

The Importance of Rangeland and Range Conservation

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am Dr. Joseph L. Schuster, President, Society for Range Management (SRM). The Society for Range Management is a professional organization comprised of individuals with a common interest in the study, management, and rational use of rangelands and related ecosystems. The subsequent testimony on the importance of rangelands and range conservation as a national issue is presented at the request of Senator Roger Jepsen. As representative of the Society for Range Management, I will present several key points for your consideration and amplify each with my rationale.

1. The Rangelands of the United States Are A Vital National Resource That Must Be Conserved For the Future

The 853 million acres of rangeland represent 38% of our nation's land base while an additional 362 million acres of forest, cropland and pastureland are used as range by livestock and wildlife. Rangeland is the forage base for most of the western livestock industry, but just as importantly it provides wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and off-site water for millions of Americans. Much of our nation's energy and mineral reserves are found under rangeland. Thus, it is a vital national resource with many economic and social benefits. In fact, Rangeland is the resource for the future when it will become more and more important for food, fiber, recreation, and water. By the year 2030 the U.S. population will exceed 300 million. Nonetheless, the nation's rangelands will have shrunk by an estimated 67 million acres because of land use changes to industrial, cropland, and built-up areas. With the shrinking base and the intensification of their use it is imperative that this nation conserve our rangelands for the future.

2. There Is A Pressing Need To Transmit Public Concern For Soil And Water Conservation On Rangeland Into National Policy

We must have a greater national commitment to both soil and water conservation on rangeland. This concern has become evident in recent years, and there is a pressing need to transmit public concern for conservation of our natural resources into national policy.

Our soil and water resources are our nation's wealth. It is the strength of our nation, and its conservation is the responsibility of the landowner (public or private). We as a nation must realize that there is a cost for the conservation. The public must realize that the operator is not the only beneficiary of rangeland conservation practices. The enhanced environmental quality resulting from conservation is generally an off-site public benefit. Therefore, as a nation, we must be willing to help the land user apply long-term conservation treatments. The Administration should consider tax incentives for conservation practices; long-term, low-interest loans for conservation treatments; and direct cash outgo in USDA programs toward range conservation. The USDA must adopt policies that will provide economic incentives

rather than economic penalties to range conservation efforts by private operators.

In order to meet future needs of water, food, fiber and recreation; rangelands and range conservation should not only become a USDA priority but a National priority.

3. It Is Essential To The Future Welfare Of The Nation That The National Commitment To Rangeland Resources Management And Conservation Be Increased Relative To Other Natural Resource Programs

Rangeland is a unique land resource relative to cropland and forestland. It furnishes both agricultural products and essential natural resources such as water, wildlife and recreation. This uniqueness should be realized when programs are directed toward range conservation. This has not been done in the past and range has suffered from lack of recognition and program development. Consequently, range has not received the resources and program recognition it deserves.

Evidence:

a. The range management effort in the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has declined drastically in recent years while those in forestry, wildlife, and recreation have received substantial increases.

b. Range received only slight consideration in the Resources Planning Act (RPA) Alternative Goals 1985 Program (e.g., livestock grazing was not treated as an opportunity area as were timber, wildlife, and recreation).

c. Most soil and water conservation programs are oriented toward croplands. The USDA Secretary's Memorandum 9500-5, dated 15 December 1983, implies that rangeland will be put on par with the rest of American agriculture. It is evident that this has not been done because of the thrust of present conservation policy and reduction in range conservation efforts. Manpower and funding commitments to range in both USDA and USDI continue to decline in relation to other natural resources. The Range Research Act (Sub Title M of 1981 Farm Bill) has never been funded, and the Renewable Resources Extension Act of 1978 has received minimal funding and then only through the efforts of Congress. Its formula for funding allocations to disciplines slights range.

d. The Soil Conservation Service (SCS) has placed major emphasis on "conservation tillage" on cropland, but there is no comparable effort in conservation for rangeland. I propose a "conservation management" movement for rangelands.

e. Except for special studies, there is no adequate way to identify range inputs and products within USDA.

Within the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), range is mixed with pasture and forage research. Within the FS, range is lumped with wildlife and fisheries. Within the Cooperative Research Service Inventory System, range is combined with several other activities rather than as a resource commodity (as forestry is treated).

