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Multiple Use Decision Making on Public Lands



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Multiple Use Decision Making
on Public Lands

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Multiple Use Decision Making on Public Lands

What is multiple use decision making? Why has Congress directed federal land management agencies (the U.S. Forest Service and the BLM) to make multiple use decisions? Why is it important for you to understand the meaning of the term "multiple use" and how it is applied in managing the public lands? Answers to these questions must be sought from several quarters: historical patterns of land use throughout the West, the economic rationale underlying the concept of multiple use, national legislation, and interpretations of Congressional directives by land management agencies and citizens' groups.

Land use history

As Americans moved west, lands with the greatest natural productivity tended to be settled first. The richest mineralized areas, the easily accessible timberlands, and the more productive grasslands were claimed eagerly by early settlers. In addition to being naturally more productive, these first claimed lands were usually located along major transportation routes. Vast areas of somewhat less productive rangeland and forestland far removed from population centers remained in public ownership. Over time, a viable social and economic system developed throughout the "interior west," which was heavily dependent upon the use of public resources by private citizens. The important point is that this social and economic system, characterized by rangeland cow-calf operations, small saw mills, and widely scattered rural communities, remains largely in effect today. Because of the close ties between the well-being of private citizens and the use of public resources, the land use decisions made by federal land management agencies have a major influence on the stability of rural communities throughout the West.

Economic rationale

For people who live and work in these scattered rural communities, using the public lands to produce a variety of goods and services makes good economic sense. If the land were used only to produce timber, for example, a viable local economy would be difficult to sustain for any length of time. Local economic conditions would be highly dependent on the national demand for timber, and the seasonal fluctuations of timber production activities would cause serious problems for local residents. Similar problems probably would result if the

public lands were devoted entirely to producing grass. From the local perspective, relying on the recreation industry to support the whole economy is also risky (witness the reduction of "driving vacations" due to the gasoline crunch) and this suggests that the public lands should not be devoted solely to wildlife habitat and watersheds.

Given the high degree of economic dependence of local residents on surrounding public lands, and considering the problems (for local residents) inherent in "exclusive-use management," the economic rationale for multiple use management becomes clear. Whenever and wherever the public lands can support the production of timber, forage, and fish and wildlife, then it is in the economic interest of local residents to manage these resources simultaneously for their many uses. A multiple use management approach on public lands can sustain local timber, ranching, and outdoor recreation industries, and support a stable, resource-based economy. In fact, managing for all major resources and resource uses can result not only in higher and more stable levels of economic output, but also in improved biological condition of the resource base.

National legislation

In 1960, Congress passed the Multiple Use, Sustained Yield Act. This Act is often cited in later legislation that established the current management framework for public lands under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Multiple use is defined in this Act as:

"the management of all the various renewable surface resources...so that they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people; making the most judicious use of the land for some or all of these resources or related services over areas large enough to provide sufficient latitude for periodic adjustments in use to conform to changing needs and conditions; that some land will be used for less than all of the resources; and harmonious and coordinated management of the various resources, each with the other, without impairment of the productivity of the land, with consideration being given to the relative values of the various resources, and not necessarily the combination of uses that will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output."

Implied in this definition is the recognition by Congress that public needs change over time, and that federal-land management agencies must have the ability to make adjustments in the outputs of each resource according to changes in demand and changes in relative values. One thing is clear, however: multiple use does not mean all uses on every acre of public land.

Alternative interpretations

Conflicts in multiple use decision making tend to arise as much from differences in interpretation of the legislative definition of multiple use as from real (physical, biological) land use conflicts. The Forest Service, for example, was originally established to manage timber, but as the values of other resources found in and on forestlands have increased, management decisions no longer reflect only timber production objectives. National forestlands are now managed for forage production, big game, energy production and other uses. Timber is still central to the management decisions made, however, primarily because of its high unit value.

Conservation groups have been critical of this "timber first" orientation, stating that timber production is too central to Forest Service decision making, to the detriment of other resource values. Instead, these groups point to those parts of the multiple use definition that state "...that some land will be used for less than all of the resources; ...and not necessarily the combination of uses that will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output". In other words, multiple use management of public resources requires that the aesthetic and spiritual values of unspoiled open space, or wilderness, or wildlife be somehow weighed against monetary costs and benefits of alternative management proposals.

The Bureau of Land Management, too, is directed to manage its lands for multiple uses. But many activities on Bureau lands are not compatible with other uses. Strip mining, for example, is a single use, at least temporarily. Off-road vehicle use, especially severe in the California desert, has left the land scarred and has drastically lowered the productive capacity of the area. Dealing with these kinds of problems under a multiple use mandate is difficult, if for no other reason than everyone has a different definition of the term "multiple use." All too often, when people say "multiple use," they mean "my use, and any others that don't cause me problems."

The critical thing to keep in mind is that multiple use is not an activity, nor even a set of compatible activities. Multiple use is a philosophical approach to managing the land and all its resources. It is a management framework within which all the various relationships among and between natural resources must be considered, and within which the impacts of man's activities must be carefully evaluated. Multiple use management implies "the greatest good for the greatest number," but it also implies the "greatest good" for the resources so managed.