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Grazing Lands  
Technology  
Institute

## Conservation Planning on Grazing Lands

# The Art of Communication



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## Foreword

H. B. Passey had an outstanding career in the Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service). He worked as a range conservationist in Arizona before becoming the leader of the Soil - Range Investigation Team located in Utah. Mr. Passey served as regional range conservationist in the Denver Regional Office and then as state resource conservationist for range in the Texas SCS State Office. Mr. Passey's last position was the national range conservationist in the National Headquarters.

Mr. Passey was an outstanding speaker. He was a master at holding one's attention with stories to get his point across. He spent many days in the field working with the most successful range conservationists, studying their methods of communication. He watched the landowners to determine how they reacted to what the conservationists did and said. This study, and his own experiences, led him to become an outstanding trainer in the art of working effectively with producers.

In 1969, Mr. Passey wrote down his thoughts on how to communicate with landowners. His notes have been used throughout the Nation as a training tool to teach new employees how to communicate with landowners in a way that would lead them to desire to work with the conservationist and develop an understanding of their grazing lands. This understanding would lead to the development of a conservation plan that met the needs of the natural resources, as well as the needs and objectives of the landowner. Even though Mr. Passey's writing was aimed at working with ranchers, his comments are applicable to working with landowners on all kinds of lands and problems.

It is by widespread request that the Grazing Lands Technology Institute publishes this document for use by Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field personnel in learning the art of successful communication with landowners. We made minimum alterations to update the original text, making every effort to maintain the basics of Mr. Passey's writings. Our challenge to you is to study Mr. Passey's recommendations and, based on your own personality and the landowners with whom you work, develop your own method of communication that will allow you to be successful in leading landowners in the conservation planning and application process.

Rhett H. Johnson  
Director, Grazing Lands Technology Institute

*From an article*

# Grazing Lands Planning and Application

## **Preface**

*The following is not intended to represent official Service (SCS) policy or procedures....(handbooks, technical guides).... various numbered State and Service memoranda adequately cover policies and accepted procedures.*

*These notes, therefore, will be confined to some of the philosophy of working with people and some methods and procedures which might be employed to motivate them to carry out sound and practical conservation programs on their lands. No conservationist would be expected to use all the techniques described or to use any of them exactly the way they are stated. It is hoped, however, that some of you might pick up an idea or two which will help you in working with people.*

*I do not take credit for the ideas, thoughts, or philosophies expressed. Most of them were "stolen" from successful conservationists and ranchers over a period of quite a few years. Perhaps some were "lifted" from you.*

*H. B. Passey  
July 1, 1969*

## Background

Despite having the word conservationist as a part of many Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) working titles, we the NRCS do not apply conservation to the land. We sell it to people. If we do a good job of selling conservation to people, they will apply it to the land. Therefore, we are really people conservationists. It is just human nature that if people want to do something badly enough, they usually find a way to get it done. If they don't want to do it, they can think of a dozen reasons it can't be done. Our job, then, is to help landowners want to do the things that will be of most benefit to them and the resources in the long run. This means motivation, and motivation depends mostly on communication. We need to get in tune to get the job done.

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One cardinal rule in working with landowners: Never ask a question to which they might give the wrong answer. If they give the wrong answer, we are faced with telling them they are wrong—and this isn't good communication. It is far better to say to the landowner, "Most people think plants get their food from the soil, but you and I know they don't because there is no plant food in the soil." Also, we should never let them commit themselves to a specific stocking rate nor to specific treatment measures until we have helped them understand their land and made an inventory because some people hesitate to back down even if they find they are wrong.

*Never ask a question to which they might give the wrong answer.*

A conservation plan does not exist until the owners or operators make decisions. Therefore, they must be led to make decisions. It is equally important, however, that we do not let them make decisions until they have the understanding and background

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for making the right decisions. We can suggest that they withhold final decisions until we have helped them consider all their resources and opportunities.

Always take the positive approach. Point out opportunities, not just problems. If a landowner has a thick patch of brush, this represents an opportunity to replace some of that brush with good grass. If the pastures are too large, there is an opportunity to increase the harvest efficiency by cross-fencing and grazing management. Low plant vigor presents a fine opportunity to increase production through the application of a Prescribed Grazing Management plan that balances animal numbers with forage production and achieves the needed rest of the pastures.

