

Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 5 *Ecosystem Management of Natural Resources in the Intermountain West*

Article 8

1995

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Recommended Citation

Hatfield, Doc and Hatfield, Connie (1995) "Trout Creek Mountain project, Oregon," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 5 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol5/iss1/8>

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The Trout Creek Mountain Project, Oregon¹

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Abstract

The Trout Creek Mountain experience is an example of how the land and the people can win by building bridges of understanding and common interest between concerned constituencies. Love of the land, its natural resources, and realization of a need for changing grazing practices to reverse the degradation of riparian areas were the common interests that caused environmentalists, ranchers, the BLM, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to work together to find solutions. The result was a new management plan that was biologically sound and had diverse public support—this is what ecosystem management is all about. The social-political factors which allowed all this to happen were trust and respect between constituencies, recognition of the problem by concerned publics who together asked federal participation in finding solutions, strong support by BLM through all managerial levels, keeping communication open between constituencies, and having one BLM person in the position of Rangeland Manager Specialist/Ecologist so that trusting relationships can be built. The lessons learned from this are that public citizens have the power and obligation to take responsibility for the destiny of private and public lands, and that success comes when diverse individuals in the public accept each other and work together to make a healthy land and community.

INTRODUCTION

Much of our personal effort the past 10 years has been spent building bridges between concerned urban environmentalists and longterm ranchers who depend on the land for their livelihood. Putting folks with different backgrounds and values together for the purpose of making positive change on the land a reality, is a slow, painful but rewarding process. The Trout Creek Mountain experience is an example of how the land and the people can win.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Evolution of the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group began in June of 1988. The authors of this article and Wayne Elmore were invited by the Oregon B.L.M Vale District to give a talk to ranchers in the Trout Creek Mountain area of southeastern Oregon. The purpose of the talk was to give examples of how ranchers in the Prineville BLM District have been able to work cooperatively with the BLM to generate management changes that better the ecological health of the land.

The Prineville, Oregon area has been well publicized by Wayne Elmore, a BLM riparian specialist, who has presented his slide show talk all over the country and has become "Mr. Riparian," a well-deserved title. Wayne has worked out of the same area for 18 years. The dramatic results he shows on the Bear Creek watershed were possible because:

- Prineville district and area managers have been willing to take substantial managerial risks to benefit ecological health.

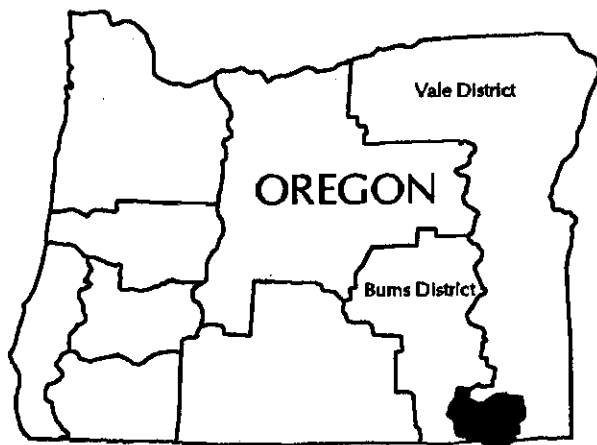
- The BLM-rancher grazing advisory board has provided financial and positive peer pressure support.
- The range con (Earl McKinney) stayed in place and built trust and credibility with ranchers. With that trust and credibility he was able to negotiate and implement very non-traditional, biologically sound grazing strategies that produced watershed and riparian improvement.

Enough on the history of the Prineville program. Let's get back to the sensitive and fragile Trout Creek Mountain area and the June 1988 meeting at the schoolhouse in the tiny border town of McDermitt, Nevada. Picture the setting: one very angry manager of the Whitehorse Ranch, five other unbelievably frustrated ranchers, and several BLM folks including the area manager, range cons, wildlife biologists, and hydrologist.

