

Innovative Grazing Management Tools and Incentives for Ranchers

Dan Macon

Dan Macon's presentation was a qualitative overview of the social and cultural issues pertaining to grazing management and how ranchers are motivated to make positive innovations in their ranching operations. Grazing was considered by many to be the root of all evil in terms of wildlife habitat and the environment, however this perception of ranching has evolved and is now considered by most to be the lesser of two evils. People have come to realize that grazing can be a very positive tool not only in terms of bolstering the economy of rural communities, but also for managing natural environments. Dan Macon noted that in addition to development, the greatest threat to rangeland ecosystems is the aging population of ranchers whom embody invaluable local knowledge; almost an entire generation of livestock operators is being lost because people do not see viable economic opportunities; in order for the heritage and benefits of ranching to persist, crucial skills, knowledge and infrastructure must be redeveloped locally.

Dan's presentation addressed the motivations of ranchers to be concerned about environmental stewardship. The presentation outlined grazing management tools that are being utilized by ranchers, and the partners that are involved with these innovative management tools. The presentation also outlined new approaches to livestock management as well as incentives and new markets. The further development of markets for range products is crucial since a lot of innovative grazing practices seem to accomplish their goals; however, it remains very difficult for ranch managers to receive an "extra dime" for doing the "right things" environmentally.

Ranchers care about environmental stewardship for a wide variety of reasons. First and foremost they have a direct personal incentive to be environmental stewards because ranches are both homes and businesses and everyone wants to live and work in places that are aesthetically pleasing and environmentally safe. Moreover, ranchers are in the business because they care about the land and their animals and love to work in the natural environment. Oftentimes environmentalists, with concerns about grazing, and ranchers seem to want the same things for the environment but have talked past one another. The bottom line is that ranch operators are certainly not in the business to "get rich quick" but rather because they love the land and animals. Further incentives for ranchers to care about environmental stewardship include community quality of life issues that are driving the land trust movement. Increasing regulatory guidelines pertaining to water quality, wildlife, air quality, and public safety (mostly wildfire prevention) are also encouraging environmental stewardship amongst ranchers.

Several innovative grazing management tools are highlighted in the publication titled "Grazing for Change Range and Watershed Management Success Stories in California." The publication profiles several cattle ranchers and watershed management groups formed by ranchers throughout California. It describes the types of tools being utilized by ranchers to benefit the

environment as well as their bottom line. There are several great examples of environmental stewardship that also work economically.

All of the ranches profiled in “Grazing for Change” were participating in some type of site-specific management planning; they avoided the “cookie cutter” approach to management. Management planning approaches utilized by the ranchers included: Rangeland Water Quality Management Plans, Holistic Management NRCS Conservation Plans, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) Plans, as well as other planning processes. All of the ranchers also monitored their success and measured their progress toward goals set in the management plans. The monitoring was goal-based and appropriate for the local rangeland type. The ranchers also utilized record keeping and tried to keep monitoring simple so that it could efficiently fit within the context of their overall management objectives.

All of the ranchers profiled also used some form of rotational grazing by varying the timing, duration, and intensity of grazing utilization (sometimes on a particular plant). Rotational grazing can improve plant vigor and composition. Many ranchers also utilized off-stream water development, which keeps livestock away from riparian areas and springs to protect vegetation and water quality. Such development also aids in livestock distribution (especially when used in conjunction with mineral supplementation) and provides additional water for wildlife. All of the ranchers profiled remarked that in terms of economics, utilizing management practices such as rotational grazing, off-stream water development, strategic supplementation and fencing provided the added benefit of interacting with animals on a more consistent basis allowing them to spot health problems early and better understand how animals are interacting with the environment. This resulted in decreased animal health costs and increased profitability in some cases.

Many ranchers, primarily in the coast range and foothills have to deal with brush and woody vegetation control or removal to reduce the threat of wildfire and to increase forage production. Dan cited the presentation given by Dr. Pittroff and a goat research project near Colfax to demonstrate the value of livestock as tools to control vegetation and maintain forage productivity.

A number of ranchers in “Grazing for Change” were also participating in riparian management projects that can improve wildlife habitat, protect and enhance water quality, and increase forage quality and quantity. Dan cited the Wood Ranch and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power as examples of successful riparian restoration projects that utilized grazing as a tool for managing recovery. Some ranchers profiled were actively engaged in native perennial grass restoration using plantings, rotational grazing, and animal impact as tools. These restoration projects improve wildlife habitat, can protect water quality, and can increase forage production. Dan cited Three Creeks Ranch as a good example of successful native perennial grass restoration.

The publication also discusses a few controlled burning programs that have been coupled with grazing management to control invasive weeds such as starthistle, medusahead, and blackberries,

and to encourage the establishment of native grasses. Dan acknowledged that controlled burns do present challenges.

An increased interest in multi-species grazing as a management tool has prompted this practice to be included in the upcoming updated version of “Grazing for Change.” Since different species of livestock use rangelands differently, multiple species grazing can help control invasive plants and manage brush for example. They also help with increased economic risk management through diversification.

Last but not least, conservation easements allow landowners to realize the development value of their land without developing and provide for the transfer of ranches from one generation to the next. Dan mentioned that he is glad to see the recent trend away from prescribing range management in deed restrictions that lock managers into a particular management strategy for perpetuity. Dan also mentioned that the California Rangeland Trust is the single largest holder of easements in the state, which demonstrates not only their success, but the commitment of the ranching community to keep land as rangeland.

Dan included a long list of partners in innovation in his presentation and commented that it is encouraging to see the huge number of partners interested in working with landowners on these types of projects, especially the level of interest from organizations that at one time had been opposed to grazing. Dan also highlighted a number of programs that are being utilized by ranchers to promote environmental stewardship. A number of market-based programs have also been developed that tell the story of the benefits of grazing and range management and add value to the products that come off of those rangelands through marketing. Such programs that have shown promise include: Conservation Beef, Yampa Valley Beef, Oregon Country Beef, and High Sierra Beef in California.

The bottom line of the presentation and “Grazing for Change” is that most successful managers seem to mix tools and create new ones. Some rancher work with partners and others do the work on their own. In conclusion, hopefully the new recognition that environmental stewardship is valued by society will equate to the willingness for society to pay an extra dime for products that come from ranches engaged in such stewardship.