Naturally, no two landowners are exactly alike just as no two ranches or stock farms are exactly alike. Therefore, we must keep our approach flexible and adapt it to the individuals with whom we are working.

Ask leading questions. Have the ranchers supply information. This will help them realize that you are sincere and interested in them and what they know about their operation. If you accept some of their ideas, they will more readily accept yours. The sign of a good conservationist is to lead landowners to think they thought up the idea in the first place. Give them full credit for the successful things being done and for the good ideas they present. A pat on the back really helps, but don't get carried away and agree when they are dead wrong. Better to say something like, "That is probably true in some cases, but would you consider looking at it in this way?"

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Always be frank and businesslike when working with people. Admit you don't know the answer to a question rather than risk giving the wrong answer. Tell them, "I am not sure, but I will find out for you." Tactfully stick with your convictions

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when a technical matter comes up. Don't agree if it is incorrect or impractical; suggest a better way. Be a professional and act like one.

We should strive always to recognize the problems of the landowners as well as their goals, aims, wishes, and desires. We should recognize that many landowners have financial limitations and cannot go along with everything either they or we would like to plan. Be alert to cost-return aspects of the job and discuss this freely with them. If they are limited in what they can apply or how rapidly they can apply it, help them to plan their treatment so they can get the most immediate benefits from their investments, consistent with long-range objectives.

Get to know and understand the person with whom you are working. Then adapt your approach accordingly. Some people respond to challenge. For example, if they are reluctant to place salt away from water because they think the livestock will go back to water after salting, you can sometimes challenge them with a statement similar to the one that follows. This may not work with everyone, but try it out on the right person.

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*I'll make a deal with you. Take the salt away from water and put it out where there is unused feed in one pasture. Don't put it too far away to start with, and you may need to push the cattle to the salt so they will know where it is. Then after 30 days if they still go directly to water after salting, move the salt back and I will quit discussing it with you. But, if you find that they really do make better use of the forage, I would expect you to salt away from water in all the pastures.*

## Setting the stage

When keeping a conservation planning date, always take the initiative. Be businesslike, but not bossy or overly aggressive. Don't wait for ranchers to ask, "Now what was it you wanted to do today?" Tell them right off that you are here to help develop their conservation plan, to help figure how to make the most efficient conservation use of their lands and resources and accomplish their objectives. Tell them their objectives

are the same as yours: To grow on every acre the desired plant community that will meet their objectives and at the same time conserve the soil, water, air, plant and, animal resources.

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The best way to begin the conservation planning process generally is to come to an understanding of what is to be accomplished. This might be called laying the cards on the table. It might include such a statement as: *We want to be sure we agree on a few basic points.*

*First, I recognize that you own this land. You have the deed to it. You make the decisions on how you will use and treat your land. I may discuss some different alternatives with you, but you still make the decisions.*

*Second, I recognize that you know your place better than I ever will. You know every ridge and draw and patch of brush.*

*Third, I recognize that you may know more about livestock than I do. Especially, about your livestock and how they handle on your place.*

*Now, we believe we know some things about your soils—what they are capable of producing, the moisture relationships, and the limitations. We also know about your forage plants—how they grow, what their requirements are, how they compete with each other, how they respond to the time and amount of grazing use you apply, and how we can get the most efficient use of them and at the same time create the kind of plant community that is most desirable. We can help you with your water quality and quantity problems, as well as air problems such as cold winter winds or hot summer temperatures. Also, we can help you take into consideration the wildlife habitat needs and ensure that the needs of your livestock are met.*

*Our proposal is simply this: Let's take your knowledge of your operation and the livestock, your objectives, add our information on your soils, plants, water, air, wildlife and livestock needs, and put all*

*this information together. Together, we can then develop a better conservation plan than either of us could work out separately. But remember, you make the final decisions.*

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Next, suggest how the two of you might go about developing the plan. They probably have been trying to decide "what are we going to do now?" So tell them. Something like the following generally works:

