Soulen Sheep Allotments: A Success Story

John F. Hooper

The Soulen Sheep allotments encompass a 115-thousand acre area of the Payette National Forest in upper Idaho. The Soulen Livestock Company has the permit for 10,000 ewes with lambs from 1 July to 15 October. In the early 1970's it became obvious that there was a great need to improve the condition of the allotments. There had been a tremendous decline in grazing capacity (to less than 50%) since use records were first kept in 1928. Over 5% of the area was classified as in a poor range condition and about 20% of the primary range area had an apparent downward productive trend. The decline in grazing capacity was attributed to a reduction in forage quantity and quality due to ingrowth of trees and tall brush in the absence of fire coupled with overstocking. The situation was aggravated with the closing of large areas (plantations) to allow trees to become established on cut areas following timber harvesting.

In 1973, a concerted effort was made by the Forest Service, Range Conservationist Robert C. Bryan, and the permittee, Phil Soulen, to obtain an agreement for improved management on the allotment. After much discussion and compromising, and allotment management and development plan was approved and signed by all parties in February, 1979.

Conditions Before the Plan

The allotments were heavily forested and grazing the area to a proper use standard was not easy. Access was limited in many areas, causing major declines in vegetative composition and soil resources along access corridors. Meadows over 10 acres in size made up less than 10% of the primary range. The dry meadows showed severe composition degradation exemplified by Hartley Meadows, which had changed from tufted hair grass to pull up muhly, and Bear Basin Meadow, which had become predominately far weed, Canadian thistle, and toadflax.

About 15% of the primary range area was at the higher elevations where the forage was dominated by forbs. Many of these areas showed severe vegetation depletion to the extent that some areas, on loose sandy soil, had been closed to grazing. The remaining 75% of the primary range area was timber and brush in good to fair condition.

At the start of the grazing season (1 July) the sheep were trailed about 120 miles from the vicinity of Weiser, Ida., north, to the allotments north of McCall, Ida. Ewes and lambs were trailed back to a set of corrals located in McCall about 1 September for weaning of the lambs. The ewes were trailed back to the allotments for bucking. At the end of the season (15 October), the ewes and replacement lambs were trailed back to Weiser. Some of the trails had animal impact four times during the season, and the long Van Wyck Driveway between McCall and Weiser was used twice a year. Phil Soulen stated very strongly that the trailing was necessary for economic considerations.

In 1973, prior to the plan, over half the grazing impact transects on primary range showed serious overuse. A further complication was that many acres of land, closed to grazing for trees to become established, were being grazed. The herders seemed unable to avoid the closed areas. A letter from the Forest Supervisor warned that repeated damage to these expensive reforestation efforts could result in permit revocation.

Editor's Note: The author, a graduate of Utah State University, has served as a Forest Service Ranger since 1962, and has been a District Ranger at McCall since 1972.
The Plan

Several actions were taken by the permittee to reduce the adverse impacts on the allotments. The most significant actions were Soulen’s decision to reduce animal numbers by 2,000 ewes and to construct additional shipping corrals at Hard Creek Meadows, Brundage Meadows, and Pearl Creek to reduce trailing to a single shipping point. Both actions proved to be an important part of the plan. The specific objectives of the allotment management and development plan were:

1. The Forest Service would provide grazing for 4,000 head of sheep from 1 July to 5 October and for another 6,000 head from 1 July to 15 October. There would be increases in allowable animal numbers as transitory range areas (timber harvest areas where trees have been established but have not yet grown enough to shade out the grass and forbs) opened up.

2. Maintain or improve plant vigor, production, and composition on primary range by limiting forage utilization to the proper use as defined by Range Analysis guidelines. For example, average utilization of key species not to exceed 40%.

3. Improve ground cover on areas with unsatisfactory condition ratings, as defined by: (1) fair with downward trend, (2) poor, or (3) very poor. The minimum acceptable goal was a stable soil trend with less than 20% soil disturbance.

4. Stabilize soil and vegetative trend on at least half the driveway corridor between Bear Basin and Sater Meadows by 1985 (approximately 500 acres).

5. Utilize transitory range to the extent feasible while insuring success of forest regeneration. Thin, prune or clear trees on suitable areas for bedgrounds in the vicinity of transitory range where utilization was limited by lack of bedgrounds.

6. Coordinate grazing use and timing at recreational concentration areas so that conflicts with human use are minimized. Insure the closure to bedding and trailing around Upper Payette Lake, Twenty Mile Lakes, Granite Lake, and Brundage Reservoir. Light grazing may be authorized in these areas after the Labor Day weekend.

