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National Cattlemen's Association (2)

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* "required information"
Thank you. I am very pleased to welcome you all to Washington, and give particular recognition to the winners of the Third Annual National Cattlemen’s Association Environmental Stewardship Awards. I am also very happy to see some friends from the environmental community here as well.

STEWARDSHIP AWARDS

First of all, of course, I want to congratulate the winners. I am very proud that this year’s national Stewardship Award winner, the Smith Cattle Company, while based in Tribune, Kansas, is also in part a Montana company. The Smith family operates three ranches near Miles City, Montana. For those of you who haven’t had the luck to visit that area, it is truly Big Sky country. When you visit Miles City, you can hear America’s heartland beating.

The Smith operation, and the seven regional Stewardship Award winners, prove on the ground what I’ve been trying to convince people here in Washington. First, good ranch management and good environmental management go hand in hand. The best-run cattle operations, which are frequently the most financially profitable in the long run, are also the ones that take best care of the range.

Second, we do best when we cooperate. When government, environmentalists and ranchers work together, everybody wins. When we fight, everybody loses. The Smith Company’s cooperation with local government and local citizens helped them win this award, and also helps make them a profitable company.

Third, we who write the laws are most successful when we don’t try to tell people exactly how to take care of their own land. We are most successful when we let local groups -- ranchers, local governments, grass-roots environmental organizations, work together to find the solutions that are best for their regions.

The key is local control. That’s where we have often gone wrong in Washington, and as Chairman of the Environment Committee, that is where I want to put us right.
CLEAN WATER ACT

I’ll begin with the legislation that’s been at the top of my own agenda for the past month -- the new Clean Water Act.

As you know, this Clean Water Act will deal with "non-point" or "diffuse" sources of pollution. The present Act deals largely with industrial and municipal "point" sources -- that is, factories and sewer pipes you can see and shut down if necessary. The new Act takes up "non-point" sources -- problems like pesticide runoff, mine tailings, logging siltation and so on. That means it will have a much bigger effect on the West.

Non-point source pollution now causes 90% of Montana’s overall water pollution problem. It makes three quarters of our river miles and 50% of our lake area fall short of Clean Water Act standards. It is a threat to public health, tourism and a strong economy as well as to a clean environment. Like it or not, we have reached the time when we must deal with this issue.

When the prospect of a new Clean Water Act which tackles non-point sources of pollution first arose, the ranching industry had some well-grounded skepticism. Would Washington overregulate? Would Washington work with ranchers? Would we impose unfunded mandates on the states?

These questions were at the heart of my Committee’s work on the new Act. A cooperative Act was our goal, and we used a cooperative process to get there. I held field hearings in Great Falls. I talked with the NCA leadership here and with individual ranchers back home. In all these conversations -- and in talks with local governments, grassroots environmental groups and other interested people -- I found that the key to a good Clean Water Act is local control.

I come from a ranching family. I grew up on a ranch, and I’ve visited a lot of others in Montana and elsewhere. And if there’s one thing I know, it’s that when you visit four different ranches, you find four operations with different needs and different problems. If we tried to write a "one size fits all" Clean Water Act, we’d wind up with an Act that fits nobody.

So I worked with the NCA and other agriculture groups to develop an approach to nonpoint source pollution that works for farmers and ranchers. The bill we reported last week accomplishes this.

It’s targeted, so the only operators who have to take additional steps to control nonpoint pollution are those in watersheds with non-point problems.

It’s site-specific, so that control measures can be developed by ranchers themselves, working with SCS, rather than imposed from on high by some EPA bureaucrat in
Washington.

It’s coordinated with other programs, like the conservation compliance program, so that farmers and ranchers get credit for the work they’ve already done.

In addition, the bill improves the wetlands program, by making clear that haying and grazing are exempt activities and that SCS should take the lead role administering the wetlands program on rangeland.

All in all, the bill reflects a common sense approach that will address non-point water pollution problems in a way that farmers and ranchers can live with, and the Committee’s 14-3 vote in favor of the bill reflects this.

The markup is now complete, and I believe we have a bill that will help ranchers by improving water quality, and will be flexible enough to let states and local government deal with local problems in the most appropriate way for the community. We have worked very hard to keep authority local. Our bill features local watershed planning groups, bringing in landowners, local government and local citizens. State and local government will be involved at all stages of the process. And we focus on incentives to comply rather than on punishment for not complying.

We still have some difficult work ahead. I will want to keep in touch with you on issues like water rights and anti-degradation standards. I imagine that many ranchers will probably have some other concerns. I will take them seriously and my staff will work with you to make sure they are met. But I think it is very clear that, with NCA’s help and input from individual ranchers all over Montana and the West, we have drafted a bill that will make western rural communities cleaner, safer and more prosperous. All of us in the West -- on the ranch, in town, on the farm -- will benefit from it.

FUTURE ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION

We’re also working on new versions of some other environmental laws. We’re doing Superfund, we’re doing the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Water Resources Act. But the one that’s probably of most immediate concern to ranchers is the Endangered Species Act. This is still in the early stages. Senator Chafee and I have introduced an ESA reauthorization bill which has been endorsed by the Western Governors’ Association. In the coming months, I’ll be canvassing Montana, and getting the views of NCA members to find where the draft can be improved. In fact, I’ve already started.

