

Riparian Notes

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Simple, Neat, and Wrong

“For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat and wrong”

H. L. Menken, 1880 – 1956

Mr. Menken must have been astute observer of human nature. No doubt he had experienced the frustration and futility of addressing complex problems with simple solutions. The truth he describes applies to many aspects of life; it applies especially well to natural resource problems.

Too often, we view natural resource problems as simple cause and effect. We fail to acknowledge or understand the complexity of ecological relationships. We tend to look at the surface and fail to dig out and examine the roots. Complex relationships do not usually respond favorably to simple solutions.

For example, we go full blast into the eradication of salt cedar and call it “ecosystem restoration”. We fail to understand why the salt cedar invaded in the first place and we fail to look ahead at the chain of events that might happen when it is removed. Will other more desirable plants fill the void naturally? Will appropriate native species be used in proven re-vegetation techniques? Were funds set aside for re-vegetation? Will the banks and riparian areas remain barren and subject to extreme erosion? Will the control efforts be maintained and the results monitored? Is the cure as bad as the disease?

We invest millions of dollars to control brush on uplands and call it “watershed restoration”. The intent is to increase the quantity of water in creeks and aquifers. Are we addressing a problem or a symptom? Are we addressing or ignoring the importance of grazing management? Are there provisions in place to insure that the brush will not re-encroach to previous densities? Is there scientifically valid data to show that the desired water response will occur? Do we consider the impact of the project on land values and wildlife habitat?

We have all seen other short term, simple solutions applied in hopes of solving complex range and wildlife problems in Texas and other places. Plant miracle grasses such as exotic bluestems, buffelgrass, bermudagrass, fescue or Lehman lovegrass to improve grass production or re-vegetate bare areas. Initiate intensive wagon-wheel grazing techniques to magically restore depleted ranges. Kill spike bucks to improve deer genetics. Provide supplemental feed to enhance deer nutrition and grow large antlers. Release pen raised quail to augment low natural populations. Kill predators. Introduce exotic ungulates for increased diversification. Etc, etc, etc.

Some of these techniques and practices have legitimate uses and benefits in certain situations as part of a carefully planned, comprehensive land management program. None of them will solve the intended problem adequately when used alone or without careful consideration of the long term side effects.

When we hear of simple solutions being promoted to address complex natural resource issues, our best advice is to urge the promoters to slow down and back up. Urge them to take a good deep look at the situation from multiple viewpoints, long term perspectives with a wide angle lens. That will be difficult and unpopular advice; but remember this:

**The law of unintended consequences kicks in when the rule of simple solutions is applied.
That law kicks long and kicks hard.**