FRASC Meeting –Sustainable Rangelands

Thursday, March 13, 2014

Introductions
FRASC – Meeting Topics and Goals
    Purpose: provide public outreach for the next 2015 Forest & Range Assessment Update
Partners: USFS PSW
Ground Rules
    Speak to be understood
    Listen to understand
    Mute phones
Definition; Rangelands are defined as lands on which existing vegetation, whether it grows naturally….
Asset = range productivity
Threat = wildfire, pests
Priority Landscape – rangeland productivity is highly variable across space and time
6.4 million acres of private land; 1.5 million acres of USFS; 20,000 BLM
Ranching industry continues its steady long-term contraction
The tendency for rangeland to be converted
Strategy report addressed rangelands as well

Indictors Update (Fraser)
Surveying indicator user and needs
Using indicators to tell a story.
Indicators are not intended as an add on; they are intended to make use of data and analysis from within the assessment
Candidate Indicators compiled: http://indicators.ucdavis.edu/forest
300 or more candidate indicators identified. This is a catalog and reference of what indicators are available.
Framework for indicators discussed: Montreal Process Criteria
Inidicators are organized by chapter headings
Rangeland: > 60 indicators related to rangelands, > 100 to rangelands and other topic areas (a little broader for this larger group)
Request: Read and rate indicators to provide input on preferred indicators. Rating input will be used in the assessment.
Rating is a scale of 1 to 5; 5 = best fit
Step: Take input to define a core set of indicators; reviewed by FRAP staff; vetted through the BOF for approval.

Panel Discussion:
Frank Dawley – Big Bluff Ranch (4,000 acres near Red Bluff); owners of the ranch since the 1970's. Not your typical cattle ranch.

Pelayo Alvarez – Ca Rangeland Conservation Coalition. Goal: To keep ranchers ranching; emphasis on a working landscape. This preserves the broadest range of ecosystem services. TNC map that identifies high priority areas on range lands. Goal for outreach and workshops is to raise awareness on ranching issues and the need to preserve rangelands. Also, engaged in policy issues that affect rangelands.

Ceci Dale-Cesmat: NRCS State Rangeland Specialist for California. Ceci, Previously worked as a range specialist for the USFS. Wanted to work with ranchers on private landowners.

Jack Hamby – BLM, California State Range Lead. Jack, previously worked on range issues in Nevada and also in Washington D.C. Works as a coordinator between policy and landowners.

1. Question: Sustainability can be a difficult thing to define with consensus. Share your thoughts on sustainabile rangeland management in California.
    a. Frank – Defining sustainability is influenced by heritage of family ranching that gets passed down through the generations. If the families can't make a living on the land than it is not sustainable (e.g. economic sustainability as the driver).
    b. Ceci – Sustainability is a ecosystem that has long term viability of ecosystem processes that supports the plants and animals that are a part of it. Population pressure places great demands on those ecosystem processes. Maintaining ecosystem health that allows rangelands to be resilient through drought and other events.
    c. Pelayo – Sustainability is more of a mindset or philosophy. The ones that are moving towards sustainability have built a network of support that have ties to the community, to the agencies. They see themselves as natural resource managers and not just producing a single commodity (e.g. beef, lamb, etc.). A more holistic approach to management. Those that accomplish this are happy in their livelihood and are in better shape.
    d. Comments:
        i. Bruce Gwynn – How do define the public context to explain that ranch lands are not just cattle farms. How do justify tax breaks and incentives to ranchers.
        ii. Ceci – If not for those incentives those lands if accessed at higher rate for agriculture. The ecosystem processes are undervalued; if not the land turns into other uses; not viable to keep in ranching; conversion.
        iii. Frank – The landowners dream of a ranch is not what the land can always provide. There are other uses that the land gets used for which are less desirable.
        iv. Pelayo – We need to base the outreach on science. For example, vernal pools can be supported through grazing. Let's start measuring things through science to quantify the benefit.
        v. Dave Passovoy – Outreach and education are really important?
        vi. Ceci – Most of the people that I speak to have a poor understanding of ranching and what the lands produce beyond cattle.
        vii. Todd Keller Wolf – Building trust between country people and those living in cities. Different perspectives of viewing the landscape; the rural versus urban perspectives. Landscapes need science, but they also need people who live on the land and care for it.
        viii. Junko – State Wildlife Action Plan also considers rangeland issues. What are three most hopeful issues for ranchers and what are the three most fearful issues for ranchers and how to quantify?