*To do as good a job as possible and to use our time efficiently, I would like to suggest how we might go about this planning job. First, if you have a pasture or even an odd corner that has a good stand of grass, let's start there. We can see the kinds of plants you have and discuss their values. Then we might discuss how your plants grow because this is very important to know as a basis to make the best use of them and to provide for improvement in kinds of plants and total production wherever possible.*

*Then, let us go over each pasture rather carefully. I have a map of the soils on your place that will give us some good information on what we can expect each kind of land to produce. As you know, you have different kinds of land that grow different kinds or amounts of plant cover. On each kind of range (we call them "sites"), we will describe what nature intended to grow there. Then we will see what is growing there now so we will know how we can improve both quality and production. We will draw these sites on the map so we can keep track of them. We will also evaluate the available forage in terms of how many and what kinds of animals can be profitably grazed and still leave room for improvement.*

*We can locate fences, water places, and other important features on the map as we go from pasture*

*to pasture. We will look for opportunities to speed up range improvement by brush management, seeding, or other types of treatment. Be sure to point out the ideas and suggestions you have as we go over each pasture, and I would like to make suggestions where I see opportunities. There are nearly always two or more ways to get a job done, so we should consider the alternatives and weigh each one carefully to see what the effects will be, both pro and con, so you can select the best way to get your particular job done.*

*As we go from pasture to pasture, we will identify and discuss all the soil, water, air, plant, and animal problems or concerns that are evident. We will do our best to determine what is causing the problems, and discuss what can be done to solve them. We can also identify and discuss the different opportunities that you have on the place. You may have an economic opportunity that you have not taken advantage of such as recreational camping or hunting and fishing.*

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*After we have made a careful inventory of each pasture, we can use the information we put on the map and our notes to develop the best plan for using and improving your lands. I suggest that you not make definite decisions until we have looked at all the pastures. This helps you plan each pasture to complement treatment for the other pastures. For example, if you decide to control brush in one pasture, we need to figure where the livestock will be while that pasture is resting. Or, we might find that a summer-growing forage crop, such as sudan grass, will fit your year-round forage needs better than oats. I am sure this procedure will be a good way to do your planning, but I am always open to suggestions.*

Such a brief outline for planning lets the landowners know what to expect. It also saves time because they will most likely go along in the sequence you suggest rather than randomly going here and there to look at special problems or ideas they have in mind.

The main reason for suggesting that you start out in a good patch of grass is that it is easier to botanize and to find a healthy plant to dig up for the demonstration on how plants grow. Be sure to emphasize that healthy, vigorous plants make more growth than overused plants. Point out the root and top size relationship and the importance of keeping the better plants vigorous so they can out-compete the weedy plants for moisture and sunlight. This is a good place to bring out the reasons why plants need to rest periodically. On rangeland you can help them understand what range sites are, why and how composition has changed, what range trend and range health are, and how to determine them on timely basis as tools for management. On pastureland, you can discuss many of the same principles, pointing out spot grazing and what causes it.

A good understanding of how plants grow is basic in ranch and stock farm planning. It is the foundation on which management plans are based. Do not take for granted that landowners know these

things. Emphasize: Why about 50 percent of the leaf area needs to be maintained. Why plants need to rest. Why pastures profit from rest following brush control.

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The only way rangeland conditions can be improved is through proper grazing management of the key plants. The only way we can get efficient use of the forage and improve range condition is through leaving sufficient leaf area on the key plants plus planned rest during the growing season.

Fencing does not improve range, but a properly located fence makes it possible to apply a prescribed grazing plan that will improve the range or pasture. Stock water development does not improve range or pasture, but adequate and properly located water makes it possible to apply good grazing management. Proper location of salting or feeding areas does not improve range or pasture, but it may help considerably in getting better distribution of grazing. These are all "facilitating" practices that enable sound grazing management to be applied.

Likewise, brush management does not improve range unless it is accompanied by sound grazing management. Neither does seeding improve range or pasture unless it too is followed by the proper grazing of the key plants and by needed rest.

So, if we do not sell the landowner on properly managing their grazing land through prescribed grazing, they do not have an adequate conservation plan regardless of what else they plan to do.

