"Biting the Dust" on Land Use Decisions

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The Tool Shed

"Biting the dust" is an old western expression sometimes used to describe a person's terrible predicament. It might be used for a cowboy's fate when failing to break a new horse, and can even be descriptive jargon for the worst job on the duty roster.

"Biting the dust" comes to mind with its many connotations as the annual cleaning rolls around each year in our homes, garages, and tool sheds. While we are peering inside the tool shed, our consideration for use and need becomes the focal point of this seasonal task.

Each year as cleaning time arrives, as use and need assessments are made in our personal lives, government agencies and their warehouses of land and landuse management objectives should do the same. "Biting the dust" is good for goose and gander alike: An assessment of the present use of hundreds of acres of land across the country, during an annual cleaning, could produce a new focus on public needs and the cumbersome system used in public land management.

We attack our personal task by looking over the gold mine of nuts and bolts through the cobwebs in their dust covered band-aid cans, and procrastination is replaced by insanity. Great aspirations loom out of the nooks and crannies. These new thoughts replace the excuses and we swear we will finally deal with the crisis. However, reality returns and assessment is made on various other treasures. The task at hand becomes a menagerie to sort out the differences between the "need for" and the "use of" each item.

The Warehouse

Government agencies do not manage land. They manage enforcement practices guided by regulations. Many are required to protect public land resources. Permits are issued and performance standards enforced to control resource exploitation. Landuse is not the ultimate concern beyond a single project life. In some places little consideration for tomorrow and the future use of the land is given.

For mining or harvesting activities of natural resources on public lands today, a permit is issued allowing a certain amount of practical and economic reality for the operation. Goals are estimated relative to time and value of the resource. A framework of the planned work force and technology to be used is outlined to address reclamation procedures during the project. The protection of wildlife, watersheds, fisheries, and air are just a few of the criteria that must be addressed before a permit is issued. After operations begin a check is made on permits by the performance standards process. Through the long or short term operation of development the focus on protection of resources surrounding the area receive a periodic monitoring. This is all well and good. However, many times there are no real plans, thought, or effort made to formulate a use for that same land once the mining or harvesting is finished. The perspective seems to be, that the present activity is the one and only use of any major concern, especially when the activity exceeds ten years.

Resource development across the western United States commonly earmarks livestock grazing as the intended landuse following an initial resource harvest. Permits issued for strip mines, timber harvests, powerlines, etc., that state grazing as the next landuse often fail to give serious attention to planning species composition, water, or fencing for that second landuse. All too often the most unique aspect to these plans are the trail systems left behind for the livestock to wander along. Where are the range management plans that integrate forage production, livestock nutrition, and season of use? These considerations must be made during the initial stages of the permit applications. If a sincere effort is to be made to achieve a second landuse of grazing the plan must address preparations in the initial activity that will insure good management for the second tenant.

Little concrete evidence can be found and described in any permit process or performance standard, that designates intention on the part of the many agencies or permit holders to complement a project, with a compatible goal of leaving their site ready for a second tenant. The results are a superficial cleaning of the warehouse. The landuse decisions today and in the future must recognize the differences between the "need for" and the "use of" grazing. Harvesting wood on timber lands "needed for" new housing demands cannot be justified with a second activity if the "use of" that land is not planned. Harvesting wood does not translate into immediate forage production.

The Organized Shop

The use of unreclaimed strip mining and clearcut blocks for cattle grazing is as obvious an illusion as an IRS tax credit for a storage shelter. If cattle grazing is to be a use after the permit activity, then the expectations in a performance standard must be raised to meet that plan. Cattle do not thrive on uranium tailings any better than bureaucrats! Plans at the outset of issuing a landuse permit must not allow land exploitation by the first tenant's short-sighted approach to economic wealth. Permits should never be issued without a sound, long-range view, yet the present system lacks the power to prevent it. Decisions and plans to project into the future the goals of landuse are criteria missing from the regulation ledger. Regulatory agencies must be responsible.
for making land usable after the original performance standards are implemented.

A fine tuning of regulation emphasis by agencies who issue land use permits is mandatory. The objectives of land use must be defined and inserted into the issuing of permits for resource use. Each permit should identify specific lands used relevant today and down the road. A justification of the resource management plan, by defining topographic, edaphic, and biotic characteristics, would provide a mechanism to link the present with the final intended land use.

Planning of present day activities has come a long way, but it is the aggregation of these daily activities that must be oriented to not only short, but intermediate, and long-term objectives.

Inside our toolsheds, we see how unrealistic it is to expect an IRS tax credit for numbers of stored items per square foot, and so many of the treasures are not really needed. Many government agencies must do likewise and face realities inside their warehouses of land and land use management objectives. The hour has arrived. The procedure is obvious: determine the use, and assess the need. This is crisis management at its best. “Biting the dust” has become a planning session of use versus excuse.

Current Literature of Range Management

This section has the objective of alerting SRM members and other readers of Rangelands to the availability of new, useful literature being published on applied range management. Readers are requested to suggest literature items—and preferably also contribute single copies for review—for including in this section in subsequent issues. Personal copies should be requested from the respective publisher or senior author (address shown in parentheses for each citation).


Effects of Planting Depth on Vegetative Characteristics of Three Forage Grasses at 14 Days Post Emergence; by C.R. Tischler and P.W. Voigt; 1983; Crop Sci. 23(3):481-484. (USDA, Agric. Res. Serv., P.O. Box 748, Temple, Texas 76503) Based on studies with weeping lovegrass, Wilman lovegrass, and kleingrass, concluded that deep planting resulted in reduced seedling vigor but that depth of soil moisture was a consideration.

Effects of 2,4-D on a Populus tremuloides Community in the Western United States—22 Years After Treatment; by Dale L. Bartos and James E. Lester; 1984; Great Basin Nat. 44(3):459-467 (USDA, For. Serv., Forestry Sci. Lab., Logan, Utah 84321) An accidental spraying with 2,4-D killed most aboveground portions of the aspen trees but eventually increased tree densities by six times because of suckering.

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Forage Systems, Leading U.S. Agriculture into the Future: 1984 Forage and Grassland Conference; 1984; Amer. For. and Grassland Council, Lexington, Ky.; 393 p. (2021 Rebel Road, Lexington, Ky. 40503; $10.00) Its 1984 annual proceedings; includes 74 papers on cultivated pasture and forage crops, with some relationships to rangelands.

Fort Keogh Livestock and Range Research Station, Miles City, Montana, 1984 Field Day; 1984; USDA, Agric. Res. Serv., Miles City, Mont. 88401 (Route 1, Box 2021, Miles City, Mont. 59301) Includes research reports on beef cattle genetics, reproductive physiology, and nutrition and range research; also a historical summary of the station.


Late Summer Changes in Mule Deer Diets with Increasing Use on Bitterbrush Rangeland; by D.D. Austin, P.J. Urness, and J. King; 1984; Great Basin Nat. 44(4):572-574. (Dept. of Range Sci., Utah State Univ., Logan, Utah 84322) Found that bitterbrush composed most of the diet in summer as other palatable species became increasingly scarce; related bitterbrush production with deer-days use.

Managing Intermountain Rangelands—Research on the Benmore Experimental Range, 1940-84; Kirk A. Astroth and Neil C. Frischknecht; 1984; USDA, For. Serv. Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-175; 44 p. (USDA, Intermountain For. & Range Exp. Sta., 507 - 25th St., Ogden, Utah 84401) Summarizes research findings and recommendations from the Benmore Station on rehabilitation or improvement, management, and grazing of intermontain range- lands including sites converted to crested wheatgrass pastures.