



Policy engagement to enhance future American rangeland systems: implications for the IYRP 2026

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore issues that American rangeland professionals regard as most important in supporting sustainable rangeland systems. Impetus for this work is provided by the pending International Year for Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), to be celebrated in 2026. One of the goals of the IYRP 2026 is to raise awareness about the challenges facing global rangelands. The American situation described here provides one example we can learn from. The objectives of this work include: (1) Summarizing recent findings from surveys and workshops conducted during 2022 to 2024 where the participants—largely members of the Society for Range Management (SRM)—ranked priority rangeland problems to be tackled; (2) reviewing historical and current aspects of policy environments that affect contemporary problem-solving on American rangelands; and (3) clarifying how progress in policy-related problem solving could be linked to the IYRP 2026. Findings are summarized as follows: (1) American range professionals see loss of rangeland systems as the key challenge, and interventions are needed to preserve open spaces and support new generations of resource users; (2) improved policy making and stakeholder collaborative processes are the main interventions to address these key challenges; (3) recent policy opportunities abound at local, state, and federal levels that could promote sustainable rangeland systems, but how best to engage policy making and document impacts remains somewhat of an enigma; and (4) in the context of action planning for IYRP 2026, it is proposed that a process of generating political proclamations that underscore the multiple values of rangelands to society are a useful first step that can better connect SRM sections to local and state-level political entities.

Introduction

Policy can be defined as “a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business or individual” (Anon 2024). Policy is complex and embraces many levels of engagement. In the USA, this includes players such as the federal, state, and local governments. Various policy objectives can be complementary or contradictory. Despite that policy is very important for rangeland preservation and stewardship, attention devoted to policy by stakeholders is surprisingly limited, especially in the world’s more affluent nations (Holechek 2013). One major reason for this is the strongly eco-centric orientation of range science and management. Tertiary education in natural resources at American Land Grant universities has been founded on conveying technical aspects of vegetation assessments and livestock production; policy is typically left to social science departments rarely engaged by applied ecologists.

In the run-up to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) 2026, a multi-faceted approach has been embraced by rangeland advocates and change agents tackling a wide array of ecological and social issues (IYRP 2024). Awareness-raising among key stakeholders, the public, and political decision makers is a prominent goal. As part of this effort, work was undertaken here to help clarify a policy environment for American rangelands so that an action agenda can be formulated in support of sustainable rangeland systems for the future.

Methods

Materials summarized here were created from 2022 to 2024 based on several approaches. Modest numbers of email surveys and several workshop deliberations, largely involving members of the Society for Range Management (SRM), were mined for policy-relevant information. Text from key aspects of draft federal legislation was reviewed. State-level perspectives have been focused on Utah, a classic example of a western, public-land entity where a small percentage of the landscape is under private ownership; the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (USFS) are the federal stewards of most of the remainder (Leydsman-McGinty 2009). These efforts in tandem represent only a very preliminary, exploratory, qualitative synthesis that may help rangeland stakeholders chart a way forward for more effective policy engagement.

Results

National SRM Email Surveys and Workshop Deliberations

An email survey was sent to all 21 SRM sections (SRM 2024) during September and October 2022. In theory, this survey reached hundreds of potential respondents. Questions were open-ended and asked people to identify priority challenges facing rangelands as well as priority interventions to address the challenges. There were only 13 completed surveys submitted by Americans, with another 23 from Canadian and Mexican SRM members. Key results from the Americans are shown in Table 1. While the survey response rate was poor, results were broadly validated by over 50 participants at a follow-up workshop in February 2023, held at the annual SRM conference at Boise. Furthermore—although not emphasized here—data collected from Canadian and Mexican respondents were generally similar as well. In sum, it was concluded that the prominent gaps overall focused on the need for more effective policies, expanded outreach, education, and strengthened stakeholder networks.

Table 1. Top five challenges and intervention priorities (ranked) for American rangelands as revealed by 13 SRM stakeholders in 2022

Priority Challenges	Priority Interventions
1 Loss of rangeland systems	1 Policies preserving rangelands and livelihoods
2 Public and policy makers uninformed	2 More public and policy outreach needed
3 Climate change and ecological problems	3 Strengthen management at local levels
4 Better manage expanding recreation	4 Need to update federal regulations
5 Engage more resource users	5 Need to improve stakeholder networks

Utah Section SRM Group Discussions

Another effort to seek feedback on priority actions needed to sustain rangelands more locally was provided by an annual meeting of the SRM Utah section during November 2023. Forty-five attendees were assigned into nine groups of five people each for 30-minute discussions. Results were ranked with up to three categories, scored from most to less important (i.e., 3, 2, 1), and summarized. The top two needs for action in Utah were: (1) Developing more effective stakeholder networks on projects of mutual concern (16 ranked points overall), and (2) improvement of state and federal collaborations (15 ranked points). Four other needs followed more distantly, including: (1) Improved management of outdoor recreation (8 points); (2) expansion of public education concerning rangelands (6 points); (3) improvement of internal agency management processes (i.e.,

staffing and priority setting) for the BLM or USFS (6 points); and technical aspects of rangeland management and resource monitoring (5 points).

Historical Policy Environment

The foundational policies that still influence contemporary resource access and use in the rangelands of the western USA were first enacted over 150 years ago (Holechek et al. 2011). A vast, unsettled landscape governed by territories comprised most of the national endowment West of the Mississippi River. Federal Acts from congress relevant to rangelands began with the Homestead Act (1862) that allocated 160-acre parcels to people to encourage farming and the acquisition of private land. The Transcontinental Railroad Act (1862) promoted rural development, emigration, and market development. Government was slow to realize, however, that only small segments of land in the West were suitable for cultivation, hence grazing issues per se received little attention until later. Attempts to amend policies to enlarge homestead sizes or incorporate stock-raising on farms led to resource degradation because fodder resources were mismatched with livestock production needs.