Therefore, our primary objective should always be to lead landowners to an understanding of the needs of their plants and how they can most profitably use and improve them

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and at the same time meet the needs of the livestock and the wildlife. Fencing and water development are merely facilitating practices. Brush management and seeding are only accelerating practices. None will be effective without good plant management through a prescribed grazing plan.

## Landowner involvement

Involve the landowners as much as possible in what you are doing. If you are going to clip a plot with them, let them select the spot to be clipped. Have them help with the clipping.

Tell them, "If you will start on that side, I will start over here." While they are on their knees helping you clip the grass, you can show them the condition of the soil surface, presence or absence of seedlings, and other site conditions.

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Always hand them the scales to do the weighing. You may need to demonstrate how to read the scales, but this is always better than doing it for them. Have them participate in calculating composition, evaluating browse use and forage resources, and developing their grazing plan.

When you talk about a soil, don't spend much time discussing the technical classification of the soil because they probably will not remember it. Show them what kind of a home it provides for plants and that certain plants are expected to grow on this kind of soil. When you dig up some soil, hand them a handful. Even if they are standing there with their hands in their pockets, they will reach out to take the soil in their hand, and they will look at it more closely while you describe its characteristics.

## Visual aids

The three best visual aids are your spade, the plant you dig with the spade, and the soil in which the plant was growing. You can always get a lot of mileage out of a spade. Use it to show root development, rhizomes, and other underground plant parts. Use it to illustrate differences in soils, depth to soil moisture, or even how much more compact the soil surface is where it is not protected by plants or mulch than where it is protected.

*The three best visual aids are your spade, the plant you dig with the spade, and the soil in which the plant was growing.*

## Natural visual aids

Look for other natural visual aids. You can find at least one in any pasture. Point out the good growth of plants protected by a fallen branch as compared with the same kind of plant exposed to continuous grazing. Such protected plants nearly always stay green much longer into the dry season than closely grazed plants.

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Make a point of this by stating: *This protected plant has been able to grow more and deeper roots than the closely grazed ones. Because of this, it is still using soil moisture that is too deep for the short-rooted plants to reach. The longer the growing period, the more feed it can produce. We can give all our good plants a chance to extend their growth period by resting them often enough to grow adequate root systems.*

A good forage plant growing in the midst of a brush thicket or cactus patch presents a similar opportunity to make a point. You can say, "This plant is sharing its water with the brush (or cactus), but look how much growth it has made. If given a chance, it should do even better without the competition from the brush."

If most of the forage plants are in low vigor or spindly, you can say, "Just visualize what this pasture would look like if all your plants were as large and vigorous as that protected one. It got that way because it was not closely grazed. We can allow all of them to make similar growth."

Look for seedlings, they indicate changes in the plant community. Incipient sheet erosion, pedestalling, plants growing on mounds, and other evidences of soil loss or movement tell a story.

## Plot clipping

Plot clipping is an excellent visual aid because it involves the landowners and gives them something tangible to consider. Weight is most meaningful because landowners sell their calves by the pound, buy feed by the pound or ton, even buy groceries by the pound. They can more readily evaluate production in those terms. Using a 9.6 square foot plot, 10 grams of grass on a plot is the equivalent of 100 pounds per acre. While clipping, we can show them a handful of grass weighing about 10 grams and say, "If we increase production as little as this much on every 9.6 square feet of pasture, it adds up to a total of 100 pounds additional yield per acre. This means a ton on 20 acres, 5 tons on 100 acres, 50 tons on a thousand acres. That is a lot of extra feed."

If a good fence line contrast is available with the same kind of soil on each side of the fence, clip a plot on each side. The contrast in weight is much more impressive than just telling the landowner that production is greater on the well managed side.

## Onsite visual aids

When you illustrate why plants need to rest, the need for flexibility in stocking rate, food storage in plant roots and crowns, or other important points best illustrated by a visual aid on paper, draw them. Don't show the landowners a printed chart or visual aid from your thunderbook. Even a crudely drawn diagram or illustration is better than a canned one because it

seems more personal. They feel as if you are talking about their plans and their land, not something that may have happened elsewhere. Besides, while you are drawing the sketch, you can describe each point as you go along. This gives it continuity and puts the action in the proper sequence. Try it. It works.

