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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Speak clearly, please

There are two ways to talk. One, which we shall call “cowboy talk,” involves speaking clearly. We suppose it’s called cowboy talk because most folks, whether they’re repairing a fence or doing anything else, don’t have a lot of time for extra chatter. They say what needs to be said and shut up.

Another way to talk is what the late comedian George Carlin described as “when people try to sound smart.”

“People add extra words when they want things to sound more important than they really are,” Carlin said in a routine some years ago. He mentioned television weather forecasters, who talk about “rain events” when they really mean “rain,” and news anchors who talk about “emergency situations” when they mean “emergencies.”

What brings this to mind was some extra-smart communications we recently received from a USDA

spokesman, who tried to explain why the agency chronically missed its deadlines for reports on the dairy checkoff.

This communication would cause Carlin — or almost anyone who speaks English — to do back flips.

As reported by Capital Press reporter Carol Ryan Dumas, the USDA spokesman said the delayed release of the annual reports represents a multi-year effort by USDA and independent evaluators “to develop a more reflective illustration of the programs’ changing strategic direction from traditional dairy and milk promotion activities.”

“Modifications to the econometric modeling, novel simulations developed by the independent evaluation team, and securing the necessary data for these impact analyses posed significant challenges,” the spokesman emailed. “Those challenges further set in motion a series of year-over-year delays but were essential to ensure adequate

economic evaluation of the Dairy and Fluid Milk Promotion Programs.”

Uh-huh.

We will translate: “We changed the way we analyzed the checkoff and things got out of hand, causing the reports to be delayed.”

That the reports were late is one thing, but to wrap techno-babble around the explanation is another. Our suspicion is the speaker — or, more likely, the speaker’s boss — wanted to paper over the problem with a high-falutin explanation.

The problem is the checkoff collects about \$400 million a year from dairy farmers and importers. They have a right to know where every penny of that goes and how it benefits the industry.

Clear communication is important. Speaking and writing clearly is something everyone needs to do, even the USDA.

It leads to accountability, and to trust.

Don’t jump to conclusions about sage grouse-cattle study

By **GEORGE WUERTHNER**
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
George Wuerthner



The headline in a recent Capital Press article proclaims that “Preliminary data shows cattle, sage grouse can coexist.”

The article then goes on to quote various researchers who are at the beginning of a 10-year study. According to the article, grazing allotments were grazed according to traditional patterns for two years, then the third year, grazing on at least one study plot was terminated. Other pastures alternated between spring grazing and resting in even and odd years or were grazed during both the spring and fall before resting.

University of Idaho professor Courtney Conway, one of the researchers, then suggested that “Compared to pastures that were rested that spring, we aren’t seeing a difference in sage grouse nesting success in (grazed pastures).

However, Conway does suggest tall grasses improve chick survival.

Karen Launchbaugh, director of UI’s Rangeland Center, admits it’s too early to draw solid conclusions from the study, but says at least she is pleased there have been no “big red flags” suggesting cattle and sage grouse can’t coexist.

The problem with the entire happy talk is that the study is only in the early stages of its research. Basically, they have one year without grazing and other management measures, and to suggest after such a limited time period that “cattle, sage grouse can co-exists” is pushing the limits of credibility. So many variables can affect sage grouse from year to year. It’s the long-term trends that are important.

One could just as easily proclaim “study can’t say whether cattle and sage grouse co-exist” and it would be just as accurate, in fact, from a scientific perspective, more accurate.

However, that wouldn’t

get points with ranchers, the Public Lands Council, Idaho Cattlemen’s Association and the other agencies funding the project.

Furthermore, the title misrepresents what is known about livestock grazing impacts on sage grouse. Cattle impact sage grouse in multiple ways throughout their lifecycle. You can’t just look at one factor and proclaim cattle and sage grouse can co-exist.

Grouse collide with fences and suffer high mortality as a result. Grouse get West Nile virus from mosquitoes that breed in cattle water troughs. Cattle compact and degrade wetlands and riparian areas that are critical feeding areas to young grouse. Cattle remove hiding cover for nesting hens, and of course, expose both chicks and adults to predators. Cattle, by trampling biocrusts, facilitate the establishment of cheatgrass, a highly flammable grass that is burning away sage habitat.

Even the hay fields so common around the West are a problem for grouse. First, in most cases, native vegetation was removed to create grassy open pastures and field, removing a significant amount of grouse habitat. Furthermore, the hay fields fragment grouse habitat. As poor fliers, they are reluctant to cross open fields without cover.

In short, happy talk that cattle and sage grouse can co-exist is deceptive at best, and just another example of how range departments seek to promote private livestock interests over the public’s desire to see its wildlife flourish.

George Wuerthner is a former Bureau of Land Management biologist, author of 38 books and helped to write the original petition for sage grouse listing. He lives in Bend, Ore.

OUR VIEW



Meridian, Idaho, dairyman Clint Jackson with one of his Jersey cows, Josie, who helped him deliver pizzas in the Eagle area Oct. 6. United Dairywomen of Idaho and Dairy West used the event as a way to connect with consumers by bringing the farm to them. Courtesy of Greg Kreller

Dairies deliver better understanding to public

The concept of “telling agriculture’s story” is easy to say but hard to do.

