

Setting the Stage for the Crested Wheatgrass Symposium

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Crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron desertorum*); good grief--its only a grass! How can an effort such as this full four-day symposium, at such cost to participants and agencies, be justified on just a grass, or even a complex of grasses designated as crested wheatgrass?

There are a number of reasons for having this symposium, but simply stated the authors here are reporting on a singular range species--perhaps the ponderosa pine of the Intermountain range.

First of all, it is an important plant--interesting biologically and economically perhaps the single most important range plant in North America. It was introduced from Siberia with a 5000 year experience in surviving grazing, hard grazing by ungulates, and brought to the Intermountain Region where in historic perspective, grazing by ungulates was light to non-existent. Now it is abundant and widely distributed, although I cannot find a reliable estimate of the number of acres in crested wheatgrass. In addition an enormous number of wild and domestic herbivores depend on it for much of their annual forage ration.

In becoming established in the Intermountain West, crested wheatgrass has replaced a predecessor in many locations that suffers great stress under even relatively light defoliation. Yet that predecessor, bluebunch wheatgrass, (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) is generally held in much higher ecological esteem.

Economically and ecologically astounding by most measures, crested wheatgrass produces from 3 to 20 times the grazing capacity of the so-called native plants it has been called on to replace. It sustains surprisingly heavy and long or even continual grazing, much to the surprise of most early range ecologists who predicted it would easily succumb to the pressures of grazing or to its alien environment, or a combination of both. Not only has

it not succumbed, but crested wheatgrass has survived three of the century's worst droughts.

Despite these credentials, crested wheatgrass has its detractors. It has been the subject of serious controversy since about 1970 and especially during the "back to nature" period of the mid-70's. The crested wheatgrass detractors have claimed it should not be included in range seedings and especially in energy reclamation seedings because it was an exotic, implying it might be a "short-termer" in such situations.

Although I called it a range plant, many professionals would argue that an exotic is automatically excluded from being classified as a range plant, and must remain an invader, an alien without birthright. Therefore crested wheatgrass continues to confuse those who wish to apply to it range condition criteria and baffle those who wish to monitor its trend. On the one hand we attempt to ignore it or consider it an invader; on the other we arrogantly set utilization standards as though it were just a common, ordinary species of North American range plants. Despite the fact crested wheatgrass is one of our most heavily researched range plants, we have not provided it a place in our neat and simple ecological schemes and explanations; nor in our range management principles and practices.

After 50 years I believe this plant has gained its ecological credentials and is now subject to our vegetation classification schemes. Therefore I am declaring it is a range plant. We have decided here at Utah State University that crested wheatgrass deserves to receive its papers--at least a permanent work visa if we cannot grant it a citizenship based on naturalization.

In such vein, many things have been said both for and against crested wheatgrass and no doubt this symposium will repeat many and maybe even invent more. Personally, I am convinced the grass is too valuable to place on the ecological hold button. There are several million acres, mostly the West's most productive acres, now in crested wheatgrass and waiting for something good to happen to their use

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and management. Will we recognize the grass for the potential productivity it has? or will we continue to allow rangeland now in crested wheatgrass to be managed as though it were no different from the rest of the western range?

Crested wheatgrass has had a lot to do with keeping the western range livestock industry alive since 1935 and can have much more to do with where that industry is going in the future. As well, the role of crested wheatgrass in wildlife habitat improvement will grow in importance.

And finally, I think this grass will be involved in the examination and development of some

critically important theories for rangeland management.

The stage has been set for the players who have been called here to deliver their soliloquies. A stage set not by me but by the 50-year history of research and management of crested wheatgrass in the western United States.

Our hope, as the convenors of this symposium, is that it will result in a proceedings of signal value helping us to steer a useful course for rangeland management for the future.