2. What are the biggest threats to sustaining rangelands in California? Are the primary forces economic, regulatory, or natural resource-based? How can California crate and economic

a. Jack – People are the biggest pressure on natural lands. Pressure from recreational uses. The sustainability is a requirement for BLM, but BLM tries to balance it with economic needs.
b. Ceci – One thing owners are worried about is the use of public lands, higher elevation lands, for summer grazing. Many of those lands that were historically available for grazing are no longer available. Need to find ways to allow more lands accessible for grazing. A second is state inheritance taxes to families is to expensive. A third are on the regulatory side that restrict use and make it difficult to conduct sustainable grazing and keep good resource conditions. Hopeful – the legacy of the industry and lifestyle as ranches get passed on to future generations; the current market for beef is good and exports are up; the ecosystem services are beginning to be recognized and will hopefully provide future income.
c. Pelayo – Ranchers are afraid to lose their identity; they have a strong stewardship ethic. The biggest threat is the lack of understanding of their value.
d. Frank – The fears from climate change and weather are prominent. If climate change causes greater variability in weather makes managing the resource even more difficult. Regulation is restrictive, but maybe not worse than other industries. The hopes my family and ranching by future generations; potential for carbon markets, getting paid for enhancing environmental services.
e. Jack – Land conversion for housing erodes rangelands; growth and economic development is the greatest threat. Renewable energy also impacts the availability of lands for grazing; development of solar power.
f. Comments.
    i. Fraser – Ecosystem services; when the economy is doing well the public is well to pay extra for environmental services, but when the economy declines the support those services erodes and the market for rangeland is really commodity based. How do we protect the lands and activities through regulation or other means?
    ii. Jack – Export of hay is an example of how economics is a primary driver of how decisions on land use are made. Hay prices are so high that it can be exported internationally.
    iii. Ceci – It is a global market; but we need to support local markets.
    iv. Frank – The romance of the cowboy. Farmer's markets are a great way to connect people to the land.
    v. Pelayo – The willingness to pay. The role of rangelands in preserving water quality coming off rangelands. Privately owned lands that are producing public benefits; how do we compensate that.

3. If sustainability of rangelands is our goal, how will we know if current rangeland management practices are sustainable? What information can we use to assess whether range management is sustainable or not?
    a. Ceci – Indicators of rangeland health; watershed benefits are produced by rangelands. There are also functions of soil properties and biotic integrity that is maintained on rangeland. There is an assessment process of 17 indicators that can evaluate: biotic integrity, hydrologic cycle, and soil properties. Ranch sustainability self assessment methods have been developed where landowners can do this on their own. This activity is being supported through NRCS and other specialist. Some indicators of sustainability are already out there; we need to embrace them. Bulls Eye on range land health is the

name of the assessment process. NRCS offers to conduct a field workshop if there is interest.

b. Frank – The indicator assessment can be done fairly easily with a camera and a shovel. It will tell you through a set of constructions where you are strong and where you are week. It is very instructive for landowners.
c. Pelayo – NRDC is trying to come up with metrics for cattle ranching to evaluate sustainability. A second is through the World Wildlife Fund.
d. Jack – The main indicator should be are you still in business five years from now? How many T&E species do you have? BLM has indicators that can be used. The State is diverse and it is difficult to lump regions together for assessment. Use of livestock to control weeds. Livestock can also be beneficial for change wildfire risk.
e. Comment. Use of livestock to graze and provide fuel breaks. The need to sustain rancher's long term and preserve the ranching way of life. The thing that is really important is the environmental processes that the ranch supports; not the meat production. We need open space for a sustainable working landscape. We have to figure out a way for land managers to get paid for these environmental services. The ranching families through generations can lose the love for the land and eventually it gets sold and divided into little junks. We need long term conservation easements. Also, we need to get the message out of how valuable rangelands and open space are.
    i. Jim – The use of social media is important, but it needs to look cool and hip; in a modern context that younger people can relate to.
    ii. Ceci – Fresno State, Chico State, Cal Poly, they have a lot of young enthusiastic students that can do this. They have lots of energy and can do this.

John Buckley Comments

For 24 years we have been advocates to preserve open spaces for agriculture and range lands. The biggest threat is economic. Support for funding the Williamson Act is weak and a disincentive. The indicator can not be wildfire and insects. The single one should be the amount of acres converted and easements. Also, a difference between private lands and grazing on public lands. What will be the long term opportunity to assess the values that matter most; riparian areas and recreation are other important issues. There is a lot of variability in range lands.

Ceci – Livestock can be used as a tool for grazing, but it needs to be prescribed and tailored to the resource concerns that are unique to each area. I think you can graze in some meadow and riparian areas. We need to land in the middle between where grazing can be conducted sustainably.

Steve Smith – Public has both trust and distrust. The certified range specialist is not used much anymore. That certification process through the BoF needs to used more and highlighted as a way to gain trust.