## Jargon

Avoid using our technical jargon, or at least define the term before you use it with the landowner. Most people don't know what historical climax plant communities are. So when you are working on rangelands, you can tell them that this is the kind and mixture of plants best adapted to this particular soil and climate, or that this is the kind of plant cover nature intended to grow on this land (or site).

*Avoid using our technical jargon, or at least define the term before you use it with the landowner.*

Don't talk about decreaseers, increaseers, or invaders until you have properly defined them in terms the landowner clearly understands. For example:

*Over the centuries, nature developed the mixture of plants best adapted to this site. Included in the mixture were plants that green up early in the spring, some that do most of their growing during hot weather, and others that grow in late fall and winter. Some of these plants had deep root systems, and others had shallower roots. Some plant could use moisture available at any time of year and from various depths in the soil.*

*Under normal conditions this plant community was relatively stable. Some of these plants are more palatable to a particular kind of livestock than others. When this land was subjected to abusive heavy grazing use, the more palatable plants were heavily grazed and began to decrease in the mixture. We call these plants decreaseers because they are most sensitive to misuse. As the more sensitive plants decreased, they were replaced, at least temporarily by thickened stands of the less palatable plants or those that could better avoid or withstand heavy grazing. We call these plants increaseers because they increase when more sensitive plants go out. When abusive grazing continues long enough, both the decreaseers*

*and part of the increaseers are usually replaced by other plants that do not belong on the site, but which invade. These invaders are most often weedy or non-palatable plants, including brush. Fortunately this process if managed in time can be reversed through proper use, rest periods, and a good prescribed grazing plan. It can often be speeded up by brush management or seeding or by prescribed burning.*

The main point is that you must ensure that the person you are working with understands what you are saying. Any terms that you use which are new to them must be defined in terms that they understand.

## Follow-up

The development of a grazing conservation plan is just the first step in getting conservation on the land. No matter how good the plan may be, landowners do not realize any benefit unless they carry out the provisions of the plan. It is our responsibility to furnish application assistance. We can be justly criticized for rushing landowners and showing them a lot of attention until the plan is developed and then dropping them like a hot potato in the application process.

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It is during the application phase of grazing land management that they truly learn about how to manage an ecosystem that consists of soil, water, air, plants, and animals. If we do not provide assistance in the application of grazing management, many times the effort will be a failure. This failure will cause other ranchers and farmers to not trust us, and our technical expertise will be questioned by the community.

The landowners should be made aware of the availability of technical assistance to help them apply all phases of their plan, especially the grazing management part. We should arrange to follow-up by helping them make periodic checks on their grazing management progress. This should include helping them make use checks,

trend studies, and forage production estimates as well as evaluating the effectiveness of facilitating and speeding-up practices.

The way we go about arranging for follow-up is also important. Again, we are professional conservationists so we do not need to be apologetic. Don't say, "If you have time, I would like to look over your plan with you this fall." It is much better to say, "I think we have done a fine job on your plan, but we don't know how much it is going to rain or how much feed you will grow this summer. Also, your grazing systems may need some adjustments as you get into them. We had better go over the place again about the first of October (or whatever date is appropriate) to see how things are coming along and to determine what adjustments, if any, need to be made in your grazing plan. I will give you a phone call a couple of weeks ahead of time and we can set up a date at that time."

When we have a date to service the plan, get right down to business. Don't tell the grazing land manager we want to check their plan over with them to bring it up to date. Tell them something like, "Let's take a look at your grass to see how it is coming along and if there is anything you can do to make it grow even better." That is why we are out on their place, not just to do the book work on their plan.

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Some landowners need follow-up help more often and for a longer period than others. Don't drop the person from your follow-up list until you are certain they can and will follow a good conservation program, that they are, in fact, conservation farmers or ranchers.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has a good product. It is needed by nearly every landowner. We can be of great help if we communicate. Practice communicating because practice and experience build competence and confidence. Remember, we must be enthusiastic in our work.

*There is no disease as contagious as enthusiasm!*