Visualize "the mountain," which occupies nearly a quarter of a million acres of mostly BLM managed federal land in the southeastern corner of Oregon. Part of the mountain is in the Vale BLM District, part in the Burns district, and a small part of the south side is in the state of Nevada [Figure 1]. A majority of the area is in wilderness study, and is part of the Oregon BLM's top priority for wilderness designation.

This unique range of desert mountain country rises from a 4,000-foot base to a height near 8,000 feet. No evergreen trees grow in this rugged country, but many native grasses, shrubs, and trees thrive there. On top, the grass waves in the wind among the sagebrush and bitterbrush surrounded by patches of mountain mahogany. Aspen grow in the basins just off the top and continue in large scattered groves down numerous scenic, steep, rock-rimmed canyon walls. A suc-

¹ Editorial note: This paper is a verbatim transcription, with their permission, of a publication by Doc and Connie Hatfield entitled Trout Creek Mountain Working Group/1988-1993 with only slight editorial alteration to conform to Proceedings style.



TROUT CREEK MOUNTAIN PROJECT AREA

Figure 1. Trout Creek Mountain Project Area

Successful transplant of Bighorn sheep roams the mountain which also contains trophy mule deer, cougar, and sagegrouse to mention a few of the more "politically sensitive" wildlife species. Many small, wet meadows which are dry meadows during drought form the headwaters of several hundred miles of creeks which flow out to the flat desert floor. Willow, wild rose, and additional aspen make their living in the wet green areas (riparian zones) along the creeks.

The creeks are the source of irrigation water for the ranches which are scattered around the base of the mountain at the mouth of the streams. Most are family owned and historically have produced wild hay and some alfalfa on their flood irrigated meadows. Since settlement in the late 1800's, the cattle operations have been based on grazing the mountain in the summer, the flat desert in the winter, with the remainder of the feed requirements being met with hay. These ranches would be described in ranching circles as being well-balanced, natural, cow/calf range outfits.

Pastures on the mountain vary from several thousand acres up to 50,000 acres in size. Nearly all of them contain live creeks which support trout. Some of the trout are hybrids which resulted when the Nevada Fish and Game Department released Rainbow and Brook trout from the early 1930's through the 1950's to "improve" the fisheries. These "exotics" bred with the native Lahontan cutthroat trout and produced what has over time stabilized into a desirable game fish.

Several of the streams where the "exotics" were not released, or where a natural stream barrier prevented intermingling, still contain pure strains of the original Lahontan. It was in these streams in the Vale BLM district (home to the native cutthroat) where the primary land management concern existed. These remaining pure Lahontans are held in great respect by an increasing number of folks interested in wild natural ecosystems in general and wild trout in particular.

Ranchers in the area have been very aware of the uniqueness of these trout and had made efforts in the past by riding to keep their cattle off the creeks in the hot parts of the summer. However, in reality this did not prove to be very

effective. Fencing was impractical due to the size and roughness of the country. Also, because it is a wilderness study area, new fences are nearly impossible to get approved. It is no wonder the ranchers were frustrated that June of 1988.

Likewise, it is no wonder that folks concerned about the native trout were frustrated. One critical factor for trout production is water temperature. Keeping water cool in these desert streams requires shade from grassy overhanging banks, willows, and aspen. Beaver harvest of willows and aspen coupled by cattle grazing of their sprouts and new seedlings had taken its toll on the tree population along the creeks for over a century. Besides providing shade, the willow roots are important to hold the banks together during floods. Finally, heavier concentrations of cattle in the creeks in late summer had caved off the overhanging banks. The result was warmer water temperatures and a marginal trout habitat.

