The Fence Problem on Western Ranges

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THE FENCE PROBLEM ON WESTERN RANGES

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In the early days live stock were produced entirely on the free open range. Stockmen were free to take their cattle where they pleased. Neighbors were desired to settle the country and assist in gathering cattle, as nobody thought there would be any danger of overgrazing. In the early '90's stockmen began to crowd each other. Many animals were shipped in from Texas and other districts. The ranges were overgrazed and many animals died from starvation. For more than twenty-five years Arizona ranges have been overgrazed, and as a result have deteriorated greatly in carrying capacity. A keen competition has developed for stock ranges. Much land has been purchased, leased or homesteaded, and at the present time only 21,000,000 acres remain in the public domain. Stockmen realize that free range is a thing of the past, as only the inferior portions are left in the public domain. During the three past years wire fences have sprung up like magic, and stockmen are now waiting for the price of wire to come down, or to be able to secure wire at any price before constructing fences.

In fairness to the stockmen themselves it is doubtful if they could have done differently under the circumstances. The federal government neglected its opportunity of granting long-term grazing permits, or supervising the range so that it was not over-grazed, water could be developed and the animals increased. Community ranges have been a failure, as the stockmen wanted to get all they could on such ranges and give as little as possible. The uncertainty of what policy would be followed by the federal government, made stockmen feel nervous. They endeavored to secure all the land they could by purchasing homesteads and other lands. This was a slow method, however, until the state lands were offered for lease or purchase. The competition for land has become more and more acute until the present time when enerybody is endeavoring to secure control of the range by lease or purchase.

The prime object in leasing or purchasing land is to get control of it so that areas may be fenced. Some have purchased land at a speculation, but most of the land has been secured so that is may be inclosed. The public domain cannot be fenced, so that

it is necessary for stockmen to secure land by leasing or purchase before fencing.

The first consideration with regard to the range fence problem, is where to fence. There are large areas in Arizona that are not worth fencing. As a rule the best areas lie at altitudes from 3,000 to 5,000 feet. Ranges at lower or higher elevations may be especially valuable during certain portions of the year. There are many valleys and mesas with a sufficient amount of rainfall, flood water or underground seep to make it possible to grow crops for live stock. These areas should be fenced and farmed in the most approved manner so that as much forage as possible may be grown, and stored in silos or stacks for livestock during periods of drouth. Water is also of importance for the man who controls a water hole also controls the range. As there is a greater supply of summer than winter forage, it is important that the stock be kept off winter ranges during the summer months. Fencing along the mountain will keep the stock at high altitudes when they desire to come down onto the lower flats during cold, wet weather. The shape and size of the pasture also has a direct bearing on the subject. Thus, it requires two rods of fence to enclose every acre on a square field one section in size, while only one-tenth of a rod is required for every acre enclosed on a pasture 100 sections in size. A pasture which is twice as long as wide will require six percent more material to enclose a given area than would be required if the pasture were square. As the shape of a pasture varies from the square it requires a proportionate increase of fence to surround it. A field that is four times as long as wide, requires 25 percent more fence than is needed to enclose the same area in the shape of a square. Pastures must be rotated just as much as farm fields. To do this properly it is best to have three or four separate pastures belonging to each outfit. With this number of fields it is possible to pasture the areas with different kinds of live stock and allow the forage to go to seed at least once in three or four years.

The following are some of the chief disadvantages of fencing:

1. Necessity of purchase or lease of land;
2. Expense of constructing and maintaining fences;
3. Stock are not allowed to drift to best forage.
4. Management of fence pastures little understood.
5. Stock require more care and attention;
6. Large outfits will crowd out small stockmen.

Altho there are some disadvantages against fencing, yet the advantages greatly predominate. The ranges can be operated on a permanent basis without fear of being crowded by neighbors. The stock will be more gentle and under control at all times so that they can be handled with greater ease. Much of the work can be done when they come up to water, and the policy will be to develop and conserve the range rather than to exploit it. The advantages of fencing stock ranges may be summed up under the following headings.

