Organized Action at Root of Sunflower Success

Glen Snell

Range management was given a positive boost by the Sunflower Resource Conservation and Development Area when it began a range-forage-livestock improvement program. This RC&D Area, covering Barber, Comanche, Harper, Kingman, Kiowa, Pratt, and Sumner counties, in southern Kansas, has about 1 1/2 million acres of native range land plus another 1/2 million acres of cropland in forage production. It all began in 1969 when several counties proposed individual range improvement measures. Subsequently, the leaders recognized the need for an area-wide effort to solve range management problems and improve forage production.

In 1976 an RC&D range-forage-livestock committee was formed to coordinate individual county efforts into area-wide policy. Next year the Soil Conservation Service assigned a range conservationist to furnish technical help in this effort.

The first winter the committee developed guidelines on the major range problems of the area. The counties then formed committees to focus efforts on their particular needs. They named 32 items of concern ranging from brush management to planned grazing systems to tame pasture development to prairie dog control. After describing county needs, each committee selected ranchers to work with.

At the end of 1979, 50 ranchers were actively involved in solving or demonstrating one or more items of concern. Answers to a few problems were beginning to form. For others, it will take 2 to 4 years of progress before confident recommendations can be made.

Besides the SCS and the conservation districts, several other agencies and groups have come in to help on this program. Kansas State University furnishes help through range management research and has given direct assistance to livestock management problems. The Cooperative Extension Service has helped with fire control schools and local tours. The USDA Science and Education Administration’s Southern Great Plains Field Station at Woodward, Okla., is furnishing research information and plant materials to start highly productive native grass in pure stands for tame pastures. The Kansas State Board of Agriculture’s Weed and Pesticide Division is running trials on brush control. The Kansas Fish and Game Commission is helping with a trial on the biological control of prairie dogs.

Direct assistance to project ranchers is the major way this program works. Dealing with the actual problem on a going ranch operation is the most practical way to solve it. It also demonstrates for neighboring ranchers that the solution or management principle can be effectively applied.

The author is range conservationist, Soil Conservation Service, Medicine Lodge, Kansas.

Editor’s Note: The name “Sunflower” was chosen for this first RC&D project to Kansas because Kansas is the Sunflower State, so named because of the profusion of wild sunflowers that grow everywhere in Kansas. The sunflower is the state flower and is on all state highway signs.
Rangelands Spring and fall tours show the progress toward management objectives and how solutions to problems are applied. News articles and feature stories help spread the news. Information meetings and management seminars offer in-depth discussion. Ranchers have opportunities to hash over questions dealing with problems and with modifying management techniques.

Sponsored and guided by the Sunflower RC&D Area, assisted by cooperating federal, state, and local agencies and groups, this type of program offers great opportunity to improve resource management and increase net income.

Stockmen’s Concern for Rodents Leads to ‘Rat to Life’ Society

(Reprinted from October 4, 1979, issue of Livestock Weekly published at San Angelo, Texas.)

Some stockmen in desperation have resorted to a dangerous weapon—satirical humor—in their battle with environmental activists over the predator control issue.

Possibly the ultimate deployment of that weapon has been the creation of the “Rat to Life” Society, organized by Spade Ranch general manager W.J. “Dub” Waldrip [Lubbock] and carried toward its illogical conclusion by the Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Association.

Waldrip hit upon the idea after reading a New York Times article about a rat eradication drive prompted when a woman was bitten near the Big Apple’s city hall. He promptly fired off a letter to the editor of the Times protesting the ecological folly of taking action “against the entire rat population.”

“This is certainly unfair,” he lamented, “and I am grateful that we are more civilized out here in this part of the country. At one time were were just as ignorant.

“We have, at times, population expansions of coyotes, wolves or other predators, but clear-thinking members of such organizations as Defenders of Wildlife, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society and a multitude of others have pointed out how fortunate we should feel to contribute our lambs and calves to the care and feeding of these poor animals. The fact that we now support more of these animals than ever before in our country’s history attests to the success of our program.”

Waldrip expressed confidence that the Rat to Life Society would receive considerable support from the afore-named groups, “since the great majority of these associations come from large population centers such as those along the Eastern Seaboard.”

Calling for help in “this fight to save our rats,” he contended that “rats have as much entitlement to life as coyotes and other creatures. To identify and punish the guilty rodent is one thing—but to poison indiscriminately will upset the delicate ecological balance. DON’T TAMPER WITH OUR ECOSYSTEM!”

Waldrip’s final plea was a genuine heartstring-tugger. He reminded Times readers that “you have plenty of folks up there. Don’t you think it worth giving a few of them for the joy of looking out at night and seeing a big trophy-sized boar rat silhouetted in the moonlight as he scampers up a pile of garbage?”

Waldrip’s letter, reprinted in TS&GRA’s Ranch Magazine, prompted a membership application from Jerry V. Allen, vice-president and trust officer of the Frost National Bank of San Antonio. Allen noted that he administers more than a half-million acres of land and, accordingly, shares the RLS concern over the “indiscriminate brutal destruction” of “defenseless” urban rats.

“I cannot understand why they do not trap the guilty rat and then release him into the correct ecosystem similar to what they demand we do to the coyotes, wolves and eagles which attack our new-born lambs, goats and calves,” he said. “As an alternative, they could catch and sterilize the guilty rat,” Allen suggested, adding that rats should be recognized as beneficial in cities because they feed primarily on garbage.

Waldrip in turn answered that RLS is “working diligently to save this precious heritage,” but that the Society faces a “well-organized, well-financed, united group of folks who are very greedy and not the least interested in protecting this endangered species.”

The Society, he continued, is considering seeking a court injunction to halt “all their murderous schemes” until a full hearing can be conducted. Failing that, Waldrip suggested New York has received so much federal aid that it should be declared “a portion of the public lands” and placed under the administration of the Bureau of Land Management. He would then favor establishing an “adopt-a-rat” program.

In appreciation of Waldrip’s efforts, TS&GRA commissioned San Angelo artist Jimmy Cox to produce a cartoon showing a properly concerned rancher protectively embracing a properly scruffy rat. The cartoon has since been imprinted on T-shirts, and another drawing of a moonlit rat silhouetted atop a garbage can has been used to decorate caps.

The next installment in the unfolding drama was perhaps inevitable. TS&GRA executive secretary Bill Sims, hearing that the General Services Administration and the Parks Service had been called in to combat a rat problem in the White House, mailed RLS T-shirts to the First Family. He enclosed a letter to President Carter outlining the Society’s roots and purpose, slyly sneaking in a plea for improved predator control efforts. Sims pointed out that Compound 1080, commonly used as rodenticide in crowded urban areas, has been banned for predator control use on the open range because of claims that such use is too hazardous.

In his closing remarks, Sims suggested to Carter that, if the White House rat problem doesn’t clear up, “you might use your paddle to fend them off. After all, the ranchers of this nation have been up the creek without a paddle so far as predators are concerned for years!”

The next step? Well, Sims has forwarded copies of all correspondence to both the Merv Griffin Show and Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show. Responses so far have not been exactly positive, but then they haven’t been absolutely negative either. How could they be, with an issue so central to the public’s concern over environmental protection?