Two recent examples from the dairy industry demonstrate that it can be done, and with a style — advertising experts call it “sizzle” — that promises to leave a lasting impression.

Our favorite example involved the decidedly non-sizzle-producing act of delivering pizzas. The folks at the Dairy Farmers of Idaho and Dairy West teamed up with Smoky Mountain Pizza to deliver their pizzas to customers in Eagle, Idaho, a suburb of Boise.

Here’s where the sizzle comes in: They also brought along a dairy farmer, Clint Jackson, and one of his cows, Josie.

Anyone who has ever been around Jersey cows knows how irresistible they are. When Josie and Jackson showed up at the door delivering pizzas they made a huge hit, not only with the customers but with the entire neighborhood, many of whom

received free pizzas.

Suddenly, dairy became a topic of conversation around the neighborhood and at work.

When you can get people to talk about dairy — especially if it’s good — you’ve won the game.

Add that to another effort in Washington state, in which dairy farmers invite members of the public to ask them questions during a live Facebook video chat.

The Dairy Farmers of Washington are sponsoring a series of four such chats, during which farmers do what they do best: explain in plain talk what they do and why.

The Sept. 19 conversation was with Jason VanderKooy of Skagit County, the Oct. 12 conversation was with Jason Sheehan of J&K Dairy in Sunnyside. Other episodes featured Bill Wavrin of Sunny Dene Ranch near Mabton, Wash., and Rich Appel of Ferndale, Wash.

The questions ranged from water use to how many times a day cows are milked to why calves are

separated from their mothers. Seattle food writer Ashley Rodriguez was the host and read questions that came in from viewers.

An interesting thing happened, too. Many of the questioners and commenters were not from Washington. They were from Los Angeles, Florida, Canada and as far away as the United Kingdom. They appeared to be part of an effort to push an animal rights agenda, but their leading questions were met with logical and conciliatory answers.

It’s probably not what the animal rights folks wanted, but it was interesting to see actual farmers take on more than powder puff questions.

They did well, and showed thoughtfulness in their answers that would lead a fair-minded person to conclude they know their science and the logic behind how dairy farmers operate.

It might not have been as much fun as handing out pizzas, but it was an equally effective way of bringing the farm to the public.

Readers’ views

U of I range students misguided?

The “positive” Capital Press article not after 4 years of study and \$2 million draw any solid conclusions, but could produce a nice headline and photograph. This is the education being provided University of Idaho grad stu-

dents. Capital Press article is headlined, “Preliminary data show cattle, sage grouse can coexist.”

Karen Launchbaugh’s group (UI’s Rangeland Center), working with the Idaho Cattlemen’s Association and \$500,000 a year can make sure the right headline is released even if after 4 years and \$2 million “it’s too early to draw solid conclusions from the study.”

With 6 more years and \$3 million more, will their results and education be enhanced? When the UI’s Rangeland Center “studied” the Asotin Wildlife Area and Wild Steelhead Refuge “pilot grazing” project in Washington the WDFW was taken to court. After 4 years “study” and obtaining about \$2 million the judge saw only negative effects on fish and wildlife

habitat ... and closed it down.

These students may be learning how to take home money rather than determining environmental interactions. Is this the lesson Idaho residents want their University to teach: faculty and students “at the trough”?

*Don Johnson
Retired biology professor
and fisheries scientist
American Falls, Idaho*

Affordable fuel critical for agriculture

By **MIKE LAPLANT**
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Mike LaPlant



Many farms are rapidly moving toward green technologies and fuel efficiency. Yet to make that transition, we need access to affordable diesel and gas to make those green investments.

Yes, you heard that right. We need access to affordable fossil fuels to ultimately become greener farmers.

That’s because we still need energy to grow our crops, power our equipment, and ship our products — that’s just a fact. Energy accounts for nearly 30 percent of intermediate production costs on Washington farms, and when inputs rise, farms have less to spend on new technology. And it’s not just direct fuel costs that affect our available capital. Fertilizers that are key to crops also fluctuate with the cost of oil. In fact, fuel costs can be traced up and down the supply chain so even little increases can be magnified across inputs.

In times of lower input costs, farmers can invest in creating sustainable energy solutions that are also good for their business. Many Farm Bureau members are cutting costs and drastically reducing their energy bills by investing in the latest produce storage systems, some of which are controlled by computers. These systems keep

their products fresh for market and efficiently use electricity, which lowers their overall input costs and emissions.

These are significant capital investments. All investments are risky but that risk can be mitigated when market conditions are stable and input costs, principally fuel, are affordable.

The Washington State Legislature and other states are considering policies next year like cap and trade and carbon taxes that, while well-intended, will ultimately lead to increased fuel costs. As stewards of the land, farmers agree that we must protect our environment so we can produce good, healthy food. Yet policymakers must consider the unintended consequences of such policies that increase fuel costs for farmers and prevent investment in innovative technologies that may ultimately bring down emissions in the long run.

To learn more and get involved on these issues, I encourage all farmers to visit www.affordablefuelwashington.com to get engaged and help keep fuel prices in Washington affordable and predictable.

Mike LaPlant is president of the Washington State Farm Bureau.