Hope on the Range

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Narrator:

The western rangelands . . . vast open spaces spanning half a continent . . . legacy of a young nation's epic journey toward its destiny.

For the early settlers, these were lands of hope and opportunity. Just as they are for present and future generations.

Some 300 million acres of the western rangelands are preserved in public ownership. They are managed for many public uses and values that advance our national interests, and contribute to the quality of life we all enjoy.

But the future of the western rangelands, both public and private, is uncertain.

The delicate balance of these ecosystems is being threatened by a variety of factors -- the impacts of population growth and development, and the interrelated effects of climate change, wildfires, and invasive species.

Today many scientists, natural resource managers, and private land owners believe that one natural feature of the rangeland ecosystem, present for thousands of years – the grazing animal – may have an even more important place on the landscape in the future.

"We can look at the diaries of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The Lewis and Clark Expedition came through North Dakota in 1805—1804, 5, and 6—before any settlement and any grazing or fencing of the prairies . . . . They constantly were talking about the number of bison, the number of elk, the number of deer, and pronghorn antelope, and all the predators that came with them . . . . . Periodic fires, wildfires, came across the prairies. We also had things like drought—natural, floods—natural. All of these disturbances created these prairies. But probably the greatest was the grazing animal.

-- Don Kirby, Ph. D., Director, School of Natural Resource Sciences
North Dakota State University

With the abundant forage for livestock grazing, these lands invited settlement, the birth of communities, and way of life sustained by the land that endures today.

As the frontier advanced, however, the grazing practices of the Great Plains were not suited to the arid and semiarid landscapes of western rangelands. Livestock grazing took a toll on the land.

"We all know that improperly livestock grazing can have many detrimental impacts. We also know, however, equally as well that well-managed livestock grazing can have many positive effects and that livestock grazing can be done in concert with the environment, in concert with many other amenity values."

- Jeff Mosley, Ph.D., Extension Range Specialist, Montana State University

The science of range management, evolving over the last century, has fundamentally changed grazing practices and the impact of livestock grazing on the land.

"Since that period—100, 150 years ago—we've come a long way. We've, we've learned a lot about how individual plants grow—plant autecology that's called—we've learned a lot about, , plant synecology, how plant communities interact with one another in the face of disturbances like fire and grazing. I see livestock grazing as a viable tool, to be used as a viable tool to manipulate vegetation in ways that make renewable resources more renewable."

- Larry Howery, Ph. D., Rangeland Extension Specialist, University of Arizona

Throughout the West, targeted grazing projects are getting results, documenting the effectiveness of this approach as a powerful tool for resource management.

"There really is a place for it. It can really accomplish landscape goals such as reducing fire, such as reducing invasive species, such as handling landscapes that can't be handled with mechanical tools or with herbicides or with fire. So, livestock grazing and targeted grazing is an important part of the whole landscape management toolbox. "

- Karen Launchbaugh. Ph. D., Department of Rangeland Ecology and Management, University of Idaho

By law, public rangelands are managed for sustained yield and multiple uses such as public recreation, energy and mineral development, livestock grazing, and many other uses.

In the face of growing pressures on rangelands across the West, Federal resource management agencies have a daunting mission.

Agencies such as the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management – with stewardship responsibilities for nearly two thirds of all public rangelands – must determine how to balance all these uses and values, while ensuring the sustainability of the rangelands.

Successful range management is both science and art. Science can give us strategies to ensure the health and productivity of the rangelands. Implementing these strategies involves the art of collaboration, bringing diverse interests together to forge balanced and workable solutions.

"I think defining what the, the different goals and objectives are for public rangelands is a great benefit and working with the public in, in figuring that out. How to integrate the different management goals with what the public wants, both at the local and the national level. I think that's going to be a real difficult challenge. It always has been and probably always will be. "

- John Tanaka, Ph.D., Economist and Range Scientist
  Oregon State University

How we meet this challenge will have a direct bearing on the future of the rangelands.

"We're going to have to take a holistic view of management of these ecosystems and the people that use them, depend on them and occupy them. And if we don't do that, we'll pay the consequences."

- Mort Kothmann Ph. D., Ecosystems Science and Management
  Texas A & M University

Solutions must also take into account the interdependence of public and private lands. With the sparse forage of the arid West, the amount of land made available through the homestead acts more than a century ago, was too small to make private ranches economically viable without the use of adjacent public lands. Today many ranching operations in the west still depend on public land to supply critical sources of forage during at least a portion of the year.

Today's ranchers must be knowledgeable about both the economics and the science of range management.

"When people look at grazing in general they tend to see that earlier history, or they tend to hear about paradigms where ranching is something that takes from the land. And, in fact, the argument that ranchers have made for a long time is true, that we have to operate sustainably and if we don't operate sustainably we're gone."

- Grady Grissom, Ranch Manager, Rancho Largo Cattle Company,
  Southeastern Colorado

When ranching operations fail, the rangelands are often converted to other uses, and these open spaces may be lost forever.

"If you can sustain the ranch, is sustained through the public land grazing permit, in that way you sustain the ecosystem as a whole and you sustain larger wildlife populations. And that's…in this day and age that may be one of the most important contributions of public land livestock grazing to the Western landscape."

- Jeff Moseley, Ph.D., Extension Range Specialist,
  Montana State University

For us, these remnants of the American frontier are still lands of hope, opportunity, and challenge.

Preserving these lands as our legacy to future generations will require innovative scientific strategies to sustain the many environmental services these lands provide.

Successfully implementing these strategies will demand the reasoned, balanced and collaborative stewardship of all who own the western rangelands – including those who own the largest share of these lands and have the greatest stake in their future – the American people.