These and other reasons indicate that range and rangelands should have separate identity in USDA and be treated as a land resource with several commodities and uses.

4. Development And Application Of New Range Conservation Technology Is Imperative If Rangelands Are To Meet The Increased Demands Of An Affluent Population

Over half the rangelands of the U.S. are seriously degraded and suffer reduced productivity caused by ill effects of past mismanagement, overgrazing, and erosion. Only 34% of the U.S. rangelands are in good or better condition. Ranges in fair condition constitute 45%, while 16% are rated poor. Ranges in fair condition are providing goods and services at less than half their ecological potential while those in poor condition are producing at less than 25% of their potential. Rangelands in these lower condition classes are much more susceptible to erosion and drought than those in good condition. With the considerable amount of additional pressure that will be placed on American rangelands by recreationists, hunters, and demands for increased water yield in the next two decades it is essential that range research and range technical assistance be accelerated. We cannot afford further range deterioration. The productive potential of our nation's rangelands must be maintained where it has not deteriorated and enhanced where it has. To accomplish this, range conservation must truly become a part of the total U.S. agricultural commitment. It must receive resource allocations in proportion to its value to the nation.

5. Federal Soil Conservation And Range Management Programs Need To Be Redirected To Stop The Diversion Of Federal Assistance From Range And Related Grazing Lands.

The SRM lauds the priorities set by the National Program of Soil and Water Conservation (NCP). Reduction of erosion and conservation of water are vital to this nation's welfare. We are concerned, however, that rangelands have not

received their share of the conservation effort. The Special Areas Conservation Program of the SCS, by using erosion as the sole criterion and the Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE) as the major measure of erosion, heavily favors "targeting" toward cropland. The result is continued rangeland degradation and a declining effort in range conservation because of migration of funds and manpower to predominantly cropland regions.

6. The Rangelands Of The United States Are A Primary Source Of Increased Water Supply

The 853 million acres of rangeland are a vast watershed, and although much of it is in the semi-arid west, it provides significant water for municipal and agricultural uses. It has the potential to provide even more. A 1983 report issued by the Office of Technology Assessment cautions Congress that brush encroachment on the nation's rangeland poses a major threat to long-term productivity. Excessive brush is also reducing our nation's water supply. Improvement of range condition not only enhances on-site water use by plants but reduces soil erosion, and increases off-site water quality and yield. Noxious brush and weeds now infest 350 million acres of privately owned rangeland. A 50% reduction of these noxious plant infestations would make 12.2 quadrillion gallons of water available each year for other uses.

7. The Criteria Used To Determine Cost-Effectiveness Of Range Conservation Practices Should Consider All Benefits, Not Just Increased Livestock Production

We urge that USDA recognize that benefits of range conservation practices accrue to the public as well as the land owner. Increased grazing is not the only value derived. In addition to increased forage production range improvements: (1) enhance fish and wildlife habitat; (2) enhance the recreational opportunities; (3) enhance water conservation on-site and both quality and quantity off-site; (4) reduce flood damages; and (5) reduce siltation and sedimentation downstream. All are for the social good, and all should be considered when evaluating the benefits of range conservation practices. The Economic Research Service should be tasked to support range products research.

VIEWPOINT:

Use of USLE on Rangelands

Kenneth G. Renard

Having read the SRM position statements in *Rangelands* 6(3):139-140, I was pleased to see that SRM is involved in taking stands on issues they feel affect the membership. Not being familiar with Coastal Marsh problems, I cannot comment on that portion of the position statement. The discussion of USLE contains a number of errors and misconceptions which I feel have done a great deal of harm to those concerned with stewardship of the soil resources of rangeland.

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The transmittal letter of SRM President J.L. Schuster states, "Until technology is developed to replace it . . . the USLE as inapplicable on rangelands, and adopt proven and acceptable techniques for evaluating vegetation as a more accurate and earlier indication of degradation of the total rangeland resource." It is a foregone conclusion that the USLE was never intended to assess anything other than the erosion that would be expected over a long period as a result of the process of water erosion. Perhaps that is where the problem lies. Is this technology being used to assess water supply, water quality, wildlife, plant resources, etc.? If so I can't imagine how. ARS scientists are attempting to develop