7. Stabilize streambank areas on the driveways through adjustments in use and appropriate project work.

8. Insure adequate forage for private recreation stock at agreed upon locations.

9. Construct access trails, bridges, shipping corrals, and bedground areas as needed, to gain access to grazing areas previously inaccessible for improved animal distribution, and to reduce conflicts with other resources.

10. Protect the pristine character of the McHand Lake Basin by closing it to grazing.

The grazing system agreed upon was a six-year cycle on 14 allotments and included (1) deferred use until after the seeds of preferred grasses and forbs were matured, and (2) rest for three allotments annually. Planned improvement projects included construction or reconstruction of five shipping corrals; construction of 30 miles of trail for access to range which was currently inaccessible; deferment of trailing on alternate years; construction of eight bedgrounds to replace those now inside plantation boundaries; and construction of one sheep bridge.

For objectives 5 and 9, money was provided by the Forest Service with Soulen providing labor and some materials. The Forest Service provided monetary investment for noxious weed spray, grass seeding, and streambank stabilization for objectives 2, 3, 4, and 7.

What Was Done

The first cycle of the grazing system was completed in 1984. All improvement projects were completed with the exception of the sheep bridge and 5 miles of access trail. Additional projects included control of noxious weeds in specific areas and some stream bank stabilization.

A significant part of the success on the allotments is attributed to the hiring by the Forest Service of a Spanish speaking "plantation guard" who works directly with the herders when they are grazing open plantations or near closed plantations. Damage to plantations is now an infrequent occurrence.

Conditions in 1984

There are many indications of the success of the plan and the cooperative work between Soulen Livestock Company and the Forest Service.

The first indication of success is that objectives 1 and 2 of the plan are being met with few instances of excessive utilization or disturbance. For goal 4, it is estimated that more than 70% of the corridor has been stabilized. For goal 5, there are about 1,400 acres of plantations now being grazed and these
supply a substantial portion of the grazing capacity of several allotments. Goals 6, 8, and 10 have been fully implemented, a result of changes in other areas providing sufficient forage to make these areas no longer needed. Goals 3 and 7 are progressing, although more time will be required for recovery of the most severely depleted areas.

Some of the most dramatic indications of success are that Hartley Meadows is again a hairgrass meadow and Bear Basin now has the appearance of a grass meadow. Some of the transects taken on primary range in 1983 show dramatic increases in forage production over 1973, but it will take several more years to quantify the differences. One non-beneficial result is that ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine are invading some of the meadows.

In Retrospect

When reviewing the factors leading to the success on the Soulen allotments, it is difficult to separate those which are resource related—such as less trailing, deferred and rested rotation of allotments—from those which are people related—such as greater permittee interest, better herding, and better coordination and cooperation. In the long run it makes no difference. The stage is now set for continued long-term grazing, with an upward trend in vegetative and soil conditions which can be defended to a critical public.

International Rangelands Development Symposium to be Held at 1985 SRM Annual Meeting

Rangelands in developing countries are often associated with famine, starvation, drought, and declining capacity to sustain human and animal populations. Even in more developed countries, most rangelands produce well below potential, and sound range management principles are often ignored.

Why are range resource managers and users not adopting "better practices" and increasing benefits? Obviously the answer is complex, but the first emphasis must be on people! The resource left alone can manage quite successfully. However, it's the people that control how the resources are utilized. The first key to improving rangeland benefits must be understanding human and cultural strengths and constraints to management.

Anyone interested in presenting a volunteer paper at the symposium (addressing the theme) should submit an abstract and brief biographical sketch by September 28, 1984, to Dr. Larry D. White, Chairman of International Affairs Committee, P.O. Drawer 1849, Uvalde, TX 78801.

Starting at Salt Lake City in 1985, the International Affairs Committee of SRM is sponsoring an annual symposium to provide range professionals practical knowledge necessary for improving management of rangeland resources and human benefits in developing countries. The symposia will concentrate on an annual theme with invited and volunteer speakers and proceedings publication available at cost at the symposium. Authors submitting abstracts will be notified of acceptance or rejection, and instructions on manuscript preparation will be sent by mid-October 1984. By submitting an abstract the author(s) agree that if accepted, he will be at Salt Lake City to present the paper. Authors will be provided a complimentary copy of the proceedings. The final camera ready original manuscript must be received by December 3, 1984.

The theme of the first symposium—to be held February 13 and 14—will be "Human and Cultural Understanding—Key to Improving Benefits from Rangelands." A letter has been sent by SRM President Joe Schuster to each U.S.A. range department with an accompanying letter welcoming foreign students to the U.S.A. and inviting them to participate in SRM activities.

If you have trouble getting people to adopt sound management, we are sure the experiences and expertise at this symposium and in the proceedings will be invaluable. Plan now to attend. If more information is needed, write the Chairman, International Affairs Committee.