

Tour Participants Learn Best Range Practices

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On June 16th, ranch operators and agency people toured the Strandberg Ranch in Malo to learn more about range management practices. The tour was organized by WSU Ferry County Extension, Ferry Conservation District, USDA NRCS, the US Forest Service, WA Fish & Wildlife, and Ferry County Cattlemen. On the tour, attendees learned about best management practices for sustainable grazing, conservation, and water quality on a working ranch, as well as heard from area professionals about noxious weeds, wildfire impact, grazing permits on public lands, and wolves.

Ranch operator Gordon Strandberg welcomed attendees to tour his rangeland. Well-managed rangelands and other private ranch lands support healthy watersheds, carbon sequestration, , and wildlife habitat. Tip Hudson, WSU Extension rangeland expert from Kittitas County, started the workshop. He stated, “taking care of our rangelands is important and has impact for many years.”

Rangelands provide grazing and forage for livestock and wildlife. Rangeland and ecosystems provide benefits vital to both the ranch and the environment. When best management practices are used, these lands support livestock and wildlife. Sound management improves local watersheds and ecosystems as well.

Ferry Conservation District Manager Lloyd Odell, said, “Sustainable practices for rangeland watersheds are important. The Strandberg Ranch is a great opportunity for operators to learn what works well.” Odell also said that seeing such a well-organized operation shows us that conservation and sustainability is compatible. He also noted grazing practices and land conditions affect water quality directly and by long-term changes in vegetation conditions near streams. Mr. Strandberg has worked very hard to do what is best to sustain productivity on his lands.

Grazing was one of the earliest uses of public lands when the West was settled, and it continues to be an important use today. As other industries and the general public look to public land, grazing has to compete with more uses than it has in the past. Well-managed grazing provides numerous environmental benefits. For example, livestock grazing can be used to manage vegetation; intensively managed “targeted” grazing can control invasive plant species and reduce fuels that contribute to severe wildfires.

The condition of the nation’s rangelands and grasslands vary from highly disturbed to fully functioning, healthy ecosystems. While at the Strandberg Ranch, attendees were able to observe successful strategies and grazing best-practices essential to maintaining a healthy landscape. This tour highlighted the emerging multi-disciplinary rangeland science methodologies, discussing the impact of invasive species, and the effects of grazing land conservation practices that the Strandberg Ranch uses very well. The range tour was also helpful for agricultural producers, rural landowners, and land managers learning to make science-based land management decisions.

Every presenter stressed the impacts of wildfire. After a fire, vegetation is gone and land managers may think that the vegetation will not return without seeding. However, except with extremely intense, hot fires this is rarely the case.. While the grass may be lost, the below ground roots are still alive and well. According to US Forest Service Rangeland Specialist Travis Fletcher, “Given time and moisture, pastures that have been disturbed by fire should make a full recovery.”

Someone asked, “How much time do I need to defer grazing after the fire?” According to several rangeland experts at the tour, the answer depends on a few variables. In most cases, plant communities that were in excellent condition prior to the fire should not need a full year to recover with normal precipitation. Those plant communities that were already disturbed, or in poor condition may need up to 2 years to make a full recovery. The window of recovery is variable and depends on many factors.

USDA NRCS Rangeland Specialist Kristina Horn said, “Plant communities that exhibited plenty of desirable plants, seeds, root crowns, and rhizomes prior to the wildfire will result in healthy, vigorous plants after the fire.” Weed control and seeding in these situations may help improve the desirable plant community after a fire. Horn also stated that in all cases weed control is very important. Succession after a fire may see an increase in forb (broad leaf plant) production which can enhance forage nutrition as well as wildlife habitat. It is important to manage for the plants you want in a system, and not for those you do not want.

Different types of plants recover at different times after a fire, and being vigilant for noxious weeds is important, too. Maintaining good management practices including proper stocking rates, rotational grazing, proper livestock distribution, rangeland monitoring, and weed control are essential to ensure healthy rangelands and a successful post fire recovery.

WA Fish & Wildlife wolf expert Jay Shepherd, discussed the location of wolf packs in Ferry County, basics of wolf biology, and methods for dealing with depredation. Shepherd acknowledged the restoration of wolves is an exceptionally contentious issue, but in areas where both wolves and livestock have a legal right to exist, the task of natural resource professionals should focus on maintaining viable livestock operations and sustainable wolf populations. An important consideration in any effort is the size of the wolf population because research emphasis will differ for small and recovering wolf populations vs. well-established populations that can tolerate higher per-capita losses without jeopardizing the population.

Range tour attendees learned that home ranges for wolves are variable in size with dynamic margins that fluctuate seasonally and across the years. The territories they establish within these ranges depend on many environmental factors including elevation, weather patterns and wild prey migrations. Generally speaking, wolves limit their movements in order to mate, den and rear pups becoming nomadic when the pups are old enough to follow. WDFW data from 2007 through 2013 show that in Washington most depredations occur during the summer months. Because every ranch operation has its own set of challenges, each one should be assessed to determine which methods are applicable to them. It is likely that the greatest advances in this area will come from more intensive management of livestock (herding, night penning, and clumping) combined with wolf management strategies (lethal and nonlethal).

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