Since the birth of the contemporary environmental movement in the 1960’s, the nation’s natural resources and surrounding environment have been the object of new public perceptions and expectations. According to recent polls and other indicators, popular interest in environmental quality and natural resource management has been broadly infused into American society and will continue to shape natural resource policies for generations to come.

The Congress, for its part, has responded with many new laws: the National Environmental Policy Act, Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Public Rangeland Improvement Act, Renewable Resources Extension Act. These and other laws have effectively re-chartered federal natural resource agencies to provide greater program balance and a beefed-up land stewardship responsibility.

The Department of Agriculture’s conservation, research, and education agencies have responded by directing special attention to wilderness and wildlife resources through the programs they administer. As part of this response, we have recently completed the second roadless area review and evaluation (RARE II) on the National Forests and Grasslands. This process recommended allocation of 62 million roadless acres to either wilderness or nonwilderness use. We have given similar emphasis to fish and wildlife management in USDA programs.

Now it’s high time we take the same focused approach to the nation’s rangeland resources; that we give range management equal billing with other renewable resource programs by giving it the emphasis it needs and deserves. It’s time to rethink and restate our range policies.

For too long, range ecosystems have been a benignly neglected resource which has been considered insignificant relative to the rich productivity of crop lands and forest lands. It’s time to end that neglect, recognize the true significance of the

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rangeland resource, and shape a new commitment to the future of rangelands.

Significance of the Rangeland Resource

Our nation's forest and rangeland resource encompasses 1.56 billion acres—69 percent of the land in the United States. It is a resource which is distributed throughout the nation but concentrated in the West. Canada and Mexico, too, have significant rangeland resources and share many of the same opportunities and problems that we address on U.S. rangelands.

Our rangeland resource is a diverse and complex array of sometimes fragile ecosystems. And it is a resource on which we are increasingly dependent.

Rangelands provided 217 million animal unit months of livestock grazing in 1976 (29 million from federal rangelands, 188 million from non-federal lands). They provide 15% of the total roughage used by livestock in this country. They will be called upon to produce even more in the future.

New nongrazing uses are becoming an increasingly significant part of total rangeland worth to society. Commercial or potentially commercial rangeland crops include oil from jojoba, rubber from guayule, and firewood from juniper. Rangelands are hunted on and frequented by recreationists and mined for the coal and minerals which lie beneath them. They provide needed habitat for many species of wildlife—some threatened or endangered, and some protected otherwise. And one-fourth of the surface water runoff in the West comes off rangeland. These rangelands bear a very great potential for effective and enduring returns from multiple-use management. Yet, we have permitted them to produce at far less than their potential.

Fifty-four percent of all rangelands in the "lower 48" States—350 million acres of private, state, and federal rangelands—are in poor or very poor condition. Vegetation and soil conditions on these lands are estimated at 40% of their potential or less. Brushy plants with little or no economic value have encroached upon much of this acreage. In the arid and semiarid Southwest, there has been significant soil erosion, with related effects of stream sedimentation, degraded wildlife habitat, and impaired recreation values.

Call for Commitment

Since the Dust Bowl days, we have spent several generations correcting past land abuses. On private and public lands alike, we have tied down the soil, brought water to once-dry lands, and recovered the productivity of millions of acres. With revolutionary advances in conservation practices developed through pioneering research, and with excellent cooperation among government, industry, and rangeland owners and users, we have turned the corner on the degradation of our rangeland resource.

Now it's time to go an extra, but essential, step: to shape a commitment to the future of the rangeland resource, and to speed our efforts to build back the fertility and productivity of these lands for all uses. The pressures which already bear heavily on rangeland ecosystems will continue to grow. We can accommodate these pressures, but we must do it by applying additional knowledge, through thoughtful long-range planning, and through our mutual commitment to solving the problems, resolving the conflicts, and taking needed initiatives.

Research Needs

In our USDA programs and investments, we will continue to address the need for conservation leadership. We have long conducted range research, for example, but now we must strengthen research programs to better accommodate a blend of rangeland uses. We have reprogrammed research to explore the interactions of forage production and livestock grazing with wildlife habitat, watersheds, recreation, and timber.

There are areas we still need to explore. We need:

- to determine the critical habitat requirements for endangered plant and animal species and the management strategies needed to protect that habitat;
- to develop multisource identification and classification systems that are acceptable to all land management agencies;
- to better understand both the structure and function of rangeland ecosystems, as well as our data needs, for better prediction of the environmental impacts of our proposed actions;
- to find or develop new germplasm and improved varieties of grasses, forbs, shrubs, and nitrogen-fixing plants which are...
easier to establish and more tolerant of pests and grazing; ★ to determine the potential for improved production on better rangeland sites, and; ★ to understand the relationship between grazing intensity, soil erosion, water quality, and fish and wildlife populations on those sites.

We will look to our researchers to help us find the answers we need.

**Extension, Education, Technical Assistance**

We will also look at the opportunities for early investment in the cooperative extension, technical assistance, and higher education programs which are so essential to long-run improvements in rangeland productivity. We will consider the immense need to educate the general public in making better use of rangeland ecosystems without abusing them. We cannot afford to ignore the enduring benefits of these programs.

