

PUBLIC LAND POLICY EDUCATION

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At one time 80% of the United States was owned by the federal government. Today, one-third of this nation's land still remains in federal ownership. Over one billion acres of the public domain was disposed of, mostly before 1900, to states and private interests through sales, grants, bounties, and other conveyances provided for under a myriad of public land laws.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, about a third of the remaining federal lands were withdrawn for such public and special purposes as national parks, forests and wildlife refuges; Indian and military reservations; and reclamation projects. These lands are now managed by such federal agencies as the Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of Defense, and the Bureau of Reclamation. The remaining federal lands — some 470 million acres — are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

About one-third of the federal land is forested. The rest is rangeland — grassland, shrubland, and non-commercial forest. These lands include over half the nation's softwood timber, most of the big game habitat (except white tailed deer), over a third of the nation's recreational trails and about 15% of the livestock forage available in the 11 contiguous Western states. Present and potential mineral production from these lands, including vast energy resources, are of high significance to the nation.

Ninety-four percent of the federal lands remaining today are located in 12 Western states. These states now contain about 20% of the U.S. population. The percentage of federal lands by state vary from 29% in Washington to 86% in Nevada and 96% in Alaska. Because of the regional distribution of public lands, Western states and western people have some very direct economic environmental, and cultural ties to these lands. However, interest in the public lands today extends nationwide, and certainly public policy development effecting the uses and management of these lands is increasingly a national rather than a regional or local political process.

I believe Extension education activities directly concerned with public lands have traditionally been at a level far below what their values would suggest as appropriate. This is probably for two reasons. First, public lands have been perceived (if perceived at all) primarily as a regional resource. Second, public policy relating to public lands has always been extremely controversial and has been viewed in a highly emotional and personal way by residents of public land areas. Thus, it has been a difficult area for local Extension people to work in effectively.

The Western Universities Public Rangelands Coordinating Committee was established early in 1976 primarily in response to one major current land issue—a federal court order requiring BLM to prepare 212 environmental impact statements over a 13 year period on their livestock grazing programs throughout the West. The committee was formed by the Western Association of Extension and Experiment Station Directors to facilitate communications and coordinate activities among the 12 land grant institutions. Committee members are range scientists, or Extension range specialists. Three of the institutions (Nevada, New Mexico, Utah) have developed specifically funded programs utilizing funds provided by their legislatures and/or funds returned to the states from grazing receipts. Seven institutions have assigned responsibilities to individuals or departments without any major new allocations of funds or duty assignments. Two states, Washington and Alaska, have only had a limited involvement since public rangeland resources and problems are relatively minor.

Since organization, our committee has met at least twice a year, usually at professional society meetings. Members have kept in regular communication by mail and phone. We have invited, and had good participation from, agencies and interest groups at several of our meetings. Our charge has become more clear:

- to provide the best possible information for agency decision making,
- to develop informed public participation, and
- to encourage the best technical and administrative procedures to facilitate the process.

Most of the committee and member activities were and continue to be related to the grazing environmental impact statements — working with the agencies and national interest groups in encouraging the development of technically and practically suitable policy and procedures — working in the field with the agencies, users, and interest groups to better understand and deal with the processes. Informational materials and methods developed in one state are shared with the others. Several educational activities have been done on a regional basis for the West. Technical and administrative policy, and procedural comments and recommendations are often sent out in

the name of the committee. We believe we get more attention in this manner.

The committee also has expanded its interest to other public rangeland policy issues — the Forest Service roadless area studies (RARE II), the Renewable Resources Extension Act of 1978 and other legislation — proposed grazing regulations and Council of Environmental Quality Guidelines, for example. More and more we are utilizing the help of the best available expertise among our faculties to meet special educational needs. However, our abilities as a committee to do this are rather limited.

Just what our scope and role will become over the next several years is still unknown, and our effectiveness has not yet been carefully evaluated. At the least, however, we believe we have demonstrated that the universities can respond in a timely fashion to specific public policy issues with useful educational services. We hope we can also establish the recognition that the land grant institutions should play an important role in the development and implementation of public land policy.

