

## A Case for the Value of Rangeland Monitoring

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You've probably heard a lot of talk about monitoring. Why it is important to you? The best explanation I can give came from my Vocational Ag instructor back in high school. He said, "You can't fix a motor if you don't know how it works because if you don't know how it works you can't find what's wrong." Monitoring helps you document and understand changes occurring on your rangelands and helps explain them to agencies, neighbors, acquaintances, environmental groups, scientists and the public at large who can all influence how public lands are managed. Monitoring allows you to detect negative changes early and take action to rectify the situation before solutions are prescribed through a grazing decision or permit stipulations. It also allows you to preserve the record of good management.

I've been involved as one of the instructors for the Nevada Rangeland Cooperative Producer Monitoring team since its beginning. During that time, I have met many individual farmers and ranchers throughout Nevada. I have found you to be knowledgeable, concerned about the resources you manage and genuinely interested in learning what is happening on the lands you use. I know this has a threefold reason, first: you all recognize that rangeland condition is critical to the productive potential of your operation and the quality of the product you produce. After all, it is how you make a living. Second: surveys document that a significant portion of your production costs go to maintaining animal health and you understand very well that rangeland health directly affects animal health. In other words, if they don't get enough variety and quality of forage, then condition, production, and health all suffer. Third: rangeland condition is critical to the quality of the environment. You realize full well that rangeland condition is the key to reduce erosion, maintain healthy plant production, keep good soil micro-biotic activity, increase water infiltration and reduce runoff, minimize flood or large runoff event effects, provide good quality wildlife habitat with food, shelter, cover, water, screening, and escape values, maintain a good watershed with biological and physiological function, and many more factors. You realize this because if you did not value it all, you would not be in business to worry about rangeland condition very long.

With that in mind, over the past three years I reviewed 153 permit renewal allotment analyses and EA's for the Sustainable Grazing Coalition. I have provided extensive written comments on the scientific applicability of the analysis and interpretations of the data on 41 of these analyses. To track this in a way that I could report to the Sustainable Grazing Coalition about the effectiveness of management on our public rangelands and to get some idea of the varying degrees of management going on, I created several categories of information that I record to keep a running tally. This provides information about how the industry is doing overall as stewards of resources. It is important to remember that good resource management requires reasonable and achievable goals that are based on the resources you

have and what they are capable of doing coupled with a sound method to evaluate whether you met your goal or not, and if not, why. The different categories I track and the number of allotments (as of April 1, 2011) that fell within each category are as follows:

1. STANDARDS MET – *All of the Resource Advisory Council (RAC) Standards have been met and there are no other apparent issues on the allotment based on the monitoring that has been conducted.*

**34 allotments**

2. STANDARD NOT MET; LIVESTOCK NOT CONTRIBUTING; NO CHANGE TO PERMIT AUM's, SEASON OR CLASS– *One or more of the RAC Standards has not been met but livestock are not a causal factor for this condition. Reasons for not meeting standards could include: plant composition may be altered due to a recent fire, or a riparian area that is excluded from grazing for most of the year may have been severely damaged due to a heavy flash flood, or other similar causes. Monitoring has shown that livestock activities and impacts are within all established objectives. No changes to the grazing permit were proposed.*

**60 allotments**

3. STANDARD NOT MET; LIVESTOCK CONTRIBUTING; NO CHANGE TO PERMIT AUM's, SEASON OR CLASS – *This category is similar to number two with the exception that livestock activities were part of the reason that objectives were not being met but that due to the apparent and measurable progress that is being made with current management, no changes were proposed to the permit. 8 allotments*

4. STANDARD NOT MET; LIVESTOCK NOT CONTRIBUTING; CHANGE TO PERMIT AUM's, SEASON OR CLASS – *This category is very similar to item two but we are shifting into a category where changes have been made to the permitted AUM's, season of use, or class of stock. Since livestock were not a causal factor, changes to the permit were generally related to changing multiple factors with over half of the changes being to shift the season of use or shift class of stock. Some AUM changes occurred but approximately one half of them were very small.*

**36 allotments**

5. STANDARD NOT MET; LIVESTOCK CONTRIBUTING; CHANGE TO PERMIT AUM's, SEASON OR CLASS – *This category of allotments identified multiple issues from multiple causes. One or more RAC Standards was not met, livestock were a contributing factor and to address the numerous problems and issues several changes to the permit were proposed that included changes in the number of AUM's, season, and class.*

**14 allotments**

(Class of stock in all above cases refers to sheep vs. cattle vs. goats vs. horses, etc. and not to age distinctions such as yearlings vs. mature cows or bulls vs. cows.)

It is very important to note that of the first three tracking categories of allotment evaluations listed above, 102 allotments, 66% of those reviewed to date, did not have any recommended changes to the AUM's, season of use, or class of stock. This is significant; even more so when you look at the fact that over half of the changes in the next category number 4 were minor changes and were not included in

the 66% of the first three categories. Simply put, whether anyone likes the results of the analysis or not, the monitoring that is being done documents that the great majority of grazing allotments are being pretty well managed. Whether there were some problems or not, you are doing a good job and your proof is documented in the monitoring results. I can't stress enough the value of good management and I can't stress enough the role that a solid monitoring program plays in helping you evaluate, document and demonstrate your success in meeting your and agency goals. I encourage every permittee on public lands to be involved in the monitoring the agencies do on your permits and set up an agreement with your agency to do your own monitoring through a cooperative monitoring plan in addition to their monitoring sites.

Monitoring information is available from the Ranchers' Monitoring Guide, UNCE Publication Number EB-06-04; <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/ag/2006/eb0604.pdf> . These techniques provide science-based methods that have been developed by rangeland management professionals and scientists, and have been peer reviewed as valid procedures and techniques for your use. Additionally, they are designed to be relatively quick and simple to establish, measure and record. Both BLM and USFS are signatory to the Cooperative Permittee Monitoring agreement with the Public Lands Council and to the Ranchers' Monitoring Guide procedures which means the agencies were involved in developing the procedures and agree that they are valid and useful techniques and provide beneficial data. They also agree to assist you in setting up a plan to accomplish this.

Monitoring information helps everyone manage resources so that everyone benefits. This is true for the rancher/farmer, agency specialists, and even the general public. Good information dispels myths and gives everyone a better knowledge base to make good decisions. Document, document, document photograph, photograph, photograph. Knowledge is power. Know what is going on on your allotment and why.