Rangeland Assessment and Monitoring Committee

Meeting Notes (Corrected)

January 29, 2017

SRM Annual Meeting

St. George, Utah

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Lamar Smith at 8:00 am.

Members and participants introduced themselves; 30 people signed the roster.

Old Business

The technical paper, developed by the RAM committee as a result of discussions at the Corpus Christi meeting, entitled “Does Size Matter? Animal Units and AUMs” has been accepted for publication in Rangelands. The final proofs were submitted in early January 2017. The Public Affairs Committee wants to use it as the basis for one of a series of one page “fact sheets” for public distribution but have not yet done so.

New Business

**Conference call** with BOD and SRM officers, January 19, 2017. The BOD wanted each committee to consider whether the mission of the committee was still relevant and its handbook current, along with other housekeeping items. Notes on this conference call were emailed to RAM committee on January 20. The consensus of the committee at this meeting was that RAM has an important role to fill and the handbook does not require any substantive change.

**Interpreting and Measuring Indicators of Rangeland Health** – Mike Pellant reported that that Version 5 of this document would be out for review about April and requested that RAM review and comment on it. Mike passed out a schedule of training classes that will be held using the new version from April to June. The changes from version 4 are relatively minor and mainly consist of fleshing out the portions on reference sheets. Mike, Dave Pyke, and Dave Toledo are members of the RAM committee involved in this revision and they will get revised copies to the committee.

**Utilization –**

Sherm Karl made a short presentation in which he outlined his view that Interagency Technical Reference 1734-3 Utilization Studies and Residual Measurements needs to be revised and solicited involvement of RAM in that process. Some of the problems that need attention were:

1. The existing publication describes techniques but does not adequately address where the techniques are useful either in terms of vegetation or purpose of measurement, which sometimes results in selection of inappropriate methods.
2. People in agencies, consultants, and other interest groups often make modification to the methods in ways that produce results that are either incorrect or different from the methods as described in 1734-3, resulting in confusion and disagreements. Explanations of inappropriate modification needs to be included.
3. There is some additional scientific information on utilization that needs to be incorporated.

Discussion – some of the points and conclusions resulting are as follows:

1. RAM was supportive of the idea of revising and updating the publication. It was pointed out that problems surrounding the use of utilization derive from two sources – failure to use the appropriate technique and protocol (including sample size) and improper use of the resulting data for management decisions and guidance. Revision of 1734 would address the first issue.
2. How would this be done? It was pointed out that this project would require substantial dedication of time by people with understanding and experience in measuring utilization. Sherm indicated that he envisioned the BLM, FS, NRCS and Cooperative Extension personnel doing the work, but including as authors who are volunteers from RAM that were interested and had expertise. And that RAM may want to review the work.
3. The question was raised whether SRM would be listed as “endorsing” the revision. There seemed to be support for that provided the committee was in agreement with the revisions and authorized by the BOD.
4. It was suggested that the revised reference be made available in a format that can be put on cell phones since that would be format most likely to be used by many people.

Needed Action:

 This project will depend on getting the cooperation and support from the agencies that collaborated on the original version of Tech Ref 1734-3, i.e. BLM, FS, NRCS, and Cooperative Extension. To that end, RAM will do the following:

1. Write a memo to the SRM Board of Directors describing the project and its importance and asking them to support it when they make contact with agencies in Washington, D.C.
2. Ask the agency representatives on the RAM committee to support the concept to the appropriate people in their agency.
3. Send a letter to the Extension Director in each of the western states explaining the need for this revision and asking for their support.
4. When the appropriate approvals and support for this project are secured, RAM will participate in the revision either by involvement of volunteers on the committee and/or reviewing and commenting on draft versions.
5. The issue of whether SRM’s logo and approval should appear on the document will be deliberated as this project progresses.

More on Utilization

 Lamar Smith pointed out that, in spite of numerous publications, and reports (and a position statement by SRM) by reputable range scientists, including representatives of the federal agencies to the contrary, some agencies continue to misuse utilization guidelines by writing rigid standards into management plans and directives. This basically sets utilization as a management objective, not as a tool to be used in adaptive management as intended. There was considerable discussion of this issue. Some agency representatives present expressed the opinion that the main problem was not with the range professionals in the agencies, but with people from other disciplines in their agency that lack understanding of what utilization is and what it should be used for that results in its misuse. This misuse is often done over the objections of the range professionals. It also appears that the problem is more pronounced in some administrative units than others. The consensus seemed to be that, for the most part, we are “preaching to the choir”. The range professionals, for the most part are not the problem. We need to educate other disciplines about utilization and appropriate use. No plan of action was defined in this regard, however it does relate to the training and continuing education needs discussed in the meeting with the CPRM committee. Therefore, this issue will continue to be considered during the coming year and a plan developed.