Compounding the situation was a past history of "paper-and process-driven" BLM management. Couple that with a new range con on the ground every few years with never enough time to build trust and a true working relationship with the rancher permittees. Remember that for 21 years concern over riparian conditions and the fate of the resident trout had been a concern of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, numerous BLM resource professionals, and the Whitehorse Ranch itself. These concerns had been echoed by environmental organizations including the Izaak Walton League, Audubon, the National Wildlife Federation, Oregon Environmental Council, Oregon Natural Resources Council, Trout Unlimited, Oregon Trout etc.... Twenty-one years of environmental concern and frustration with *no significant change on the land*. No change that is except for a number of study enclosures which showed the potential of the riparian areas.

Viewed with a historical perspective, it is understandable why no change had occurred in grazing management. Cattle had been summer grazed on the mountain under open range conditions since the late 1800's, establishing an accepted tradition which was backed up by legally adjudicated grazing preferences. The BLM's primary role during the 1940's, -50's, and -60's was to license and administer these grazing permits. It was not until the late 1960's and 1970's that the importance of the environmental affects of grazing were clearly spelled out through environmental lawsuits and legislation. It was at this time that the mountain was fenced into several separate grazing allotments. However, the pastures were still very large, and the fencing in a number of instances actually concentrated cattle in the stream bottoms. Finally during the 80's, political appointees in the Interior Department sympathetic to the sagebrush rebellion frequently issued policies that were in direct opposition to the intent of existing environmental legislation. The BLM was caught in the middle, attempting to respond to a series of very conflicting signals.

Back to the scene being played in the small border town of McDermitt, Nevada that June of 1988. Wayne Elmore gave his 45 minute riparian talk in 2 hours. Angry discussion accompanied each slide, and the day ended with a number of talks, including Doc's, not given. There was not time to see how positive results had been accomplished cooperatively only 250 miles away. The frustrations of the past were so

prevalent in the room that the message would not have been heard anyway.

The next day was a tour on the mountain. The riparian areas had limited numbers of willow and aspen and most of those were old citizens of the tree world. The history was one of 130 years of continual livestock grazing from June to October each year. Even though one of the objectives of the massive Vale range improvement project of the 60's was to provide management alternatives to rest the mountain from continuous grazing, these alternatives had never been used.

At the end of the day, Connie could stand it no longer. As a "Public Citizen" she expressed her right to try and get some changes made that could benefit the land and the people. With substantial help from Bob Skinner, President of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, and some friends in the environmental community, Doc and Connie were able to put together a meeting one month later at the 14th floor offices of the BLM State Director in Portland. Present at that first meeting of what would become the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group were:

- Whitehorse Ranch (two representatives)
- Izaak Walton League (two representatives)
- Oregon Trout (one representative)
- Oregon Cattlemen's Association (four representatives)
- Vale District and Area managers
- State Director
- Chief of Resources and
- Head of the Range Program statewide

The tension, energy, fear, care, and concern in that room for four hours was overwhelming. At the end of the day it was obvious that changes had to be made, or everyone, and the land, was going to lose big after a long battle in court. Regardless of the grazing decision made by District Manager Bill Calkins, ranchers or environmentalists were going to challenge it with a lawsuit. And under current procedures, while a lawsuit is in process, management reverts to historical precedent which would have meant several more years with no change on the ground.

FORMATION AND ACTION OF THE TROUT CREEK MOUNTAIN WORKING GROUP

Folks from this meeting in Portland with the addition of a representative from the Oregon Environmental Council and family member representatives from three neighboring ranches in the Trout Creek area became the "*Trout Creek Mountain Working Group*." The group's purpose was to see that change in management occurred *immediately* that would "*make a positive difference*" on the land. The future of the trout and the ranching community and culture depended on improving the health of the watershed and its streams.

The Trout Creek group, working closely with the Vale BLM and full support of the state director, was able to build enough understanding of the immediate need for watershed improvement that the ranchers involved voluntarily removed their cattle for a three year period of rest.

The Whitehorse and Oregon Canyon watersheds of the Trout Creek Mountain located in the Vale BLM district completed their third year of rest the fall of 1991. Despite severe drought conditions, the response of 100 miles of critical riparian area was encouraging. A lot of credit for the results needs to go to the Whitehorse management who recognized that the past 130 years of traditional summer long grazing on the mountain was not going to be acceptable in the future.

