

Impact

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A new era of collaborative land stewardship

Extension's science-based range education program help ranchers and federal land managers establish a collaborative grazing management process that is improving the land, and relationships.

Issue

In the early 1990s, controversy over environmental impacts of grazing on public lands came to a head around the West. Ranchers, land managers, environmentalists and recreationalists held divergent opinions on grazing management and how it affected the land. In Colorado, Western Slope ranchers faced uncertainty about what land managers expected of them. Witnessing the discord and confusion, Extension saw an opportunity to help ranchers and land managers develop a science-based approach to rangeland health and management.

Extension's Response

In 1995, Tri River Area Extension Range and Livestock agent Robbie Baird LeValley created the Range Management Schools (RMS) by bringing together ranchers and public land managers from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The group developed a curriculum that was based on shared needs and grounded in scientific principles.

The RMS offers Range 101, Range 501 and Range 701 courses, that all include one classroom and one field day. Through this curriculum, participants learn about the ecology of the rangeland, plant physiology, rangeland nutrition, animal behavior, rangeland monitoring, grazing responses, range health indicators, grazing plans and much more. To support learning, participants receive a resource notebook that features all classroom presentations plus research articles, reports and information from the Colorado State University's Department of Forestry, Rangeland and Watershed Stewardship. In December 1995, 62 grazing permittees, federal managers, land owners and other stakeholders participated in the first RMS Range 101 course taught by LeValley on the Western Slope.

Through the science-based curriculum, ranchers and land managers collaboratively build a grazing management plan that reflects the needs of all species that use the landscape, not just livestock. With this plan, ranchers and managers define a long-term vision for sustaining landscape health. Extension then helps ranchers create monitoring programs to assess these new management strategies.

Within three years, the RMS expanded beyond the Uncompahgre Basin and Gunnison National Forest to other Colorado regions. Courses have also been taught in Utah, Wyoming, Oregon, Montana, British Columbia and Nevada. A total of 6,450 ranchers, state and federal land managers, wildlife specialists, environmentalists, county commissioners and private rangeland owners from across the West have attended the RMS since 1995.



The Bottom Line

- For 15 years, Extension has helped ranchers and land managers increase their understanding of rangeland ecosystems, while encouraging a new, collaborative approach to grazing management.
- By working together and basing management on principles of rangeland science, ranchers and land managers are improving rangeland conditions and increasing public acceptance of livestock grazing on public lands.

By the Numbers

- Total number of RMS participants since 1995: 6,450
- Average percent increase in participant knowledge after attending the RMS: 34%

Impact

Through 15 years of instruction and collaboration, the RMS has helped improve grazing management on over 6 million acres of public land around the West. LeValley attributes these improvements to an increased understanding of landscape health, multiple-use and their interrelationships. “Grass responds the same no matter what animal—cow, elk, or grasshopper—takes a bite out of it,” says LeValley. “The RMS has taught everyone that grazing can be managed to maintain plant health and be used as a land treatment.”

Dave Bradford, Rangeland Management Specialist for the Paonia Ranger District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompaghre and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG), says that the RMS fostered a major change in the relationship between the Forest Service and grazing permittees. “We moved beyond the bureaucratic approach and began to base our management on scientific principles and what was actually happening on the ground,” says Bradford. As of 2010, all 27 grazing allotments on the Paonia Ranger District have multi-pasture, time-controlled grazing strategies and none has seen a reduction in animal numbers in the past 15 years.

Bradford cited an example: In 1996, new grazing management strategies began on the District’s 9,000-acre West Terror allotment which ranchers and the Forest Service transformed from one giant pasture into seven smaller pastures. Ranchers grazed cattle as a single herd and moved them every three to 33 days based on grazing intensity and plant growth. These changes produced immediate improvements. Early grazed pastures were allowed to re-grow and late grazed pastures grew to maximum development prior to grazing. According to Calvin Campbell, West Terror allotment permittee, this new strategy allowed the most overgrazed areas to rebound quickly. “Nobody would’ve guessed those areas were capable of producing as much, or the variety, of grass that they did,” says Campbell.

Overall, the collaborative approach used within the RMS have improved the land, how it’s managed, and the relationships among those who have a vested interest in conserving public lands around the West. Ranchers and land managers have a better understanding of why the range is improving, and what they can do to continue this trend. All parties agree that the decision to include environmentalists, local politicians, and other land and wildlife interests in the RMS program has created a global understanding of landscape health and helped dissolve an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ attitude.

“One of the Range Schools successes is that it opened up a discussion and allowed for communication between permittees and range staff that wasn’t there before. There was never any mention of policy, standards or guidelines. Sure you have to follow guidelines, but that shouldn’t really be what’s driving your influence of what can be implemented. We were there to talk about practice on the ground.”

– Calvin Campbell

Rancher and permittee, West Terror allotment

“The natural environment is complicated and our understanding of it is an on-going process. We need to continue to try to learn and base our understanding of what is happening on science and actual on-the-ground conditions.”

– Dave Bradford, Range Management Specialist

Paonia Ranger District, Grand Mesa, Uncompaghre and
Gunnison National Forests

“Range management is not an academic answer or an agency answer. It’s a partnership answer.”

– Robbie Baird LeValley

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