

Letter to the Editor

By Matthew K. Barnes, Timothy J. Steffens, and Jim Thorpe

Dear Editor:

The article “Cross-Fencing on Private US Rangelands: Financial Costs and Producer Risks” (April 2011), arguing that cross-fencing may not be cost effective¹ is interesting, but problematic. Although it is true that cross-fencing with no expected resource benefits would be neither cost effective nor a public good, the assumptions of the article are not generally supported in our experience, and the article’s implications may unjustifiably undermine support for this widespread conservation practice utilized by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) technical and financial assistance programs as part of a prescribed grazing strategy addressing resource concerns. To preclude any impression that the article’s implications are widely applicable and prevail among the rangeland management profession, we briefly present arguments in support of cross-fencing to facilitate planned grazing for rangeland health and associated ecosystem services.

Their economic analysis of cross-fencing a hypothetical 10,240-acre pasture into 16, 640-acre sections is mathematically accurate, but the implications that cross-fencing is not cost effective and may be counterproductive are dependent on assumptions of uniformity of the landscape, no improvement in efficiency or distribution of grazing, and no improvement in rangeland health, species composition, or production of forage species as a result of improved grazing management. In the hypothetical ranch where all else is equal, this might be reasonable—but on real rangelands, all else is never equal.

Rangelands have significant differences in production and palatability between and within sites, inherently and as a result of past management. Grazing pressure on preferred areas and plants is higher than the stocking rate for the whole pasture.² Patch overgrazing and degradation (and declining grazing capacity) are maximized when the pasture is large, the grazing period long, and the nongrazing interval insufficient for plant recovery.^{3,4} In NRCS conservation programs, cross-fencing is a facilitating practice to implement the management practice of prescribed grazing, specifically to address resource concerns by moving a herd of livestock through a series of pastures in a strategic manner to improve grazing distribution and efficiency with moderate utilization, and provide sufficient growing-season recovery time.⁵ The analysis in the article assumed no resource concerns—which would make the hypothetical ranch ineligible for conservation program financial assistance—and continuous

grazing, a rare combination except where pastures are small and lacking diversity (e.g., many research stations).² Similarly, the analysis assumed that the initial stocking rate was recommended by the NRCS for that area. Recommended stocking rates are usually specific to ecological sites, states, phases, and level of management.

Grazing capacity depends on the condition of the land and on the effectiveness of grazing management, which generally requires planned periods of grazing exclusion during the growing season to allow preferred plants to recover from defoliation. In North America, cross-fencing is often the most effective and economical method to accomplish this, especially if some of that fencing is wildlife-friendly one- or two-strand electric rather than four-strand barbed wire as assumed in the article’s analysis.

On the diverse ranches we have managed, planned grazing has facilitated other ecosystem services and generated returns well in excess of the cost of cross-fencing. For example, on the ranch currently managed by one of the authors (Barnes), cross-fencing (based on topography) and planned grazing facilitated increased grazing capacity by forcing livestock to use steep slopes along with riparian and other preferred areas and then giving all areas sufficient growing-season recovery.⁶ The stocking rates are now 1.5 to 3 times the previous, unsustainable stocking rates—well beyond the approximately 9–16% increase that the article calculated would be necessary to pay for cross-fencing 16 sections—while monitoring transects show improving trend and wildlife are abundant.

Thus it is our experience that the hypothetical large, continuously grazed pasture without any resource concerns on which the article was based is not representative of real US private rangelands, and, along with other assumptions effectively negated the benefits of improved grazing management, creating a false impression of economic infeasibility of cross-fencing for planned grazing.

References

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Response to Barnes et al.

By Ted Toombs, Justin D. Derner, and Kevin Bracy Knight

Our original article “Cross-Fencing on Private US Rangelands: Financial Costs and Producer Risks” (April 2011) demonstrated that producers incur high initial and continuing long-term costs associated with cross-fencing rangelands.¹ While these costs can be partially offset by USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service cost-share programs, increases in stocking rate are needed to maintain break-even economic conditions for the ranch.

The purpose of our analysis was to explore the financial costs of fencing incurred by producers and to demonstrate a simple method for determining these costs. It was not our intention to debate or undermine the potential benefits of fencing. The model ranch example we used was purposefully simplistic; a complicated, real-world example would not have adequately illustrated our point. For Barnes et al. to focus on the simplicity of the ranch model used is to miss the more important points of our analysis. Installing fencing creates significant short- and long-term financial costs and might encourage higher stocking rates to maintain break-even financial conditions. Our analysis did not and was not intended to convey that fencing will *never* be cost effective. To determine the cost effectiveness of fencing is obviously a site- and project-specific calculation. Our paper simply provided the tools with which to make this determination.

We recognize and it has long been known that fencing can facilitate access to underutilized forage in complex topography and increase grazing management flexibility on the ranch. The use of fencing for these purposes can obviously increase gross income for ranchers—but at what long-term financial and environmental costs?

As our paper shows, the financial costs of cross-fencing can be considerable to producers. Our paper arose from the

concern that these costs, which are not well understood and are site specific, are not being accurately accounted for in the project development stage. A clearer understanding and more accurate accounting of the short- and long-term costs is only fair to those paying for these practices—the producers and taxpayers. Our analysis was meant to be helpful to producers and their technical service providers by enabling them to better account for the full financial costs of cross-fencing throughout its lifetime. Our paper also more generally highlights the need for more accurate accounting to assess management alternatives prior to project initiation.

Although not the primary subject, our paper also arose from the observation that, perhaps similarly, the environmental costs of fencing are being overlooked and/or not communicated during the course of project development and in broader conversations about national policy. Research on cross-fencing’s direct (e.g., bird and big game collisions) and indirect environmental costs (e.g., reduced habitat heterogeneity) are ample and should be considered by technical service providers when evaluating project alternatives. Other techniques are available to influence movement and distribution of livestock on landscapes that can avoid the direct and indirect costs of cross-fences. These include use of patch burning, low-stress herding, virtual and temporary fences, strategically located supplemental feed sites, use of different breeds, and individual animal selection. The environmental costs of fencing are also cumulative across landscapes and the nation. This is something that NRCS should consider as it revises its practice standards for fence and for prescribed grazing.

The results of the analysis presented in our paper show that the financial costs and environmental costs of fencing