

RANGELAND MONITORING

I attended a range monitoring workshop in Elko a few days back. Representatives from the Extension Service, NRDC and the Bureau of Land Management were all there - suggesting that in order to ward off future law suits and cuts in grazing use, we permittees should enter into cooperative monitoring programs involving agency personnel and permittees.

It sounded logical, and I suppose I would have bought into the idea thirty years ago, but as I listened I could not help thinking - are the methods and practices that are being suggested today any different than what was being proposed thirty or more years ago.

Over the years, we ranchers have tried just about everything. We have tried deferred rotation grazing; we have tried rest rotation grazing; we have met requirements dictating that a certain amount of stubble height be left on riparian areas each year; we have tried taking half the feed and leaving half; we have taken one cut after another in grazing use. Yet we are still being told we have to stay off riparian areas, we are still being blamed for downturns in sage grouse numbers, we're still facing road closures, and we are still being threatened by Western Water Sheds.

Have conditions improved for wildlife? No they haven't. If anything, things have gotten worse. Consider the fires we are now experiencing. Is it not true that thousands and thousands of acres of prime wildlife habitat have been destroyed by wildfire during recent decades? Can anyone deny that the fires we have been experiencing are a product of grazing reductions?

It's true, range deterioration has been occurring during recent years. But not of the kind that everyone is talking about. All the rhetoric we hear about the need for protecting and preserving sage grouse habitat, pygmy rabbit habitat, and deer habitat. What can be more harmful to these species than wildfire? Just in the last twenty years, we have lost thousands upon thousands acres of the finest wildlife habitat found anywhere within the western United States to wildfire, but do we see the blame for these fires placed on those who have caused the problem - never.

I suppose I would not get so upset about these things if it only affected those who have been implementing such policy, but when it hurts each and every one of us, I get angry - particularly when those that are responsible keep going on year after year, blaming the ranching community for problems they themselves have caused.

Its myth, that livestock grazing has harmed our rangelands since the time of first settlement. Take riparian condition as an example. If you go back and look at the earliest photographs that were taken in the 1800's as I have done, and you compare them to photographs taken of the same areas more recently, you will find that riparian condition has improved dramatically since the time of first settlement. Trees found along waterways have increased. Bank erosion is less pronounced than it was in the mid 1800's. Willow growth has increased. Only in areas where government has had complete control for long periods of time, is excessive erosion of the kind that agency people speak of still occurring.

And what about predator control? Forty years ago, we were being told that bounty programs were bad; that toxins were bad; that coyote control programs were of no value. On and on it went, until finally, one predator program after another was cut. And so, what has happened? Has it helped wildlife? Of course it hasn't.

Riparian decadence is another problem. All across Nevada we are seeing increasing willow growth along streams and waterways - along Edwards Creek in Churchill County, along Stoneberger Creek in the northern part of Monitor Valley, in Elko County, in Eureka County and elsewhere throughout the State. Everywhere, where livestock grazing has been reduced, woody vegetation is increasing - crowding out understory, reducing water flows and harming fisheries.

Upland health and productivity is being harmed as well. In 1975, Dr. Paul Tueller, Professor of Range Ecology at the University of Nevada, completed a study indicating that range plants grazed at judicious levels produce as much as 80 percent more plant material than plants that are protected. When cattle and sheep are run on a rangeland, they prune plants back, stimulating new and nutritious growth. Trails are created, openings are made larger, twigs and litter fall to the ground, and nutrients are recycled. Moisture retention improves, sunlight reaches soils more readily, insect production increases, spring and fall green up become more pronounced, and wildlife thrive.

It's true, overgrazing can be a problem - as was the case in the old days when so many were competing for the range. Underuse, however, presents an even greater problem, and that's what we are facing today. We must always remember, the greatest numbers of wildlife occurred during the period when the greatest numbers of livestock were being run on the range.

I suggest, if monitoring is to be accomplished, we must focus on final outcomes. It's not what we humans want our rangelands to look like that is important, it's what we do that benefit wildlife that is important.

Recently I sent a request to the Elko BLM office, asking them to send me copies of all the yearly monitoring records they might have, determining the status of Lahontan cutthroat trout following the acquisition of and protection of lands along the Mary's River. Not surprisingly, they had to admit, they had done no monitoring.

This is the problem. Agency personnel have not been monitoring in ways that reveal the truth. For example, we now know that when there is an increase in woody vegetation along streams and waterways there is a corresponding decrease in water flow. We also know that such increases in woody vegetation occur when livestock reductions occur. So why are we not monitoring water flows on streams where livestock use has been reduced or eliminated throughout the State? If there are indications that past actions are proving harmful, should we not be monitoring outcomes and pursuing solutions?

The same can be said of sage grouse. It now appears that acquisition of lands by the federal government along the Mary's River and the removal of sheep use in the area have caused sage grouse to become non-evident throughout the area - while on the other hand, sage grouse seem to be doing fairly well on large blocks of privately held lands that are owned and controlled by the

Sorenson Family near Secret Pass. Should we not be monitoring the production of sage grouse within these two areas so as to determine what is actually occurring and why?

We need to know as well, why it is, when black sage is grazed by domestic sheep from year to year, that deer and sage grouse do better. Could it be, when black sage plants that are found on the deserts of Nevada are grazed each winter, it stimulates the plants in such a way as to causes them to produce greater amounts of highly nutritious feed beneficial to livestock and wildlife alike?

If I'm wrong about these things – then prove me wrong. Let's get out there and get some studies going. Let's do some meaningful monitoring.