

► Background, from left: The tall enclosure denies access to all large ungulates while giving access to small mammals like rabbits. The short enclosure denies access to cattle, but allows game animals access. This fence had been on the ground until July of the current grazing season. Foreground: Range was grazed during the hot season of the current grazing season.



Finding the Fit: Cattle and the Forest Service

Hoping to establish trust and communication between ranchers and Forest Service, Idaho Farm Bureau organizes a cattle allotment range tour.

by **Paige Nelson**, field editor

The majority of the pickups weren't fancy. The mud on the fenders and the brush scratches in the paint proved they had been out to check the cows a time or two. The stock trailers behind them were well-used and familiar with heavy loads. Felt cowboy hats, wild rags and leather gloves adorned the majority of the drivers as they parked near a stock tank to unload their four-wheelers.

Amongst the rancher traffic, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) personnel for the Salmon-Challis National Forest Service arrived, as well. Dressed in their well-known deep-green apparel, they too began unloading four-

wheelers, putting on name tags and shaking a few gloved hands.

Some state legislators and even the regional director for U.S. Congressman Mike Simpson were in attendance at the Oct. 3, 2014, Lemhi and Custer County Farm Bureau Range Tour of the Pahsimeroi Allotment.

The meeting had been organized in response to Katie Wood's most recent decision regarding public land management. The Challis Yankee-Fork District Ranger for the Salmon-Challis National

Forest had requested that Troy Olson and R.J. Hoffman, the permit holders on the Pahsimeroi Allotment, remove their cattle from the allotment 30 days early.

At the end of August, the permit holders were asked to come off of the allotment. Their actual off-date was scheduled for Sept. 28, but resource concerns in the riparian areas were the reasons for asking them to move off early, Wood explained.

For Hoffman of May, Idaho, who manages 400 commercial-Angus cow-calf pairs on the allotment, the request was no surprise.

"I've been here for three years, and we've been off around the first of September each year," he said.

Olson, who has a permit for about 700 commercial-Angus cow-calf pairs, echoed Hoffman's frustrations: "I only turned 50% of my numbers out this year because, with the two previous drought years, I knew it was going to be tough, but this has probably been one of the best years in 10 years, and we're still home a month early."

Olson and Hoffman both recognize that there are distribution and infrastructure problems on their allotment. For years they have been trying to work with the USFS to make improvements.

"I've been trying to get these pipelines replaced and things like



this done since we bought in 2005, and it just seems like I keep getting put on the back burner — until this year. We've had more assistance this year, with these administrators, than we've ever had," Olson noted.

The USFS administrators managing Hoffman and Olson's permit are both new to the area. Wood started in the spring of 2014. Josh Edwards, rangeland management specialist for the Salmon-Challis National Forest, is actually stationed out of a different ranger district and just started helping out in July.

The lack of long-term experience with this allotment has been a recurring problem for the permit holders. Olson describes it as a communication problem due to employee turnover.

"We address a problem to them, and it seems like shortly thereafter, we've got somebody new to deal with, so every issue has to be readdressed and readdressed," he explained.

Edwards doesn't see that changing.

"I think the revolving door is going to be a constant problem," he noted. "It always has been."

Faith Ryan, Range and Weeds Program lead for the Salmon-Challis National Forest, verified Edwards, saying, "We must be spending time with [permit holders] on the ground, and it's bumpy; we're not there yet. In the four years that I've been here, there have been only nine months where we have been fully staffed."



► Wally Butler, Idaho Farm Bureau rangelands specialist, facilitates discussion of current grazing rotation between permit holders, concerned ranchers and Forest Service personnel. According to Troy Olson, permit holder, the same grazing rotation has been used on this allotment for 20-30 years.

"This fence has taken and tripled the amount of cows that are hitting the same water site."

— Troy Olson

With livelihoods at stake, the Custer and Lemhi County Farm Bureaus got involved and organized a range tour of the allotment.

Wally Butler, a rangelands specialist hired by the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, explained, "The overall purpose for having this tour was to make the agency aware of what these [permit holders] are going through and to expose other ranchers and producers to what's happening here."

"The whole idea is to develop communication down the line, and that will become cooperation and will evolve on into trust for each other," he continued. "Once you get to that point, then you can make some really good strides."

As word of the tour spread, ranchers from across

the state, state legislators and a congressional representative began to RSVP. In total, 45 interested persons participated on the tour that traversed 25 miles and stopped at four sites.