The Whitehorse ranch made a major financial commitment to the recovery of the watershed by leasing another ranch during this three year rest period and drastically changing their grazing program on the lower reaches of the watershed. Four neighboring ranches who also run cattle in the watersheds on the northeast side of the mountain made unprecedented management changes to rest their areas of use on the mountain. These changes involved considerable water hauling and 100 pound reductions in weaning weights. This weaning weight loss came primarily from grazing drifted up bunchgrass in August and September at four to five thousand foot elevation instead of the greener more nutritious bunchgrass and meadows at six to eight thousand foot elevation. The cattle were not short on grass, but its feed value was considerably reduced.

During this period of voluntary rest, the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group met regularly to help develop a solution for the land that included grazing. Some examples of the strength of a diversified working group follow.... Monte Montgomery (Izaak Walton League) has years of experience on the mountain and was invaluable in stimulating better communication between the Vale and Burns B.L.M Districts. Mary Hanson from the Oregon Environmental Council has a very logical mind and helped facilitate the meetings. She also communicated to other members the importance of doing everything in accordance with legally mandated public planning procedures. Kathi Myron from Oregon Trout's genuine care and love of the wild Lahontan, and the importance of its habitat, was a message she clearly communicated to everyone in the group. And because of Kathi and Oregon Trout's diligence and review, their protest of the first plan made it a much better document. The original document was vague on what acceptable condition of the streamside shrubs, trees, and grasses needed to look like in the future. Spelling out what was expected in ecological improvement assured trout habitat conditions and also gave the ranchers a clear goal to achieve. Because the plan received so much review, when the final decision was appealed by an out-of-state activist, the administrative law judge dismissed the appeal.

The District Manager from Vale issued a grazing decision for the Whitehorse Butte Allotment which became effective in late 1990. The grazing strategy was specifically designed for the benefit of the watershed and the fish which depends on that watershed for its existence. It is important to understand that the mountain received two years of voluntary rest before any formal grazing decision was issued for the Whitehorse Ranch. And although allotment management plans are in process for the four neighboring northeast slope ranches and two additional ranches on the south side of the mountain, formal grazing decisions for these ranches are yet to come. Despite the lack of formal allotment management

plans, these ranches are five years into a grazing program which has been reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as being compatible with Endangered Species Act requirements for Lahontan Cutthroat Trout.

These results were only possible because environmentalists, ranchers, the BLM, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service all worked together to find solutions for the land and people.

It was in the late spring of 1992 when the moment of truth and the test of three years of working together arrived. In the seventh year of the worst drought since the 30's, cattle were returned to the mountain to graze pastures containing endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout. Turning those cows out as planned demonstrated to everyone that the Vale BLM did indeed have the ability to follow through on a management program if it was biologically sound and had diverse public support.

The management strategy on the higher elevation mountain pastures is to graze from May to mid-July in an area for two years; then rest that area for two years. This program is based on the growth requirements of the plants and the social and eating habits of the cows. Willows and aspen do most of their growing after mid-July which is the same time when the bunchgrass is drying up and becoming less palatable. And like people, when the hills dry up and it gets hot, cattle find it more comfortable to congregate in the cool shade along the creeks. By removing the cows in the middle of July, new willow and aspen sprouts and seedlings are seldom grazed. The grass along the creeks, which was grazed in May and June, has time for full regrowth before fall. Since the bunchgrass on the hills is of excellent quality and palatability before mid-July, the cows spend less physical time on the streams and trampling of overhanging banks is minimal. The two years of rest which follow each two years of grazing allows the upland bunchgrass plants time to fully recover from being cropped at a sensitive time in their growth cycle.