I. **Fencing Necessary to Maintain and Improve the Quality of the Ranges.**
   1. Avoids overgrazing;
   2. Increases the carrying capacity;
   3. Retards erosion;
   4. Allows the plants to go to seed;
   5. Allows a better range utilization;
   6. Can use range according to type of forage produced;
   7. Useless shrubs and weeds may be destroyed.
   8. To equalize summer and winter forage.

II. **Fences Reduce Mortality and Losses.**
   1. Feed may be stored for periods of drouth;
   2. Stock can be gathered and fed;
   3. Ranges will not be overgrazed;
   4. Poisonous plants destroyed or grazed when least dangerous;
   5. Breeding stock live longer;
   6. Less stealing and wandering of the stock.

III. **Fences Facilitate the Management of Animals.**
   1. Reduces labor;
   2. Can wean calves;
   3. No need of branding and ear-marking;
   4. Facilitates a regular breeding season;
   5. Can gather stock and market them any time;
   6. Aid in locating cattle.

IV. **Promotes Stock Improvement.**
   1. Better sires will be purchased;
   2. Avoid inbreeding;
   3. Heifers will not be bred too young;
   4. Facilitates culling.

V. **Increases Returns from the Range.**
   1. Calf crop can be increased twenty-five percent;

2. Extra thrift of stock inside of fences;
3. Saves salt;
4. Conserves water.

The fence problem must be solved by each person according to his own individual condition. One man may need more fenced winter range while another must have a larger supply of summer forage. Some need more browse and others will require land suitable for growing crops by flood-water or dry farm methods. In some places large areas will be most desired, while in other places water may be the prime consideration. A fence may be joined onto a drift fence or neighboring pasture, or railroad right of way with little expense. After securing control of land and inclosing it, certain places will be found so badly overgrazed that a rest of from five to eight years will be necessary in order to allow the range to regain its normal carrying capacity.

Fencing will not solve all the range problems. They are expensive and of value chiefly to correct mistakes in range management. A fence does not stimulate the growth of one more blade of grass or one leaf of browse. Theoretically it would be much cheaper and perhaps more efficient to graze inferior areas under proper direction. Until the community spirit is developed more strongly in range districts, stockmen will desire to have separate holdings of their own. They have worked together in the round-ups, branded the other fellow's calf honestly, and cooperated in exchange of salt, water, bulls and range; but they have not been content for they felt that the business was not secure and desired placing it on a better basis. Scientific methods will be applied in the protection and utilization of the range as well as in handling and breeding of their animals.

Fences have come to stay in the Southwest. The livestock business cannot be placed on a secure foundation without fences. The average stockman is anxious to eliminate the hazards in his business. A few fences are necessary to protect the animals, but only the best and most productive land should be thus inclosed. Free range production has been a wasteful, expensive method. Undoubtedly the day has passed in Arizona when stock can be maintained without some protection; therefore fenced ranges are coming fast and they will stay. Stockmen cannot be expected to develop and improve the open range which belongs to everybody. They have abused the open range and they are going to continue to abuse it, and thus protect ranges under fence, as long as no pressure is brought to bear on them.

Other stockmen need their ranges fenced just as much or more than cattle raisers. A coyote and wolf-proof fence will greatly reduce the loss of sheep and goats, and save much of the labor required to herd them. These animals will graze more freely and scatter over the range better if allowed to do so of their own accord. Bigger and better lambs and kids are grown inside of fences, and also a heavier yield of wool and mohair produced than where the animals are held in bands. By conserving sufficient feed for the ewes and does, and having the lambs and kids dropped at the most favorable season, an increase of fully thirty percent more offspring should be raised. The time has already come when three or four sections should be reserved for lambing and kidding a band of a thousand ewes or does.