Jarbidge Ranger District

It Can Be Done

Kenneth Timothy

This is a story about the Jarbidge Ranger District in northeastern Nevada. This is an area with a long history of livestock grazing and with an excellent story to tell. Cattle were brought into the area in the mid-1800's and many changes have occurred since that time. The early history of the area describes the range as being knee-deep in grass as far as the eye could see. The high mountain ranges were productive and proved to be ideal for summer range. Cattle used the higher elevations from early spring until late fall and then wintered on the lower plains until the following spring.

This type of grazing system worked well for a few years until more cattle—and eventually sheep—were brought into the area. After a few years of heavy livestock use, the range was in a depleted condition and available forage was almost eliminated. Sagebrush, which was once found in scattered patches, began to cover thousands of acres. Cattle and sheep range wars began to cover thousands of acres. Cattle and sheep range wars became a common occurrence in competition for available forage.

After a few years of this conflict and range abuse, local ranchers requested the Federal government to create a Forest Reserve. This was accomplished in 1906 primarily to protect the grazing and watershed resources. This area is now the Jarbidge Ranger District, Humboldt National Forest.

At the same time the area was proclaimed a Forest Reserve, the range conditions were the worst they had ever been. Range improvement did not occur quickly. It was not easy for ranchers, accustomed to free range, to conform to regulations and then pay grazing fees for range they had considered to be theirs.

After 11 years of regulations, range management, and patience, the range began to show improvement. The ranchers were so impressed with the improved range condition, they organized the “71” Stockmen's Association whose main purpose was for bettering conditions on the range. (71 was an early day Texas brand, but is not used in this area today.)

The “71” Livestock Association is still in existence today and together with the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management is still striving to maintain and improve range conditions.

Today the range is greatly improved since the early 1900's as shown by the following pictures:

The author was employed on the Jarbidge Ranger District.

Date: August 19, 1919
Location: Approximately one mile north of Pole Creek Ranger Station looking due west.
As demonstrated by droppings and close-cropped forage, the area was receiving extremely heavy use in 1919. The browse plants behind the cattle are probably rabbitbrush and big sagebrush.

Date: September 2, 1977
The area has recovered greatly from the abuse it received in the early 1900's. The vegetal cover is primarily western yarrow, Idaho fescue, and dandelion. Rabbitbrush is still found within this area, but to a lesser extent than before.
These pictures were taken on the Pole Creek Allotment, which has been grazed by both sheep and cattle. Presently, cattle graze this allotment on a four-pasture rest rotation system from July 1 to September 30. The rest rotation system was begun in 1969 with 450 head of cattle. In 1970 an increase to 700 head was approved. In 1977 an increase of 150 head of cattle was added to bring total numbers to 850 head, (500 cows with calves and 350 yearlings).
The increase and improvement in range conditions are the result of water developments, fencing, prescribed burning, spraying, rest rotation grazing, and continual cooperation between the permittee, Forest Service, and interested persons and agencies.
Livestock, mainly cattle, are attracted to creek bottoms and often cause detrimental effects. The area along the creek bottoms, known as riparian habitat, is important because of its high diversity for wildlife and fisheries habitat. All livestock management plans should be designed for protection or enhancement of riparian areas.
The condition of the riparian zones has improved significantly.
Date: 1909

Date: 1909

Location: Upper North Creek looking due west.

This mountain meadow, adjacent to the stream course, was over utilized during the summer grazing season. The vegetation consists of big sagebrush, California false hellebore (skunk cabbage), willows, aspen, and ceanothus patches in the distance.

Summary

During the past 73 years the Forest Service has advocated sound range management and with the help of the permittees has greatly improved range conditions. These improvements are some good examples of advancements made in rangeland management. The entire area is still not knee-deep in grass as described in the mid-1800's, but what, if anything, is the same today as it was then? The goal here is not to revert back to a mono-type grassland.

Because of potential impact to existing wildlife, the management objective is plant diversity for wildlife habitat, livestock forage and watershed protection.

Not all National Forest lands have improved or recovered as dramatically from poor grazing practices as these areas, but most have made some improvement. Properly applied livestock grazing has many benefits to offer the land and the people.

Thanks, thanks, and thanks again . . .

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