

Future Plans and Milestones for the Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable

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Introduction

The primary objective of the Sustainable Rangelands Roundtable (SRR) is to create a suite of criteria and indicators (C&I) that will provide a framework for national assessments of rangelands and rangeland use and that will be acceptable to a broad cross-section of agencies and organizations interested in rangelands. SRR has met five times, starting in April 2001. As shown in the papers of this symposium, the SRR has accomplished a great deal in a short time, but there is much to be accomplished in order to meet our primary objective.

Future Meetings

We presently have four meetings planned for 2002 and have tentatively scheduled three more in 2003. The next several meetings will be reviewing and critiquing the strengths and weaknesses of the indicators and critiquing their relevance to sustainability of rangelands. SRR will meet March 26 and 27 in Denver, Colorado. Our objectives for this meeting are: 1) to initiate a rotating criterion group review and critique of draft indicator sets, 2) to review the indicator framework to discuss its utility and to make modifications, and 3) to identify potential external reviewers for indicator sets. Additionally, the SRR Soil and Water Resources Criterion Group will meet with its counterpart from the Sustainable Minerals and Energy Roundtable.

SRR is scheduled to meet May 29 and 30 in Washington, D.C. and July 30 and 31 in Billings, Montana. At both of these meetings, criterion groups will review indicator sets, discuss and refine those indicators, and finalize the lists of reviewers. In October, SRR will meet in San Diego and finalize the indicator lists. These meetings will be in the expansion and contraction phase, which Romero describes as a period when candidate indicators are added for consideration and sorting of indicators occurs. Sorting of indicators will identify a core group of strong indicators meaningful to a large population and a narrower set of indicators that are useful to more specific interests.

The meetings in 2003 are tentatively scheduled for Florida, Albuquerque, and Washington, D.C. in

January, March and May, respectively. These meetings will primarily be focused on drafting and revising the SRR report. The Washington, D.C. meeting will be a joint meeting with other roundtables to review the entire natural resource sustainability effort.

Overlaps and Gaps

One of the concerns evolving in SRR is that multiple criterion groups have identified the same indicator or similar indicators. In the same vein, the SRR also wants to ensure that all important indicators are identified. This symposium and its proceedings serve as a mechanism to initiate the review of indicator efforts by all criterion groups. In fact, as individual authors prepared manuscripts for these proceedings, they noticed some indicators that had been identified by more than one criterion groups. Some of these indicators, although outwardly similar, were defined in a different context. At the Denver meeting in March, we will start a formal process for review and critique through a rotating procedure of all the criterion groups. This review process will be repeated at future SRR meetings.

Other Roundtables

The SRR invited the leadership of other natural resource roundtables to meet in conjunction with the last SRR meeting in Tucson. The purpose of this meeting was to initiate a forum for collaboration on shared issues and coordination of common tasks. The co-chairs of the Roundtable on Sustainable Forests (RSF) and Sustainable Minerals and Energy Roundtable joined us for a productive discussion on the importance of communication between the various roundtables. An informal organization has been formed, called the Sustainable Natural Resources Roundtable Coordination Network (SNRRCN). SNRRCN will provide an opportunity for more efficient progress, while minimizing conceptual and implementation inconsistencies.

Issues

Numerous issues remain to be resolved during the next few meetings. Included in these issues are

the question of scale, a preliminary definition of rangeland in relation to one for forests, the protocol for evaluating indicators, and protocols for identifying data sets, their usefulness, and addressing whether an indicator actually relates to changes in rangeland sustainability. All criterion groups have been asking relevant questions related to scale, and our Scale Working Group will report on the scale issue at Denver.

Some ecosystems are considered as rangeland and forests, depending upon the classification system. For example, the pinyon-juniper woodlands and the oak woodlands have been classified as both. SRR has a Definition Working Group developing a strategy to resolve this issue, and the issue is being addressed by SNRRCN. We want to insure that, regardless of how an area is classified, data are recorded on all of the relevant indicators.

The SRR has addressed the question of how to classify indicators with respect to their strengths, weaknesses, and relevance to sustainability. Again, we are working through the roundtable network to learn from the forest and minerals efforts so that we can gain efficiency in developing the protocol for evaluating indicators.

Finally, the Socio-Economic Criterion Group raised a very relevant issue. Even if an identified indicator can be measured, does the indicator, and particularly changes of the indicator, relate to rangeland sustainability? Several SRR participants are developing research proposals to address this question.

Outreach

The SRR Outreach Working Group has been vital to addressing outreach questions and strategies, as has the SRR Steering Committee. This symposium is one result of their efforts. Our purpose here is to provide the range profession information on what SRR is, what it is not, what it has done, and the current status of social, economic, and ecological indicators of rangeland sustainability. A larger task of how to inform all rangeland sustainability stakeholders about SRR efforts still remains. We will continue to produce white papers and press releases, as salient information becomes available. We will also continue to speak to groups on rangeland sustainability and to host workshops or symposia where the opportunity arises.

The Ecological Society of America (ESA) has accepted a proposal to hold a working symposium at their 87th annual meeting to be held next summer in Tucson. The workshop will be held Sunday afternoon, August 4, 2002. Its purpose is to gain feedback from ESA members on the indicators that SRR has developed applying three criteria: 1) soil and water resources conservation, 2) ecological health and diversity, and 3) productive capacity of rangelands.

Reports

A report on Criteria and Indicators for Rangeland Sustainability, to be drafted this year and completed in 2003, will be the summation of our current work. This report will document the status of the indicators and relevance of each to monitoring and assessing rangeland sustainability. The SRR report will be comparable to the First Approximation Report of the RSF, published in 1997 (see < www.fs.fed.us/global/pub/links/report/candi.htm>) and will be useful to all natural resource agencies responsible for assessing rangelands. The SRR first approximation report will very likely form the basis for the 2005 Assessment update required of USDA Forest Service by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974.

Final Thoughts

Let us first make the bold assumption that SRR will be successful in creating a suite of C&I that will be acceptable to a broad range of agencies and organizations. There will still be the need for land management agencies to have adequate resources to commit their agencies to long-term monitoring programs that adequately assess the C&I recommended by SRR. Unfortunately, we cannot predict when or how that might occur.

This uncertainty about the final outcome of the SRR's efforts may affect some of our efforts, but generally this reflects the adventure in which we are involved. Even though we have been able to benefit from the lessons and work of the RSF, we have seen the C&I of the SRR develop in an independent fashion. Thus, we do not know what the final report will contain at this point in time. The uncertainty and developing nature of SRR's efforts emphasize a statement of Phil Janik, co-chair of the RSF, "Sustainability is not a destination, but a journey; no deadlines are set, but work progresses towards a goal over time."