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The political pulse

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The western scene . . .

Will BLM new policies upgrade West ranges?

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

One of the most interesting questions posed at the Western Governor's Conference last week at Teton Village was whether the so-called changes in direction by the Bureau of Land Management will help the vast western rangelands.

Robert F. Burford, national BLM director, thinks it will and makes no secret of the fact he feels the previous Carter administration was lax in managing them.

Burford is a Grand Junction, Colo., rancher who people describe "as solid" in rangeland views.

He said the BLM is administrator of the largest amount of grazing land in the United States, and as such, has a grave responsibility, in seeing they are properly managed.

Burford, in one of the key talks at the conference, said the decision makers in the Reagan administration, including Secretary of Interior James Watt, himself and Reagan felt that there had not been a true balance of natural resources during the previous administration. In fact, he said, they felt there has been a continuing flurry of inaction.

Idaho Gov. John V. Evans, to his credit, was the chairman of the rangeland plenary session and drew a wide range of experts to give all sides of the controversy. It gave the Western governors, news media, lobbyists and others attending the conference an excellent chance to hear all sides.

Besides Burford, other panel participants included J. W. (Bill) Swan, Rogerson, a small town located south of Twin Falls; Dr. Harold Heady, director of Wildland Resources Institute at the University of California at Berkeley; and Johanna Wald, the crisp-speaking attorney from Washington representing the Natural Resources Defense Council and a self-styled environmentalist.

Evans, at the onset, expressed hope that the session might establish the foundation for a new state-federal partnership in the sound management of Western lands. He said that no longer can the land be ignored or neglected, and that the federal and state governments, ranchers and environmental groups, must work together for the wise use of land.

A study five years ago indicated the BLM lands were seriously overgrazed and a top priority restoration program was needed. While the Sagebrush Rebellion backers pooh poohed it, range specialists of the nation at the universities and elsewhere have not. They agreed with it.

They question is not really development of the resource lands but whether a significant percentage of the lands, a majority of the lands in some western states, including Idaho, (62 percent) can be successfully rescued.

Burford's main thrust was to the effect that the BLM seeks to become better landlords and trustees. He said the first step taken has been to develop a policy based on "selective management" of grazing allotments, meaning primarily the developing with the cooperation of users of the land, allotments with similar characteristics, such as resource availability, management techniques and economic potentials.

He then grouped such lands in three categories, identifying one as M to include those allotments in good condition and high production and to maintain them in their current state; another in Category I, the fair-to-poor condition which have the potential of substantial improvements and where the greatest amount of time and money would be concentrated; and

the third in Category C, with limited economic productions potential and to mainly see they do not deteriorate further.

He contended his policy would also streamline the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process with production data being collected upon completion of the EIS and only for those allotments where serious resource conflicts exist. He added the main purpose is to keep good lands from going bad. Any additional funds would go to help the marginal lands and in this process it would be the district BLM manager's responsibility.

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Swan, naturally on the side of the developers, called for those state and federal agencies assigned to manage public lands to be considerate of the impact their decisions will have on adjacent private lands, something he said has not been the case in the past.

Swan charged the Idaho Fish and Game Department had presented one of the biggest problems to the rehabilitation of public lands by leaning too strongly for fish and wildlife protection and development.

He said what is needed, especially with the cuts in the federal budget, is to increase the use of the grazing advisory boards, thus to rely on the people who use the public lands.

However, advisory boards generally are tilted to the users because so-called "public representatives" on the boards, like county commissioner representatives, side consistently with the users.

Dr. Heady recommended the stewardship of the rangelands needs to be broadened; all users of public lands should pay their fair share for rangeland management, including ranchers, hunters, fishermen and recreationists; most criteria for the management of rangelands should not be written into federal regulation except in a most general fashion; and that basic and applied research is needed for management of rangeland plants and animals.

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Ms. Wald, the environmental spokesman, asserted the Environmental Protection Act, insured that all members of the public would be able to participate in the decision making process. She also contended the Environmental Impact Statement do help the BLM to manage the public lands and to improve grazing, a statement that didn't exactly draw cheers from the users.

Ms. Wald contended the EISs do not stand in the way of real improvements, nor are they a waste of money. She said they can be used to restore the health and productivity of rangelands but that this improvement will not come easily, nor cheaply, or without some short term economic hardships.

Her statements hardly met with approval of the majority of governors who have indicated they lean more for natural resource development, although with proper environmental safeguards. They crux here is what is "proper safeguards."

Evans wanted to know the availability of BLM funds but Burford failed to give any figures in a prolonged reply.

In addition, Burford charged the EISs were used frequently as "instruments of delays" in rangeland management, noting Ms. Wald has already filed lawsuits in rangeland disputes.

It's apparent from the discussions there appears no common meeting ground among the rangeland users, natural resource developers and the environmentalists. The Reagan people can be expected to press for accelerated natural resource development on rangelands, as well as forest lands.