



Photo by Lynn Jaynes.

Collaboration as a path forward on Western rangelands

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AT A GLANCE

Ranching issues dividing regional users can exert too much time and energy unless they use a collaborative mindset to disagree and understand.

Challenges facing rangeland managers in the western U.S. have never been greater. Contemporary problems, including expansion of exotic annual grasses such as

cheatgrass and the associated increase in wildfire, impact most of the western U.S. These problems, in turn, are set within an increasingly complex context of multiple land uses and values as well as variable land ownership, making solutions seem at times impossible.

At stake are numerous values and services including cultural resources, human safety, wildlife habitat and a way of life for Western livestock producers who depend on rangelands as a vital source of livestock forage.

Not only are these problems complex but, importantly, they are also persistent. This is a critical point because it provides an indication of

the type of management that will be necessary going into the future. To use a medical analogy, think of a chronic disease that can be treated but for which no cure yet exists. Well, there is no miracle cure for annual grasses or increasing wildfire, but can these problems be effectively treated?

We believe the answer to that question is yes, but it's a conditional yes contingent on building and committing to effective management systems just as persistent as the problems being addressed.

A united direction

Such management systems share

several important attributes, such as being designed to operate at scales big enough to matter but small enough to be workable; they are also based on a common vision of success and include a framework for monitoring management performance and using that information to modify the management when necessary.

However, given the complex social dynamics surrounding use and management of Western rangelands, putting together management for dealing with persistent problems such as exotic annual grasses and wildfire will importantly be founded in a collaborative approach.

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The reason for this is, if nothing else, pragmatic: Time, energy and money spent fighting each other is time, energy and money not spent fighting the problems (annual grass invasion and wildfire) that are common plagues for not just ranchers but also those interested in conserving wildlife habitat (think sage grouse), maintaining wilderness values or minimizing fire danger to structures at the rural/urban interface.

A working process

Collaborative management of rangeland resources is not an event; rather it is a process largely based on relationships. Integral to that process is the accumulation of a sufficient quantity of trust within the group to move forward in a productive manner.

We have worked with multiple collaborative efforts in southeast Oregon involving diverse sets of players who include everyone from ranchers to regulatory agencies. Common to all of these efforts is: It takes a year or two of consistent meetings to build that threshold level of trust necessary to discuss difficult issues like grazing and wildlife habitat. Signs a group has reached that critical threshold include people with diverging viewpoints listening to each other with the intent to understand (versus respond) and an emerging “win-win” attitude (compared to “I win at your expense”).

So what is it about that first year or two that helps to build group trust? Well, a part of it, ironically, involves disagreement. There is nothing wrong with disagreement, as will be discussed below, so long as the folks engaged in disagreement come back to the table at the next meeting. As with any relationship, the quality of the collaborative relationship may not be defined as much by what we agree on as how we work through or don't work through our differences.

Every time a group member comes back to the table following disagreement, they demonstrate a commitment to the process that helps engender trust from the group and serves as an example for others to follow. Over time, that trust opens the door to a group realization of shared fate (for example, annual grasses are equally bad for sage grouse and long-term livestock production) that can build momentum and move the collaborative process in a positive direction.

Using our disagreements

All of that said, members of collaborative management groups also have to be realists and accept the idea agreement will not always be possible and such impasses shouldn't get in the way of achieving larger goals.

To give you an example, we recently worked with a diverse collaborative group of ranchers, regulators, and state and federal agencies in putting together sage grouse habitat management plans



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for private and state-owned lands in Oregon. Early on in this process, it became clear we had strong disagreement within the group over the impact of raven predation on sage grouse populations.

If we had made the success of our collaboration contingent on agreement on the impacts of ravens, the whole process would have come to a screeching halt. Instead, we agreed to disagree on raven impacts and move on to other issues and larger goals. That effort was eventually successful and now involves over a million acres of voluntarily enrolled private and state lands.

Applying science and data

Another factor that can help build trust in diverse collaborative groups is the use of best available science. We have found science can be used as somewhat of a third-party arbitrator to help navigate difficult issues. Think of it this way: If you assemble a diverse group of participants to talk about a controversial topic such as cattle grazing in sage grouse habitat, you can pretty much guess where individuals will initially come down on the subject based on the affiliation listed on their name tag.

A big part of the issue here is: Members of the group on a very different page regarding the mechanics of how grazing influences or doesn't influence plant communities. If you can use science as the basis for structuring conversations and as an educational tool to get the group on a “common enough” page, subsequent discussion of grouse/grazing relationships can proceed in a much more constructive fashion.

We will end this article where it began. Today's rangeland managers, be they public lands specialists or private operators, are facing challenges unprecedented in the modern history of the western U.S. Exotic annual grasses and wildfire are persistent issues, and effective management of these problems will involve a long-term, cross-generational commitment to management in a socially complex environment.

Collaboration is not always the answer but, where it is possible, it can help foster management systems that last long enough to matter when dealing with persistent threats to our valuable rangeland resources.



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