

The Consensus Process
By Rex Cleary, President, Society for Range Management

The second in the series of success stories from the Modoc-Washoe Experimental Stewardship Program, working to resolve conflicts and improve the rangelands in northeastern California and northwestern Nevada.

Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) is referred to as the Stewardship Program in this article.

The "Consensus Process" is viewed by some as the unique ingredient in the Modoc/Washoe Experimental Stewardship Program that has made it so successful. The Program was "born in conflict." Rex Cleary, BLM District Manager, told the Steering Committee at their first meeting he was tired of conflict and hoped that the Stewardship Program could solve some of those problems. In a portion of an article appearing in the August 1984 issue of RANGELANDS Magazine, Mr. Cleary explains how the Consensus Process played a key role in the Stewardship Success Story:

Consensus

"We agreed at our first Steering Committee Meeting to take the ultimate risk in a negotiation setting. We agreed that all decisions or actions of the Committee would be reached by consensus. For us, it means that all decisions, recommendations, and actions taken by the Committee would be by unanimous agreement. Any issue not receiving unanimous resolution would be sent back to the working committee for further study or would be tabled. We extended this operating rule to all levels. No level of the structure can pass a recommendation on to the next level without unanimous agreement.

"I emphasize this because I feel the consensus rule has been particularly instrumental in the success story. Yet, the concept of operating by consensus is controversial itself. The concept is frightening to some. Everyone was at least apprehensive at the outset. But, the longer it has been used, the greater is the confidence and trust in the process. I have been on the road telling the Stewardship Story to a number of groups and organizations. Without fail, the notion of operating by consensus has generated the greatest reservation in all I have talked to.

"William Ouchi, in his book on Japanese Corporate Management, Theory 2, states: 'American managers are fond of chiding the Japanese by observing that if you're going to Japan to make a sale or close a deal, and you think it will take 2 days, allow 2 weeks and if you're lucky you'll get a "maybe". The Japanese business people who have experience dealing in the United States will often say Americans are quick to sign a contract or make a decision. But, try to get them to implement it, it takes them forever!'"

"I see a parallel in our process. We have, and still do, take a lot of time, worrisome time to some, in taking our actions. But, the implementation is happening easily!"

The Modoc-Washoe Stewardship Committee is one of three such committees mandated by Congress to explore new ways to improve the public rangelands. For information, write ESP, P.O. Box 1090, Susanville, CA 96130.