This program is what ecosystem management is all about. The biological assessment of the management program written by Tom Miles, supervisory range con, was extremely thorough and accurate, which enabled the U.S. Fish Biologist to accept it. Bob Kindschy, wildlife biologist in the area for 37 years, deserves considerable credit for having the interest and foresight to have conducted monitoring baseline studies over the years which now are being used to scientifically document that ecological health is truly improving. There is no substitute for an interested biologist like Bob who has spent his entire career in the area giving him the experience to relate past management and hard monitoring data with the dramatic wet and dry cycles that characterize southeastern Oregon.

In September of 1993, after the mountain had received three years of rest and the cattle had completed the first two years of the planned four-year grazing cycle, a two day tour was conducted with the Trout Creek group. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist directly responsible for the Oregon Lahontan program was satisfied with the results. Major positive documented changes on the land are a reality for everyone to see today. The streambanks now have sufficient

young willow, aspen, and grass cover that the riparian system was able to benefit from a modest flood event the spring of 1993. And the prospect of the land becoming healthier in the future is a lot more than just some dream on paper.

Unfortunately, the traditional season-long summer grazing program on the Trout Creek Mountains that was in place five years ago is not that unusual in the West today. Most areas have not had as much public interest as the Trout Creeks. But the sad truth is too much ecologically unsound grazing continues to be licensed year after year with no changes.

There are several reasons for our current predicament in the West. Improving land management through laws and bureaucracy alone has not proven to be very effective. The BLM is a politically directed entity which has basically been paralyzed since 1974 from the conflicting messages and constraints it receives on a regular basis from Washington, D.C. and various lawsuits. This paralysis can be overcome through a consensus group such as the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group. When understanding exists between ranchers, environmentalists, BLM managers and resource professionals, state and U.S. Fish and Wildlife representatives, decisions that benefit the land and people can be implemented without years in court.

"SOCIAL-POLITICAL" FACTORS WHICH ALLOWED THE TROUT CREEK GROUP TO EXIST, FUNCTION, AND STIMULATE POSITIVE CHANGE ON THE LAND

- Trust and respect existed between a number of ranchers and environmentalists in Oregon prior to formation of the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group.
- The problem on the ground was recognized by both the ranching public and the environmental public who together asked the BLM to participate in a unique process to find solutions. Public land management agencies such as the BLM and Forest Service exist to serve the public's best interest. And to quote our Oregon State Director,

"When a group of diverse interests with full participation by the Bureau of Land Management develop and support a sustainable resource management plan which is ecologically sound, economically feasible, and socially acceptable, it is extremely difficult for any individual or group to stop implementation of that plan." *D. Dean Bibbes*

- Strong support existed at all BLM managerial levels throughout the process. But a key role of the joint rancher/environmentalist "public" involvement was making sure this support continued with each new manager. Over five years the Trout Creek effort included two state directors, two district managers, three area managers, and several interim managers.
- State Range Conservationist Chad Bacon was detailed by the State Director to maintain communication between the ranch community, the environ-

mental community, and the Vale BLM both at the management and on the ground levels. Chad's credibility and personal relationships with leaders of the Oregon Cattlemen, the participating environmental organizations, and local ranchers in southeastern Oregon was and continues to be an important key to the success of this pioneering group.

- A pilot "range specialist" classification is being tested in Oregon and Tom Forre, Rangeland Manager Specialist/Ecologist in the area for the past five years, has this position. The key in this new job description is that it enables range cons the opportunity to be *promoted in place* and become *responsible for land health rather than land products*. Tom has had this responsibility for five years now and has built trusting relationships, not only with the ranchers who depend on the land for their livelihood but also with environmentalists who depend on the area for their quality of life and the earth's future.

"Trust, respect, credibility and communication are four simple words to write. They are incredibly difficult items to build and maintain. But for lasting success on the land, they must exist."

THE PROCESS AT GROUP MEETINGS WHICH MAKES CONSENSUS AND ACTION POSSIBLE

Everyone sits in a circle and speaks in turn. A question starts each meeting such as... "*How do you feel about being here and what would you like to help make happen today?*" According to conflict resolution consultant Bob Chadwick, no one is at a meeting until their voice enters the room. By having to think about how you feel (most folks feel anxious and frightened which may be expressed as anger), the right brain is activated. The right brain is where our creativity is located.