**Data** Quality

Data quality was raised as an issue at the 2016 meeting and the possible need for some kind of certification of data collectors and/or interpreters was briefly discussed there. Over the year, dialogue with the CPRM committee was established and a joint meeting agreed upon. At 10:00 a. m. the CPRM committee joined in the meeting with the RAM committee to discuss this issue.

Lamar Smith briefly outlined data quality issues from RAM’s perspective as follows:

1. Lack of adequate training in monitoring protocols, including plant id, for data collection.
2. Inadequate technical background and experience in the design of monitoring systems, selecting methods appropriate to management objectives, selection of time and place of data collection, and interpretation of data as a basis for management decisions.
3. These problems exist both within the agencies and consultants or other outside groups that may be collecting data.

Jeff Prinz, Chairman of CPRM, described the certification requirements and also the certification programs of some other professional groups. This was followed by discussion among the members of the two committees. These discussions highlighted many aspects of the problem – and revealed that it is a multi-faceted issue deriving from a number of sources which do not have one simple solution. Among the points raised were:

1. The CPRM certification has not had support within the agencies and there is little incentive or recognition for certification. The exception is that sometimes a CPRM is given more consideration for employment, advancement, or approval to attend meetings, etc. than a noncertified person. But there has been no requirement for CPRM involvement in development and/or review of management plans, monitoring plans, etc.
2. There is a difference in the amount of technical background and experience needed for data collection (which involves following a prescribed protocol) compared to that needed for qualitative assessments (e.g. range health), design of appropriate monitoring systems, and the interpretation of data for management (which generally requires education and experience equivalent to the CPRM with special emphasis on range assessment).
3. The existing CPRM program of SRM is a general certification that does not certify competence in any specialized subject matter. Certified people do have the opportunity to indicate their areas of expertise when making or renewing applications for certification – and the code of ethics requires that CPRMs not misrepresent their area of competence. It is probably not practical for SRM to have a more complex form of certification involving various subfields, e.g. monitoring, targeted grazing, etc , or a multi-level certification, e.g. technical vs professional levels. It was suggested that CPRM could require that at least a portion of the CEU credits be in the subject matter area indicated by the person certified, and this was considered possible with development of the new data base.
4. Judith Dyess mentioned that the existing range conservationist (454) requirements basically meet the CPRM standards (except the test and experience requirements). However, it has become increasingly difficult to evaluate people properly due to changes in majors and course descriptions in the universities, and lack of proper evaluation of course by those making the ratings, e.g. they may not allow a course if “range” is not in the title. There is an SRM group led by Diana Crider looking into redefining the requirements for the 454 rating and other topics.
5. There is a need for more training for both professional level range managers and for “technicians” or seasonal employees involved in data collection. These needs extend to contractors, consultants, ranchers, and other interested parties. Although the agencies, universities and SRM have provided this type of training and education in the past, there is a continuing and, apparently, increasing need for it. This need is perhaps greater than in the past because range graduates seem to be getting less grounding in the fundamentals of range management than in the past, and the agencies are employing a much wider range of people with different educational and experience backgrounds who lack these fundamentals.
6. Alan Bass suggested that SRM (through RAM) encourage SRM sections to work with the cooperative extension and the agencies to sponsor such training in each state. It was also suggested that RAM could work with the sections, universities, and agencies to put together a framework for the kind of knowledge and skills required to collect and interpret range monitoring and assessment data. Some of these training resources are already available online, e.g. Global Rangelands has a number of videos, powerpoints, etc on these topics which can be downloaded and modified to suit specific needs. This training should be extended to include all members of interdisciplinary teams, because members with insufficient understanding of range management principles by the leader or majority of such teams may nullify the input of range professionals.
7. Lack of qualified range professionals in some of the agencies seems to be a contributor to the data quality issue. Administrators often assign monitoring and assessment to people lacking proper qualifications due to lack of qualified range professionals (and in some cases, perhaps, due to distrust among various professional personnel). This lack also leads to increasing use of outside contractors (people from another agency or office, or private contractors) to do assessment and monitoring rather than the local rangeland specialist. Use of contractors is not necessarily bad as long as their competence and local knowledge is assured, but it can lead to lack of personal involvement of local agency personnel with the land and people they are administering. SRM should emphasize the need for qualified range professionals in their contacts with agency heads, and should also work with interest groups such as the Public Lands Council, Farm Bureau, National Association of Conservation Districts, etc. to press for more qualified people.

Action Plan:

1. RAM will work with the BOD to support and promote the CPRM program, especially in the federal agencies. With BOD approval, RAM will also reach out to interest groups to inform them of the need for data quality control and how they can help bring that about.
2. RAM will consider putting together an outline of required knowledge and expertise for collection and interpretation of monitoring and assessment data as a guide for training and continuing education for the agencies, universities, SRM sections or others.
3. RAM will maintain contact with the SRM committee that is evaluating the 454 requirements to see that monitoring and assessment is duly considered.
4. CPRM will consider feasibility of requiring CEUs in specific areas of expertise for CPRMs.

Meeting was adjourned at noon.