

THE OREGON RANGE VALIDATION PROJECT

FROM A RANCHER'S VIEW POINT

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The Validation Story starts with three things. The first is a desire to excel and squeeze everything as good as possible from something - in this case, a ranch. Second is a restlessness with the status quo and willingness to change if need be. The third is a vehicle to facilitate the first two and create positive reinforcement of both. These three things breed success in the Validation Program.

Our primary objectives were twofold. One was to increase our spring pastures in quantity and quality. The other was to effectively manage our timber resources for both grass and lumber. We felt these two would result in an coordinated unit where no holes would be present from cattle turn out time until cattle feeding time. Although we focused on these two aspects, we did not shrink from analyzing the whole ranch to create a coordinated resource plan.

The Validation team consisted of the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon State Forestry, Fish and Wildlife, Soil Conservation Service, Extension, and myself. Our first order was to inventory the ranch and see exactly what was here. The State Forestry people, under the leadership of Mark Labhart and Dan Shults, inventoried the timber. No only did they take a count but they looked into tree conditions, canopy cover, areas that needed thinning, commercial thinned areas and insect problems. The U.S. Forest Service looked at the forest allotment to ascertain the needs in that area, debris disposal and pond repair being two of the major concerns. Fish and Wildlife, under Errol Claire and Ralph Denney, made suggestions for big game thermal cover, fence height, and bird habitat. The Soil Consevation Service, with Roy Manning and Dalton Montgomery, not only sampled every field as to forage output, but also analyzed it to see if fields were regenerating or degenerating. They used stocking rates that gave us an idea of where each pasture or field fit into the scheme of the ranch and at what time of year would be optimum forage. Bill Farrell, Grant County Extension agent, helped pull all these people and agencies together to form a cohensive unit. He also loaned practical knowledge on hay fields, feed grounds, fence placement, spring developments, and cattle access trails.

Our next step was to put all this information together to get an idea of where our strong and weak points were. We had many sessions just talking about certain areas to improve, the cost, the result, and how it would affect the whole picture. The team took several trips to sites to solidify ideas or get a feel for a certain practice. As we were doing this, I would add practical experience from the ranch to either confirm or adjust ideas taken from the inventory. We then listed all the ideas we thought would fit and were practical. In fact, we had a lot more good ideas than means to implement them. So then we threw in the time element problem and started to work from there.

Here is where coordinated planning really takes place. It takes the expertise of all the aforementioned men and agencies to fit the puzzle into a certain time span. It all has to revolve around cattle. Considerations involve a number of AUM's on spring, summer, and fall pastures. It also includes seedings, when to seed, how long it will take to establish a crop, and when it can be harvested. Also, pre-commercial and commercial thinning, when to do it, when to seed back, and duration of establishment. Couple this with keeping animal numbers fairly high while not sacrificing summer pasture for two summers or spring pastures for two springs and it equals a fairly involved process. All coordinated resource planning hinges on the time sequence, work sequence problem.

From this stage, we went into actual practices in the field. Some of them included spring developments, juniper control, pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, debris disposal, mechanical seeding, livestock access trails, and fencing. The problems were logistical problems, machinery problems, weather problems, and just plain coordination problems. We did the work ourselves, did it cheaper, did it better and faster, but did a lot more paper work. All in all the problems were of a smaller magnitude than one would realize because of the groundwork we laid in our coordinated planning sessions. Time spent in these sessions was well invested.

After a logical sequence then, one would ask: Results? Mostly good. I would like to dwell on just as an example our lack of spring pasture. We tipped over about 35 acres of junipers, plowed about 220 acres of sage, and seeded it all to crested wheat. We were running about 50 cows on this piece for two months. Now we can run 100 cows on it for the same period and have them come off in much better shape. It creates bigger calves, better and earlier conception in cows breeding back, bigger replacements in the fall, less disease problem, and a better bunched calf crop next spring. The only problem we have encountered as a result is that we are also running a lot more deer in the critical early growing season and the winter months also.

Let's look at wildlife just for a moment while we are at this stage. The Validation Program has increased big game numbers on the ranch. I wish that we had pre-determined big game numbers for a certain areas on the ranch when we were in the planning stages. I don't mind doing my share of keeping deer, but I hate to see it increase to levels beyond tolerance. Most ranchers, I believe, would welcome something to show they are supporting vast numbers of big game animals, be it extra tags or range improvement help or whatever. We have kept junipers and pine thickets for thermal cover, increased forage quantity and quality, increased water quantity and quality, and kept cover areas for both deer and birds. I believe the ranchers should be recognized for this.

Economically, the program will have far-reaching effects, both for the rancher and the county. Prosperous ranchers create prosperous counties. Commercial thinning creates jobs. The purchase of supplies like seeds, fencing, and equipment multiplies throughout the county and state. Closer to home, the rancher can create another acre from what he has already by range improvements. We did this on spring pasture from \$32 per acre to \$42 per acre. It's just like buying another production acre for what it cost to rejuvenate the first one. The value of thinning will be multiplied every year, not only in grass but in tree growth also. This has an impact on the rancher every year in grass, but also in years ahead as timber is taken off. The whole program has to have a tremendous economic impact when you see better cattle, forage, wildlife, and better utilization of what is on the ranch.

So, what have I learned as a rancher? Now I have a better idea of where the ranch is going. I know how long it will take, how much it will cost, how to do it, and what the results will be. It has been invaluable.