A NEIGHBORLY APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC-LAND GRAZING

An experiment is under way in Oregon that may be an alternative to all-out war over use of the public lands

by Ed Marston

The dozen or so articles in this issue came out of two visits to the high desert country of southeastern Oregon in summer and fall 1991. I went there convinced that, perhaps over the medium term, but certainly over the long term, public-land ranching was doomed. I thought ranchers would do themselves in even without help from anti-grazing environmentalists and Oklahoma Rep. Mike Synar. Ranchers’ hostility to urban culture and attitudes, their quickness to boast that they are among the last real Americans, and their oft-repeated desire to be left alone to raise their product meant they could not survive. They could not survive, I reasoned, because there is no economic room in the United States for people who don’t understand the larger society’s values, or who understand those values but are contemptuous of them. That is especially true when the cultural and economic minority depends on land claimed by the larger society for itself. It is even more true when that minority must sell its product to the larger society. That was the conviction I carried to Oregon. What I encountered shattered that conviction. Southeastern Oregon shows that at least some public-land ranchers can cross the cultural and economic divide that separates them from the larger society. Some ranchers can join forces with some environmentalists to cooperate in restoring to health what most agree is a badly damaged land. In the process, the ranchers can help environmentalists understand the land in a different way than they understand it today. To cooperate ecologically, environmentalists and ranchers must also come together politically and even socially. Out of that cooperation can emerge the possibility of learning how to protect the still un-urbanized West from the forces that threaten it with a suburbanization neither side wants. There is also an economic dimension to this story. As part of their transformation, some of the ranchers have learned how to take their product back from the urban middlemen that the ranching industry has long allowed — in fact, encouraged — to stand between them and their customers. Will this ecological, cultural and economic transformation be enough to change the West’s movement toward suburbanization and to stop the coming war over grazing? It is too early to say. But we can say that southeastern Oregon has provided the West with an experiment the rest of the region can watch and evaluate. The pro-grazing and the anti-grazing folks can pause in their rush toward battle. They can decide if there is a peaceful, constructive alternative to the community-splitting war the West is about to plunge into.

How does this possible alternative work? That is what the 20,000 words printed here are about. The easiest way to explain the approach is to describe restaurant chain whose long-term purchase contract put an economic floor under this effort. On the ground, it is their facilitation of endless meetings that has enabled some people to begin to figure out how to form a new, unified, diverse community. Politically, it is the Hatfields’ strategic approach that has kept this process from flying apart. Perhaps most important, they are the people who best communicate across the enormous cultural divide that separates ranchers from their urban critics. But it would be a mistake to stop with the Hatfields. The media has a tendency to seize on an icon — such as Gorbachev — and forget that there must be more to a movement than an articulate, attractive spokesman. There must be other people, with their individual visions, and there must be a process that allows these people to come together and exert their wills.

There seems nothing unique about the environmentalists, ranchers and bureaucrats described here. With the possible exception of the Hatfields, a similar army can be found in any part of the West. What is different in Oregon is the way these individuals have brought themselves together — into an embryonic community — to search for an alternative approach to the land.

This emerging community is organized around an approach to the land based on watersheds. In the mid-1980s, a group of far-thinking Oregonians created the Oregon Watershed Improvement Coalition. That coalition has spawned three very different re-the-
The working groups are like democracy: sloppy, frustrating, long-winded, skewed by personality and economic interests, often inconclusive.

The reader will quickly see that this is not tight, slick, packaged journalism. It does not pile fact upon fact and impression upon impression to lead the reader to an inevitable conclusion.

There is no conviction here that this approach to the public land will work. What you have in these 20,000 words is largely raw material — profiles and descriptions of events that leave much to you to decipher and interpret.

The Hollywood ending is missing because, even after eight months of living with this story, none occurred to me. Perhaps you, who come to this story fresh, will create one.