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The political pulse

E-2

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The western scene . . .

Range management changes due scrutiny

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When Robert F. Burford, national U.S. Bureau of Land Management director, outlined his plans for a change in rangement policies at the Western Governors Conference at Jackson, Wyo. earlier in the month, he placed the Reagan administration on trial.

The successes or failures are not going to be determined in one year, but in the first year in 1982 they will be closely watched as to their effectiveness.

How livestockmen, sheepmen, environmentalists, ranchers, farmers and the general public receive the new policies will have a great bearing on the entire spectrum of public lands.

Secretary of Interior James Watt and Burford seem to have great confidence to what they call a new change of direction which they think will be enthusiastically received by the public. Their denunciation of the past policies of the Carter administration sharpens their challenges.

Watt said the new policies, meaning primarily the rangelands, have almost defused the so-called Sagebrush Rebellion even now because of some policies already promulgated. He said he is in sympathy with the Sagebrush Rebellion spirit but that that he, along with President Reagan, are rebels without cause.



Robert F. Burford

Generally, the policies of Watt, Burford, Reagan and others are to seek greater use of rangelands for natural resource development, and by inference, at the expense of the environment.

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The rash of range fires the past summer in southern Idaho has further served to focus attention on rangelands. Many ranchers complained BLM rangeland policies allowed the grass to grow too high, thus encouraging the flames. Burford; Robert Buffington, state BLM director, and other BLM officials, said they had made no management changes and attributed the high flame incidence strictly to the spring copious ranges and the prolonged dry spell with followed. They said the criticisms came from some disgruntled ranchers who seek more acreages for the sheep and cattle.

Burford's first step has been on what he calls "selective management" of grazing allotments, and names three categories. They are Category M to maintain those in good condition and high production; Category I which will take the most money to improve those in only fair or poor condition but which have potential for improvements; and Category C to see those with limited economic productions potentials do not deteriorate further.

Burford emphasizes the performances of ranges must be based on several years, not just a year or two. He also termed the past BLM policies as all wrong.

Observers describe Burford as a solid rancher hailing from Grand Junction, Colo. His policies, however, much like the economic programs of the president, must show some results next year.