

The Vale Project

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Special to the Rancher

For those interested in the debate concerning the planting of crested wheat grass on western rangelands, and the allegation that such seedings are bad for wildlife, I would like to submit the following.

In the 1963 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) undertook what was probably the greatest range improvement project ever in the Vale Grazing District of southeast Oregon. Over an 11-year period, over 500,000 acres of brush land was either seeded to crested wheat grass or sprayed with 2-4-D. In addition, 1,600 water developments, and 463 miles of pipelines were put in. The results were phenomenal. Those monitoring the project estimated that the carrying capacity for the Vale District increased the estimated grazing capacity of the area, from, 285,000 animal unit months (AUMs) in 1962 to 438,000 AUMs in 1975.

Improved feed for livestock was not the only consideration. Deep reservoirs provided permanent fish habitats. Fence design and more frequent livestock movement favored wildlife. Water developments, it was found, benefited nearly all species. R.R. Kindschy, a wildlife specialist, believed that it was the development of water that caused chukars to increase so dramatically during the period following implementation.

Monitoring by the Oregon State Game Commission from 1962 through 1970 found that chukar partridge increased two-fold during the Vale District program, but only by one-fifth outside the district. In 1969, an estimated 48,000 birds were taken by hunters in the Vale District.

During the same period, sage grouse increased from 69 birds per every 10-mile transect to 95 birds per transect, while in the surrounding districts of eastern Oregon, the birds decreased from 24 birds per 10 miles transect.

Mule Deer did not do as well as chukar and sage grouse. Even so, the number of fawns per 100 does remained relatively stable with a slightly higher ratio in the Vale District than in other parts of Oregon during the period.

Areas where browse was an important component were excluded from brush control. On treated areas, brush was reduced, yet rarely were all brush plants killed. Reinvasions of sagebrush occurred in almost all areas within a relatively short period of time. Kindschy found a 25 percent increase in available browse on 22 transects between 1963 and 1971. Deer were found to utilize newly available grass during early winter and spring. In one instance, deer actually changed their migrations from the Three-Forks area (at 4,000 foot elevation) to the "Rome seedings" (at 3,500 foot elevation) to take advantage of the newly developed feed.

Further observation was, "Unusually high populations of mule deer occurred in the Vale District in the 1950's, as they did in other western rangeland. Fluctuations in numbers on the district have paralleled those of other district, except for indications that reduction in number since 1973 has not been as severe as elsewhere."

The most dramatic increase in any species during the Vale Project was pronghorn. The pronghorn population increased 2.6-fold and the hunters by three times without diminishing the hunter success from 1961 to 1975.

In 1970, the Vale District had 143 percent more antelope than in 1962, while other eastern Oregon antelope populations had increased only 50 percent during the same period. Pronghorn antelope were seldom seen in the early 1900s.

Observations indicated that "antelope preferred places where brush was removed and crested wheat grass seeded". It was further stated that, "young tender growth of grasses and forbs attract antelope. They are frequently seen in areas closely used by cattle."