

Expansion Through Range Management

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A few issues in agriculture effect producers across the entire US. One that has everyone's head spinning is land prices. While land has always been a coveted material, it's price is now being driven by something other than agriculture. Traditionally the cheapest land was used for cattle, as grazing was the only option to make a return. Now this same land can be the most expensive due to the views and hunting opportunities it often affords. This is forcing us to take a look at the way grazing operations are managed.

As an industry we consistently seed, fertilize, and spray hay crops, then let our pastures remain blanketed in sage brush, being very particular about forage fed for 4 to 5 months, but forgetting that which is fed for the other 7 to 8 months. Extended grazing and drought have caused significant damage to the quality of Montana's range land. Weeds, with thousands of years of evolution, survive better in dry conditions. Dry weather causes the need to graze pastures more intensely to raise the same number of cattle; clipping grass low and hurting it's competitive ability. With the calf market showing signs of backing off and interest rates going up, it becomes very important to maximize the return of every acre. Chemistries and programs are in place today that can help by returning rangeland to it's original condition. These present an opportunity to increase carrying capacity and spread the cost of land across more cattle.

Let us also consider expansion. Under current conditions expansion, at times, isn't just difficult, it's impossible as land is just not available. In this case improving range becomes the *only* way to expand. While treating rangeland seems expensive, let me present a scenario. Let's say spraying your pasture costs \$20/acre and it only increases carrying capacity 10%. This is the equivalent of buying another ranch, exactly like your own, for \$200/acre. How often is that price available today?

While running a range program can be intimidating, it is very feasible and can provide an excellent return. For anyone in the livestock industry, it is worth a hard look. If you have any questions on range management or are considering a program for your operation, stop in and see us at Central Montana Co-op.