Bruce Gwynn – Ag land conversion; 2008 – 2010 the least rate of conversion of any time being reported on; low development values during that time period.

Ceci – During that time period there was still conversion of rangelands to orchards and vineyards. As allotments decrease there is a stronger incentive to sell rangelands. Certified rangeland managers is a important factor to look at as a profession, but agencies typically don't require this certification. There is other qualifications required. Federal agencies don't require it because it is unique to California.

Gentry – The society for range management is very active.

4. Past rangeland management practices have at times favored cattle production over conservation of healthy ecosystems. The consequences have been over grazed lands with diminished carbon sequestration, water quality, soil integrity, and in the end, dimished forage productivity.
    a. Frank – Hard pressed to think of a lot of progressive modern range management in the area where I live. Generally, people are running fewer cattle because the lands are not as productive. I think extraction of stored carbon is one reason for decline in productivity.
    b. Ceci – My dad used to say, "Take half, leave half". The biggest hit on productivity is associated with invasive species. That's an indicator that forage species are being displaced. In the past we were managing the resource to the best of our ability. There are ranchers that are open to trying new things.
    c. BLM is running about half the livestock grazing that it did in the sixties. I think we have a huge decrease in our water resources. This is a big factor; over grazing is a thing of the past. We think we are doing good things now, but it is adaptive. Agree that invasive species is a huge problem as is urban development and vineyards in some cases.
    d. Pelayo – We still don't understand the system. I think we need to focus on soil health. I think soil health is an important indicator of sustainability.
    e. Comment
        i. Bill – The rainfall on our ranch has not change dramatically; but the key is the distribution of the rain. Now most of our rain is falls mainly between December and February.
        ii. Rich – Cheat grass is a problem. Is there a grazing regime that is better for the fire regime?
        iii. Jack – Cheat grass is a bad one in terms of wildfire. Medussa head is worse as is star thistle; red broom as well. Yes, we can do something to address Cheat Grass, but it is very persistant; you have to replace it with something else or it grows back.
        iv. Frank – I don't see Medussa Head as a problem; it is better than bare soil. I try to manage for perennial grasses.
        v. Fraser – With ecosystem services; if people are receiving benefits they need to know about that in order to invest in it. How do you link the stewardship efforts of the rancher with the general public?
        vi. Pelayo – Outreach supported by science to link the benefits of ecosystem services to the public. The ranchers need to see themselves as natural resource managers. We need to invest in our green infrastructure. The ranchers are providing environmental services and how to we compensate them.
        vii. Ceci – Picture the need for an advertisement campaign. The other think to mention, is livestock under climate change. Livestock can be used as a tool to manage fuel loads that create wildfire risk. Another need for an advertisement campaign to manage fuel loads.
        viii. Pelayo – Need to be mindful of the tradeoffs from management decisions. There can be conflicts in management goals; need a deep conversation on these tradeoffs.
        ix. Junko – Broad question on how we sustain the dialog on conservation planning?

x. Jack – The Desert Renewable Energy Plan. Primary goal of logical siting of solar plants. It addresses rangelands.
xi. Ceci – NRCS is involved in conservation planning; rancher sustainability assessments are small scale, but they can cover substantial lands in aggregate. We need to come together and be on the same page. All resources concerns are often localized and unique to an area, but we can use a consistent framework.
xii. Frank – Stressed the need for landowner driven process; The Sunflower Program for example. We can develop a common vision and shared goals. This included addressing fire breaks and fuels management issues. The point is a private person had a burning passion to make this happen.
xiii. Pelayo – The Rangeland Coalition has a strategy, but we have limited staff. We rely on other processes to help the process along.

5. Can conservation easements play a role in supporting the sustainability of rangeland in terms of cattle ranching as a lifestyle and rangelands as suppliers of important ecosystem benefits? How can conservation easements be structured to achieve both goals?

    a. Frank – Long term conservation easements that allow the ranch to be preserved long term was very positive. The benefit to the greater community is quite attractive. We specifically had ecological services called out specifically as part of the easement.
    b. Pelayo – They are an important tool, but cannot be the only tool. The rancher needs options and make their own decisions about how to maintain the lands. Who owns the easement is a big issue for the landowner. They are concerned about the restrictions that are part of easements. Needs an adaptive component to the easement to better manage the land.
    c. Ceci – Agree; need flexibility. A lot of owners do not want an easement. That mean we need other economic incentives to protect rangelands. To keep the landscape viable there has to be connectivity.
    d. Jack – Flexibility is key. During economic downturns the BLM had plenty of private ranchers that wanted the BLM lands to buy their lands. It is also risk management. The BLM's hands are often tied.