The Forest Reserves Act (1891) and the Taylor Grazing Act (1934) enabled newly minted federal entities to control access to remaining public lands by curbing indiscriminate logging and overgrazing. Today, for example, ranchers in the western USA often graze livestock on a combination of private and public lands. Access to the latter is governed by permits for the use of allotments that are regulated to promote more sustainable utilization of forage. Agencies that oversee this resource use include the US Forest Service (USFS) at higher elevations and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) at lower elevations. The USFS and BLM remain very influential in Utah.

Current Policy Environment

Using the State of Utah as an example, it is fair to say that there is considerable political tension today between state interests and federal interests concerning access to, and use of, rangeland resources. This occurs over a backdrop where the State of Utah controls roughly 20 percent of the state's land area and the US government controls most of the remainder. To illustrate conflict, for example, the State of Utah has recently sued the federal government for control over BLM lands (Schoenbaum and Brown 2024). This effort is a rekindling of past litigation; legal experts contend that the current lawsuit has little chance for success. There are other avenues for federal policy intervention for Utah rangelands. A prominent example is the omnibus Farm Bill, renewed every five years since the 1930s (Myers 2022). Traditionally the Farm Bill has not given much attention to rangeland, but this is changing. SRM submitted remarks in 2023 for the current update of the Farm Bill that is still ongoing (Reini, pers. comment). Requests from SRM include more Farm Bill support for: (1) Range conservation programs—including federal match for establishing land trusts; (2) innovative management technologies; (3) specialized education for range users including facilitation of intergenerational transfer of ranch operations; and (4) strengthening federal land-management agencies. Other range-relevant federal legislation has recently received attention, including the bipartisan North American Grasslands Conservation Act, introduced in the US House of Representatives in October 2024 (NAGCA 2024). The goal of the NAGCA is to foster landowner driven, voluntary, incentive-based programs to help conserve and restore over 125 million acres of critically imperiled grasslands and associated ecosystems, also with attention to livelihoods that includes farmers, ranchers, recreationists, and Native Americans. The focus of the NAGCA is on private lands. Administrative details of the NAGCA remain under debate. Extended congressional delays for both the Farm Bill and NAGCA are expected under the current atmosphere of political uncertainty (Reini, pers. comment).

Again, using Utah as an example, there are state- and local-level policies and actions targeted towards rangelands. The UGIP (Utah Grazing Improvement Program) funded by the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, has provided support for ranch-level resource management innovation for almost 20 years (UGIP 2024). The UGIP is also under consideration for expansion into neighboring states given the success in Utah. Recent Utah legislation illustrates a novel embrace of ecosystem-level perspectives concerning sustainable management of the Great Salt Lake (GSLR 2024). Efforts to divert more water to the lake will ultimately have

implications for water conservation on rangeland landscapes for both public and private lands. The need to recruit the next generations of ranchers seems to be addressed, at least in part, via educational outreach programs sponsored by the Utah Farm Bureau Federation, an NGO (UFBF 2024). Finally, local (county level) actions in the form of voter-approved bonds have recently taken hold in a few areas where peri-urban or ex-urban development threatens open space. Bond funds are used to purchase conservation easements (CC 2024).

Discussion and Conclusions

Feedback from national and local (Utah) sources suggests that dominant challenges for rangelands are social rather than technical in nature. The national input amplified policy and outreach to promote sustainable rangeland systems. The Utah input, in contrast, noted more need for improved stakeholder networks and inter-agency collaborations on-the-ground. This distinction between national and Utah perspectives makes sense. Honing this down further one might surmise in a synthesis that interventions are needed to preserve working rangeland landscapes, because failure to do so means that social-ecological systems will collapse. Policy-scale actions can help conserve land and fortify a new generation of resource users. Local-scale actions like stakeholder engagement and improved inter-agency collaborations play support roles in this process.

If we “connect the dots” between the synthesis above and elements of the current policy environment, several aspects of each seem to match up; it appears there is momentum towards increasing policy awareness about rangelands in the USA. Recent efforts at the federal level to raise the profile of rangelands in the Farm Bill as well as submission of a Grasslands Act are both timely. Of note is the potential provision of more money in the Farm Bill for the purchase of conservation easements via match from the McAllister Fund; lack of such resources makes open-space acquisition in Utah a struggle (Snider, pers. comment). The possibility of funding support for grassland conservation more broadly in the context of the Grasslands Act has even greater national implications. That state legislators in Utah now debate regionally scaled management of the Great Salt Lake is also encouraging.

How do these findings relate to the IYRP? A major goal of the IYRP is to raise awareness about rangelands worldwide among policy makers and the public (IYRP 2024). One impression from this work is that while rank-and-file SRM members appreciate the need for helpful policies to better navigate the future, there are few examples of SRM members actively engaging policy makers. Documenting policy impact thus becomes difficult at best. Policy engagement, rather, is left to NGOs and special interest groups. At the February 2025 annual meeting of SRM at Spokane, WA, a symposium will craft an IYRP action plan for North America. One of the key components of the action plan will focus on creation and delivery of short proclamations for political leaders in local and state governments. Editable templates will celebrate rangeland values for the public. Each SRM section will connect with policy makers to enable this process to occur, helping to build policy-relevant capacity for SRM. Other efforts are being made to bridge gaps between policy makers and SRM at state and federal levels (Reini, pers. comment). This all captures the spirit of the IYRP.

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