**Accommodating Use**

In planning to meet the nation’s future needs, we will weigh the opportunities to meet those needs from private lands, as well as from the lands we administer directly. This is the intent of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act and Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act. In an era of tightening budgets and growing needs, cost-effectiveness is essential.

In USDA policies and programs, we will seek optimum resource use, blending uses where possible, permitting them to coexist where they are compatible, and restricting or modifying them where necessary to accommodate other uses or protect the land.

Good rangeland management is the common denominator of the many rangeland uses. But good rangeland management requires cooperation among all rangeland users. Where there are conflicts among uses, we will use reasoned negotiation to resolve them, rather than draw arbitrary lines between alternative land uses.

We will continue to permit livestock grazing and rangeland improvements in National Forest wilderness areas, for example, where grazing was established before wilderness designation and where the improvements will help protect the resource and are compatible with wilderness use.

**Baseline of Land Stewardship**

We will not hesitate, though, to restrict or modify public rangeland uses where it is necessary to protect the land, to accommodate balanced use, or to improve the long-term condition or productivity of the site.

Good land stewardship will be the bottom line for permitted land uses. We will not accept long-term losses to maximize short-term gains. Nor will we permit uses on sites where they will cause long-term damage to rangeland soils and vegetation.

We are very familiar, for example, with the long-term damage which can result from indiscriminate off-road vehicle use. This has ruined fragile soils, harassed wildlife, and damaged unique archaeological sites. I am reviewing implementation of our off-road vehicle policy to determine if our plans fully comply with President Carter’s off-road-vehicle directive, expressed in his 1977 environmental message.

I am also becoming concerned about the potential long-term effects if we commercially cultivate guayule, jojoba, and other plants on arid or semiarid rangelands. Though we are interested in greater use of these plants and will encourage exploration of their economic potential as native resources of materials we now import, we also know that these semiarid rangelands are fragile environments. We may find that the environmental risks of intensively cultivating these plants on the rangeland outweigh their commercial value. Our research programs will help resolve that question.

**Cooperation with Others**

Increasing rangeland ecosystem productivity will require close cooperation among the various agencies, operators, and private landowners who manage and use them. This is particularly the case in the West, where our lands are intermingled with state-owned and private lands, and where the policies and practices applied on one parcel may greatly affect the productivity, use, and management of neighboring parcels.

Particularly for rangeland grazing, there is a traditional, seasonal symbiosis between public and private rangelands.
This allows the livestock operator to gain more efficient use of grazing resources than if production were confined to one ownership.

USDA recognizes the crucial relationship between federal rangelands and the vitality of the livestock industry in the West. We are aware of the subsequent impact of federal range policies on that industry, on the farms and ranches which comprise it, and on the stability of rural communities. We empathize particularly with the small rancher or permittee, whose operation may be economically marginal.

The federal government has a responsibility to recognize its possible effects on those operations. It is working not only with the management and use of a resource, but also with the sustenance and continued vitality of a way of life. Cost-sharing and other financial assistance should be available to those whose profit margins do not permit the long-term investment in rangeland improvements.

The Department of Agriculture advocates wise land use, as it should. Secretary Bob Bergland recently signed a new land use policy which firmly establishes our advocacy role in preventing the conversion of important farm and forest lands, prime rangelands, and wetlands to other uses. We will work with the states and with local governments to help identify those lands. And we will speak out to encourage action to retain them in agriculture.

Since 1965, USDA and the Bureau of Land Management have formally coordinated their technical assistance efforts, thereby producing individual livestock operators who use both private and public lands, with single, coordinated, resource plans for their entire operation. This effort has been endorsed by the National Association of Conservation Districts.

Where there is a significant intermingling of lands in public and private ownership, coordinated resource planning should be the rule among the federal agencies involved in such areas. Such on-the-ground cooperation should be extended to the states and other organizations as well.

Cooperation with Mexico

Since the 1977 United Nations Conference on Desertification, we have been developing an anti-desertification program with Mexico. It will be a cooperative effort to generally enhance the productivity of our arid and semiarid lands.

In that program, we have agreed to give priority to soil and water conservation in arid and semiarid ecosystems, with an eye to increasing food production and preserving the ecological balance. We will also emphasize expanded research and technical assistance programs to conserve, regenerate, and commercially cultivate and use native plant species such as guayule and jojoba.

We share a common rangeland resource with Mexico, and I'm pleased we can cooperate in this program. I hope we can enlarge this cooperation still further in the future, by convening a regional meeting for the Americas to address the mutual problem of desertification on our continents.

I have set out here much of the philosophy, many goals, and several programs which guide and drive rangeland programs in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We have recognized the great worth, the many needs, and the tremendous potential of our nation's rangeland ecosystems. Now we must translate that recognition into concrete policies and program direction.

However, we must recognize the long-term nature of that task. A quick solution to the remaining rangeland problems is not possible. We may have to be satisfied, rather, with a gradual improvement in rangeland productivity and condition.

Let's begin by shaping a new commitment to the future worth of these rangelands.