Politics

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Rangeland issue

IDAHO GOV. John V. Evans, left, and Robert F. Burford, national BLM director, discuss rangeland issues at the Western Governor's Conference convention at Jackson, Wyo., in 1981. (Post-Register/Ben J. Plastino)

BLM head says policy in balance

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

The congenial Robert F. Burford, director of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, believes his policies are achieving the even balance in land use the majority of people desire.

Burford, a rancher from Grand Junction, Colo., before he took the BLM hot seat, is not wholly optimistic of 100 percent success, but he feels he is on the right track.

The BLM has escaped much of the sharp criticism that have been leveled at sister agencies in the Forest Service, parks and others on touchy wildernress and other public land issues.

Burford is not a professional bureaucrat, as have been so many before him. He feels he can can best administer the bureau from a broad background.

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Burford is boss of an agency which owns the largest land area in the nation — 378 million acres in the continental United States, not including Alaska and Hawaii. Of this, nearly 12 million acres are in Idaho.

Burford said he felt President Carter leaned too far in protection of public lands at the expense of essential natural resource development.

"We are moving more and more to the center of the arc," he said in a Post-Register telephone interview from his Washington office. "I hope we can maintain a balanced development. We want to give mining, lumbering and others a piece of the action.

"We are not going to satisfy everyone completely. One never does. Maybe if everyone is somewhat dissatified we are achieving our goals.

"The charges had been made that this administrastion has been much more even-handed in taking a look at things from a broader range of interests. I believe this to be true."

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Burford said it is still too early in his three-year-old administration to determine if his policies are completely successful, but added the idea of monitoring the trend of range classifications has met with general acceptance.

Burford's main thrust is that the BLM seeks to become a better landlord and trustee. His initial step has been to develop a policy based on what he calls "selective management" of grazing allotments. This means primarily the development with the cooperation of land users, allotments with similar characteristics, such as resource availability. As such he has grouped lands in three categories. He indentifies one as Category M to include those allotments in good condition and high production to maintain them in their current state; Category I, fair-to-poor conditions that have the potential of substantial improvement and where the greatest amount of time and money would be concentrated; and Category C with limited economical productions potential and to mainly see they do not deteriorate further.

He hopes to streamline environmental impact statements to the point that they won't seriously interfere with BLM projects.

"These EIS are useful in some instances but in some they are unnecessary," said Burford. "It is the BLM experience that we have come to a point of what is required in writing. We tie them in with the plannning concept. This is a lot more effective. In some cases we are under a court order working under environmental impact statements."

Burford said the BLM is utilizing existing legal prerogatives to grant, trade or sell BLM lands considered in the public interest wherever possible. He said the BLM has sold land for parks, recreation and other public purposes at a nominal fee.

Russet Lions Noise Park and University Place in Idaho Falls are cited as examples.

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Burford also defends his caretaker policy, which involves participation by ranchers and other users.

He said he had recently returned from Susanville, Calif., where an excellent cooperative management agreement was in effect, which resulted in participtation from BLM, range users, Fish and Game, and others.

"It is the intent to get as many people to cooperate as possible to try to set a progam of working together for range improvements," he said.

Burford, who is scheduled as key note speaker for the East Idaho Republican Barbecue and Rally in Idaho Falls Aug. 11, has indicated he will follow what he thinks is a middle course in his administration.