



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Range and Pasture Section

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Photo Monitoring Your Range

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Photo monitoring on rangelands is a vital part of any operation including those on private and public lands. Photo monitoring is one of the easiest and least technical ways to monitor rangelands. Monitoring in general, and photo monitoring in particular, can be valuable planning and assessment tools for grazing management regardless of land ownership.

Photo monitoring is simple, low tech, and, if done properly, provides a good visual perspective of what is happening on the ground. Photo monitoring can be done alone or accompany any other monitoring technique being used. If no other monitoring is being done, photo monitoring should be a minimal effort on any allotment or management unit. Goals and objectives (see below) are essential for all operations and should be explicitly stated for any management unit, public or private.

Different types of goals will have different areas of focus. For example, if a management goal is to increase willow cover in a riparian area, photos would be taken in a different location and purpose than if the management goal was to decrease cheatgrass density in the uplands.

Why Monitor?

We monitor to know what effects our management is having on rangelands. It is difficult to know where you are going if you do not know where you have been. Doubtlessly, photo monitoring requires a commitment and cost. However, what is sometimes not considered is the cost of not monitoring (no data). Photo monitoring is much like an insurance policy. Photos provide objective data if land conditions are questioned. Photos also provide a record of both management and yearly climatic variations.

In recent years, federal (and, to a lesser extent, state) land management agencies have seen severe decreases in allocated budgets. Some of the first things cut when

agencies are facing budget decreases are typically temporary and seasonal workers and travel. Although it is not generally recommended to have seasonal and temporary workers conducting monitoring, often this is the only way federal agencies are able to do monitoring. Skilled range management specialists are unable to leave the office because they are responsible for writing the lengthy documents pertaining to compliance with NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) or ESA (Endangered Species Act).

Additionally, litigation against the federal land management agencies has increased exponentially and range management specialists are required to compose lengthy reports for litigation as well. As documented in recent federal grazing permit renewals, having no monitoring data is sometimes just as, if not more, detrimental than having data.

The following list includes examples of goals for a monitoring program:

- Determine the effectiveness of management practices (must be based on management unit goals and objectives).
- Establish a record of range condition.
- Document the effect of livestock and/or wildlife grazing on key areas.
- Aid in trend detection (done over time).
- Provide justification for maintaining or changing grazing management.

Credibility of Photos

Many ranchers worry about the credibility of their photos as a form of reliable documentation. In decisions about permit renewals, agencies are mandated to consider all data, including photos. These data may include photos taken by special interest groups. Ranchers can increase the credibility of their photos in several