

The Future of Rangelands in Western Montana: A Rancher's Perspective

Charles M. Jarecki

Editor's Note: The subject of this paper is a potential problem in many areas. It is time to consider the implications.

During the past 23 years that I have been ranching 20 miles west of Polson, Mont., there have been two profound changes taking place on the rangelands. These changes were slow at first, but both have accelerated rapidly in recent years.

The most obvious alteration to the rangelands has been the proliferation of subdivisions ranging in size from less than 1-acre tracts to 20-acre ranchettes. In most cases the range is destroyed by land disturbance or overgrazing by the usual menagerie of horses, cows, and goats. These areas of rangeland will never be "range" again.

The subdivisions that are expanding into the rural areas cause increasing sociological and financial problems for the nearby ranchers. The new rural residents demand more social services that must be paid for by increased property taxes. The ranchers find themselves out-voted in local elections, and they find themselves caught in a squeeze because of the large investment in real estate that is necessary for a livestock business. Unfortunately, with the current economic condition of agriculture, the ownership of property does not mean the ability to generate more income. Yet the rancher is made to pay ever-increasing taxes to support services that he never needed or wanted in the first place.

Another problem with subdivisions is that the neglected, disturbed land areas in the subdivisions become infested

with noxious weeds. Two subdivisions in my area graveled their roads with material that was covered with spotted knapweed. Now all the roads support a good stand of this weed. The neighboring ranchers must contend with an ever-increasing source of weed seed, and find it very difficult to get the subdividers or the new residents to control their weeds.

It appears that most people who move to a rural area are unconcerned about and have little interest in the impact they make on the agricultural community. And yet it is a viable agricultural industry that provides the open space that these people desire.

It is the spread of those noxious weeds that concerns me the most. This land disease is slowly spreading its venom over all the rangelands of western Montana, from the valley bottoms to the mountains of Glacier National Park. As a rancher, I am becoming more and more pessimistic about the future of the range cattle industry in this part of the state.

On our ranch, we are constantly fighting the spread of spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, goat weed, and sulfur cinquefoil. Chemical costs alone for spot treatment in 1984 will account for about 8% of our total cash expenditures. The cost per acre, including application is about \$30 dollars, more than the value of the land just for grazing. Effective control is virtually impossible in timber areas.

Spotted knapweed is spreading most rapidly, and despite our best efforts new spots are always showing up. When we



Spotted knapweed invades excellent condition rough fescue rangeland in western Montana.

Photo, J.B. Seago, SCS

ride the pastures to check the cattle, we also make an all-out effort to spot new sites of knapweed. We never ride together side by side, and we always try to cover a little different route each time.

Surrounding areas contribute to the seed source, be they acreages owned by private individuals, subdividers, ranchers, Fish and Game Dept., Indian tribes or the federal government. We are beginning to feel as though we are under siege, and that it is only a question of time before our efforts are in vain and the range overtaken by the weeds.

Some people hold out the promise of biological weed control, but when you consider the various numbers of weed species that we now have to deal with, plus those that are nearby, the future looks bleak. Each of these weeds must maintain a residue population to sustain the biological agents, so it appears to me that eventually the rangelands will be a mosaic of noxious weeds, each kept from choking out the other by the bio-control agents present. Gone will be the domestic livestock as well as many of the native wildlife

species. Even timber regeneration will be affected as these weeds move into the forested areas.

It is time that it was realized that we have a crisis on our hands. If we are to save our native grasslands, an all-out effort must be started NOW. I am not interested in increasing the production of my ranch. I just want to maintain what I now have, but I can't afford to do it much longer.

Our weed problems are not caused by mis-management of our range. Most of my land is in good to excellent condition. Yearling steer weights off grass are 950 to 1,000 pounds at 17 months of age. Conception rates during a 60-day breeding season average 97%. Tame pastures absorb much of the spring grazing pressure.

It is time for reassessment of range research priorities. We can no longer afford to spend research dollars to discover how to squeeze that last ounce of production from the rangelands. Instead, work must be done to find ways to keep what we have: a productive range that will serve mankind and the rest of the natural ecosystem. ●

Quo Vadis, Quercus?

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The Issue

What is hardwood rangeland management? The answer to this question is not simple. The management of hardwoods on rangeland takes on many faces and directions. In California, these interests vary from the Coastal County planner who is concerned with maintaining hardwoods on valuable watersheds important to the economy of his county; to the developer of the foothill community intent on providing scenic homesites; to the fish and game manager who is concerned with maintaining habitat in a productive state for wildlife in perpetuity and, very importantly, to the rancher whose whole purpose in life is to raise and produce red meat and other by-products for California and the nation. These various management goals and objectives have created obvious controversies among the various user and manager groups, especially when regulations are considered. Each constituent, whether you consider them a manager in the truest sense of the word or not, has an interest and a legal voice in how these lands and associated resources are viewed and possibly regulated by government.

The controversy over hardwoods and their management has come to the forefront in California.

Public interest and concern for the hardwood issue has

been building. An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* (April 29, 1984) exemplifies this concern:

Clearly the time has come for control. The Board of Forestry in Sacramento has the data necessary to write and implement protection.

There is evidence that the valley and blue oak are not regenerating. Guarding their survival, for their own sake and to sustain the state's wildlife, also recognizes the overwhelming evidence that humankind's survival is no isolated phenomenon.

It is not too late for the ranchers themselves to propose an appropriate code. But it is not enough for them simply to resist all regulation on the grounds that most ranchers are following proper procedures. . . .

The *Los Angeles Times* is an influential paper and its message reaches many voters and legislators. Furthermore, the editorial is correct in its assumption that the Board of Forestry (BOF) does have the ability to regulate the harvesting of hardwoods for commercial purposes. Whether this becomes a reality in the near future is hard to determine until more information is provided.

In California, the BOF is the only Governor-appointed Board which is concerned with supply, availability, and production of the forest resource base through time.

The Board is specifically mandated to develop regulations as necessary to help protect and maintain the forest resource base through time. Until recently, the Board has been concerned with private conifer forestland, where the primary owner objective is wood fiber production. The enabling legislation (Forest Practice Act, 1973) does, however, allow the Board jurisdiction over all private lands where commercial

This paper is an excerpt from a speech given by Harold R. Walt on the November 2, 1984, at the annual meeting of the California Section of the Society for Range Management. Authors are Harold R. Walt, Chairman, California Board of Forestry; Dean A. Cromwell, Executive Officer, California Board of Forestry; and Kenneth E. Mayer, Range and Wildlife Ecologist, California Department of Forestry, 1416 Ninth Street, Room 1354-4, Sacramento, California 95814.