids coming home from college hoping to get in on the fall riding or just checking things out in an old pickup truck to be sure dads been doing it right the last couple of months. It is a feeling of belonging that can not only really be described and only really appreciated by someone who has been there.

**WITH THE EXCEPTION OF A FEW** isolated areas, I have, in my lifetime, seen a real and remarkable improvement of the range within my stomping grounds. I have seen stands of grass in places that 20 years ago one would have written off as unrecoverable. There is real progress going on out on the ranches, real efforts are being made to insure that the next generation will have that fabled north forty complete with a stand of grass to operate on.

What does all this have to do with the health of the range industry? It has a lot to do with it. When the public perception of any industry, whether justified or not, reaches a cerlow point the industry no longer exists. Period. We're a long way from that point and I hope we never get even close. But we had better start telling our side of the story. Telling about the ranchers who are caring for the public range and those who are improving their privately owned range. Start telling about an industry that is trying to produce leaner beef in an effort to hold onto its markets and provide a wholesome, nutritional product. It is up to us. Of what earthly use is all the effort to preserve our range if the edible end product of that range can't be sold to the consuming public? What is good for the rancher is good for the range.

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