Answering the question, "what would *you* like to *help* make happen today?" affirms that something is going to happen and you are going to be an important part of it. This is an empowering experience for the participants and changes the focus of the meeting from pointing out problems to developing solutions.

Ranch wives are specifically and personally invited to participate. Ranch men frequently are bound by tradition to the way it always has been which makes opportunities for change difficult to see. Women in general tend to be more right-brained and better able to understand the feelings of environmental folks who are viewing the situation from a much different perspective than the ranchers. Everyone's feelings . . . Ranchers, Environmentalists and Agency folks . . . have to be acknowledged before true consensus for change can occur.

After everyone's voice enters the room, two or three "opportunities in disguise" (more commonly known as "significant problems") are discussed. This is in the circle as a whole, or in smaller breakout groups, but always with each

person given the opportunity to speak in turn and to be listened to with respect.

During the meetings of the working group, BLM representatives participate in turn as people with concerns and cares, not just as BLM employees doing their job.

Efforts of the group are goal oriented. The group's future "Big Picture" includes:

- A. Baby Aspen, teenage Aspen, middle age Aspen and old Aspen, willows, trout, and wildlife throughout a watershed covered by a thick stand of vigorous perennial grass.
- B. Baby, teenage, middle age and old ranchers and their livestock operating in an economically and ecologically sound manner.

There was considerable relief in the room when the ranchers had no problems working to achieve "point A," and the environmentalists had no difficulty with "point B." Descriptions for how the land needs to look throughout the watershed in the future were visualized by including statements such as, "*How McDermitt Creek looks now at the upper access, and how the upper watershed looks now at the head of Oregon Canyon.*"

At the close of each meeting, realistic commitments for accomplishing certain tasks and clearances are made by the ranchers, environmentalists, and BLM folks. The ranchers and environmentalists network with their peers to build understanding on what is occurring. The BLM's commitment prioritizes their work toward tasks that will make a difference on the ground. The BLM is presently buried under paperwork requirements without the staff or funding to accomplish those demands. For success to occur on the land, some sort of outside consensus pressure/support is required. Also it is critical that the State Director create an atmosphere in the state that supports working together and rewards positive change on the land.

The September of 1993 two-day Working Group Tour concentrated on looking at riparian areas which had been grazed in both 1992 and 1993.

Compliance in meeting the grazing objectives was 100%. The fate of the Lahontan trout appears in good hands. Ron Rhue, the U.S. Fish Biologist responsible for threatened and endangered species, was enthusiastically positive, not to mention greatly relieved, over the results on the land. The ranchers involved felt the working group experience has been a positive one even though the management changes have been very stressful and expensive, and the ranches capacity and annual profitability has been reduced. However, the bottom line is that a management plan that meets the criteria for endangered species in a wilderness study area provides a stable basis for a sustainable ranching operation in the future.

It takes people to improve land. We already have more laws and technical information than we need. Time is not on our side in the struggle to solve problems on public land. But the time is right for more "people-to-people" alliances where land owners, environmentalists, and state and federal agency folks work cooperatively to produce action on the ground.

Plain folks can make a difference, and it's exciting to see results like those on the Trout Creek Mountains.

LESSONS LEARNED

As “public” citizens we have the power and obligation to take responsibility for the destiny of the private lands we own and the public lands we depend on for many needs. Local communities can determine their own future. But the definition of “local” must be expanded to include not only the people who live in the area, but the people in urban areas who depend on that land for their quality of life and relation to a “natural” world.

Success on the land comes when a diverse group of interested “public” acknowledge one another as human beings and develop a vision for what a healthy land and community needs to be. The main obstacle is overcoming the frontier mentality we’ve lived on in the West for the past century.