Two weeks ago, back in Montana, I spent a day working on the Foote Ranch, near Ovando. The ranch has a few sheep and draft horses. It also has a stream that is a spawning area for the bull trout, which as some of you know may be listed as an endangered species. The goal of Geoff Foote, the ranchowner, is to step in early and do what needs to be done to prevent a listing. The local Fish and Wildlife Service authorities have helped -- as they
should, not in a punitive way but by offering advice and helping out with the shovels.

It was a sunny day, the water was just above freezing, and we got in a good day’s work. We deepened and narrowed the channel. We planted some willow trees to stop siltation from the banks. We built some deep pools for fish to lie in on sunny days, and moved one part of the channel to avoid contamination from mud and manure. This restores the stream to a more natural state, protects the habitat for the bull trout, and helps Montana ranchers avoid a draconian action in the future.

If efforts like the one at the Foote Ranch succeed, we can prevent a listing of the bull trout. We’ll have stepped in early and made sure the species does not become endangered. And we’ll have prevented a whole lot of regulation, litigation and rancor.

That is how the Endangered Species Act should work. Its goal should be to avoid listings through preventive action based on sound science and economics. It should not be to wait until species are actually endangered and then to step in like Bigfoot. Many of you, as environmental leaders in the ranching industry, will have good advice on how we can make examples like the Ovando Ranch the rule rather than the exception. And as we begin our work on the ESA bill, I’ll be listening hard.

GRAZING FEE DEBATE

Now I’d like to talk a bit about this year’s debate on grazing fees.

The principles of a resolution to this debate are the same as the principles we should bring to the Clean Water Act or the Endangered Species Act. Keeping the process local and working with the people on the land is the only way we can succeed.

Here is the situation as I see it. First of all, grazing fees will go up this year. That’s a sure bet. The questions are how much the fee will rise; what other changes we will see in range management policy; and whether a fee increase is a goal in itself or simply one part of a more constructive policy adopted in cooperation with the industry to improve the quality of the range.

The status quo is not an option. Secretary Babbitt will have a proposal completed within a month, which I hope will form the basis for a final resolution of the issue. If it is to be satisfactory, it must have three basic principles.

-- First, it should promote good stewardship. The goal of any reform proposal must not be simply higher fees. Rather, it should be a better quality range. The reform we adopt this year should not penalize well-run operations. Rather, it should provide incentives to care for our natural resources, and penalties when an occasional bad actor misuses the range.

-- Second, reforms should not impose an undue burden on small operations. Changes
in policy should be incremental, sustainable and not threatening to jobs.

-- Third, it should have broad public support. When it is complete, ranchers who use public lands should be confident that grazing fees and range policy will be stable and not subject to annual threats of radical change.

My own goal -- and if I can be a bit presumptuous, the goal I hope industry will adopt -- is not to stay as close as humanly possible to the status quo. Rather, it is to get a consensus that ends the grazing fee debate for the foreseeable future. The industry has suffered a great deal from the uncertainty that the debate has created, and a consensus from all sides will help make life easier and more predictable for everyone.

I am encouraged that, unlike last year's proposals, this one developed with input from all sides. The state of Colorado brought ranchers together with environmentalists, scientists and even the Secretary of the Interior. They held weekly meetings for two months in a search for common ground and consensus. Their work should be critical to Secretary Babbitt's proposal. And while I haven't seen anything on paper yet, I am optimistic.

I am told that while there will be a significant grazing fee increase, there will also be a 30% discount for ranchers who practice good stewardship, as well as other provisions to improve the range. If what I'm told is correct, it will also be a program which is not too complicated to administer. If the final proposal bears that out, we will have done well.

ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL

Finally, I also want to discuss animal damage control. I did not originally intend to talk about this subject, and I know it is a little bit off the track, but I want to say that stewardship is a responsibility of ranchers, and responsible behavior is a responsibility of government.

Federal Animal Damage Control is now off again, due to a very peculiar decision from the Interior Board of Land Appeals. The Board has agreed to place a stay on all ADC activities on federal land, based on the appeal of a group which claimed that their members suffer "psychological harm" from the loss of coyotes which animal damage control entails.

In sixteen years in the Senate, I do not think I can remember a more irresponsible decision. Any rancher knows there is no shortage of coyotes out there. And that being the case, it is more than a bit strange to find the government more concerned about the psychological well-being of coyote-fanciers than the survival of rural communities. I wrote Secretary Babbitt the day this decision was announced, and I will stay on top of it until it is reversed.
CONCLUSION

In any case, I don’t want to dwell on this subject too long -- or even talk for too long, because we are here to recognize the good work of the Stewardship Award winners.

The winners of this award have set an example not just for ranching but for all of agriculture and industry. They, and NCA members generally, understand that a strong cattle industry and a safe, clean environment go hand in hand. Montana’s blue ribbon streams go together with our blue ribbon cattle. And they always will. If more industries adopted a program like the Stewardship Award, our country would be a lot better off.

Once again, I offer my sincere congratulations to the Award winners. And now I'd like to get your questions and your advice.