

Shoesole, Ranching and Collaboration



Shoesole members during a recent ranch tour

Most of today's rangeland issues seem to generate controversy and confrontation, which explains why I belong to a group whose work is based on collaboration. Diverse stakeholders working together to solve common problems and achieve common objectives.

Anyone can join the Shoesole Resource Management Group, and the group is definitely diverse, made up of people from federal agencies, state agencies and academics, along with ranching friends, families and employees and what I call "civilians". Our common objectives are maintaining 160,000 acres of healthy rangeland, both public and private, while maintaining healthy, successful ranching operations using these lands. Our scope is two ranches, the Cottonwood and the Boies.

Basically, the Shoesole group meets annually with Agee Smith for the Cottonwood and Robin and Steve Boies for the Boies Ranch. We provide input, advice, encouragement and general conversation intended to help them manage their ranches and develop and fine tune their annual biological plans. The ranchers then use these plans to develop their annual grazing plans that are submitted to the BLM and USFS for approval. Much of our meetings consists of simple communication, the exchange of information between ranchers and agencies, between ranchers and members of the public. Agency personnel hear about the concerns and actual conditions on the ranch and ranchers hear about agencies' concerns and policies. The Shoesole name comes from an old area brand.

Collaboration is a complicated process where diverse members bring their own particular views and interests together to find solutions to problems encountered with any ranching operation. The process is helped by a facilitator, Chuck Petersen, Elko NRCS Range conservationist. A collaborative group constantly works on the group dynamic and we kid Chuck about his constant team-building efforts but any such group needs to develop and maintain trust among the members.

Decisions are made through consensus where all members are encouraged to express their opposing views before the group arrives at the best general decision. They are not usually unanimous but members agree to support the process, knowing it was fair and agreeing not to undermine it. Decisions are based on good science and refined and improved by all the different views expressed.

This is not an easy process. All members must dedicate considerable time, especially busy agency personnel who understand time spent now probably means less time spent on issues later. The ranchers must open their operations to scrutiny by people who may not understand ranching. The group must overcome conflict and gridlock to ensure an open, transparent, accessible and equitable process. Chuck keeps us on track and ensures meetings are not dominated by a few members.

We sometimes wonder why we attend these meetings and tours, but we concentrate on our goals of healthy rangelands and ranching operations and get back to work.

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