Large- and small-ungulate enclosures

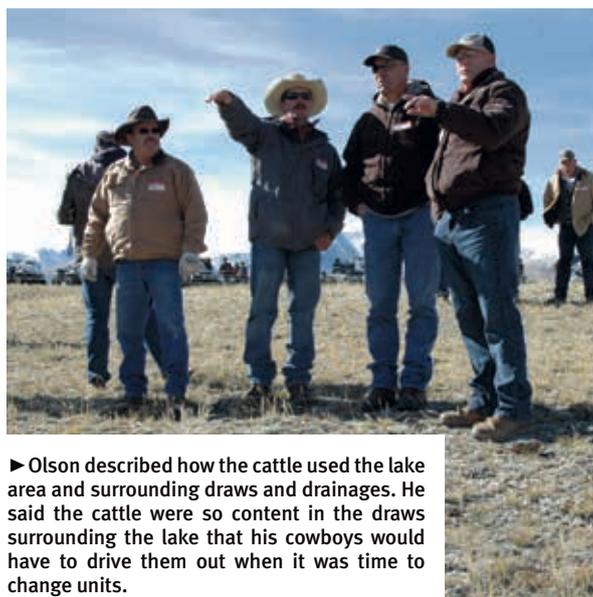
About a mile into the tour, participants arrived at their first site. Just off the road, in the uplands of the allotment, stood two different enclosures. The first looked like an elk fence with 10-foot (ft.)-tall posts and page wire. The second enclosure, adjacent to the first, had much shorter posts and three strands of barbed wire.

Butler explained to the group that the shorter enclosure was designed to keep out cattle while allowing entrance to wildlife:

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► Carlson Lake and the surrounding rangeland used to be part of the Pahsimeroi grazing allotment. Several years ago, the lake and 381 acres surrounding it were fenced off from grazing.



► Olson described how the cattle used the lake area and surrounding draws and drainages. He said the cattle were so content in the draws surrounding the lake that his cowboys would have to drive them out when it was time to change units.

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deer, elk and antelope. The taller enclosure was designed to keep out all large ungulates (hoofed mammals), but still allow small ungulates and rabbits access. It was clear the tall enclosure had ample growth, while the shorter enclosure matched that of the range grazed by livestock earlier in the year.

“My big curiosity is how well it’s been maintained, and what the breach might have been as far as livestock grazing vs. simply the wildlife end of it?” Butler asked Forest Service personnel.

Edwards replied that he needed to do more homework on both enclosures’ history,

but did know that enclosures in the area typically were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s. He wasn’t sure that the tall enclosure had ever been down, but said the short enclosure had been put up in the mid-2000s and then again by his crew in July.

“This has been grazed hot season for the past 20 to 30 years. That’s a good way to suppress the bluebunch, as far as I see; this unit could use a chance for the seed source to

“Reducing the effect and taking care of the resource is absolutely what we want to be doing here.”

— Wally Butler

these troughs off and turn some on in some different country,” said Edwards. “There [are] 21 miles of pipeline on this allotment.”

“It’s all very bad,” added Olson, describing the status of the pipeline. “There isn’t a good pipeline on the allotment. We can’t float anything. If we put a float on a trough, you have geysers 20 feet high everywhere else, so you’ve got to try to adjust everything by valves. You just can’t manage anything with the way the water is.”

Olson estimated that his hired hands accumulated 350 man-hours during the summer working on water lines.

Carlson Lake Ridge

The second stop of the day landed on top of a high ridge, which overlooked Carlson Lake, a popular fishing and recreation site. The lake and surrounding ridgeline and several draws on each side were at one time part of the allotment.

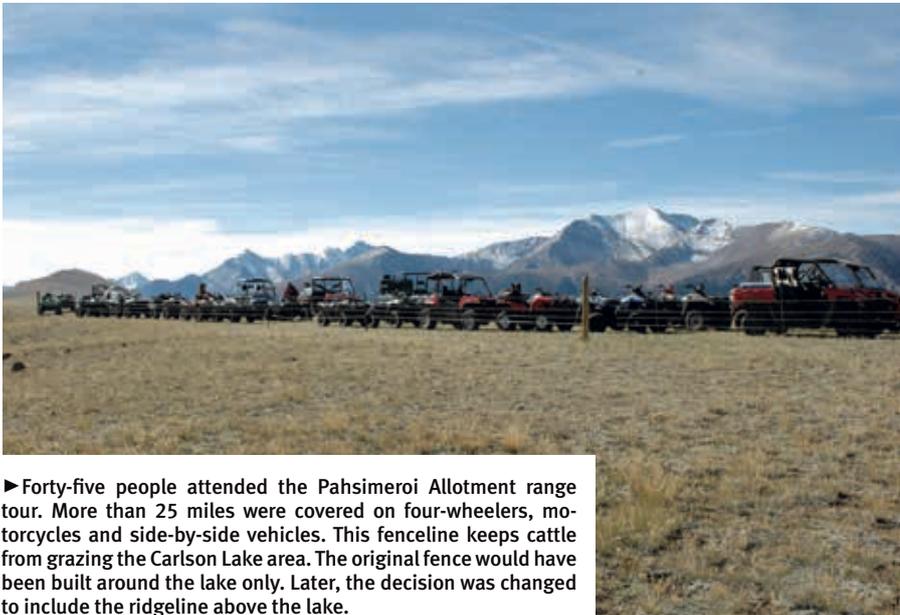
Several years ago the original plan was to fence off just the lake for its recreational purposes; however, when the final decision was made, the entire ridgeline was fenced

instead. According to Olson, the decision to fence the ridge was made in the fall. By the next spring, the fence was in place.

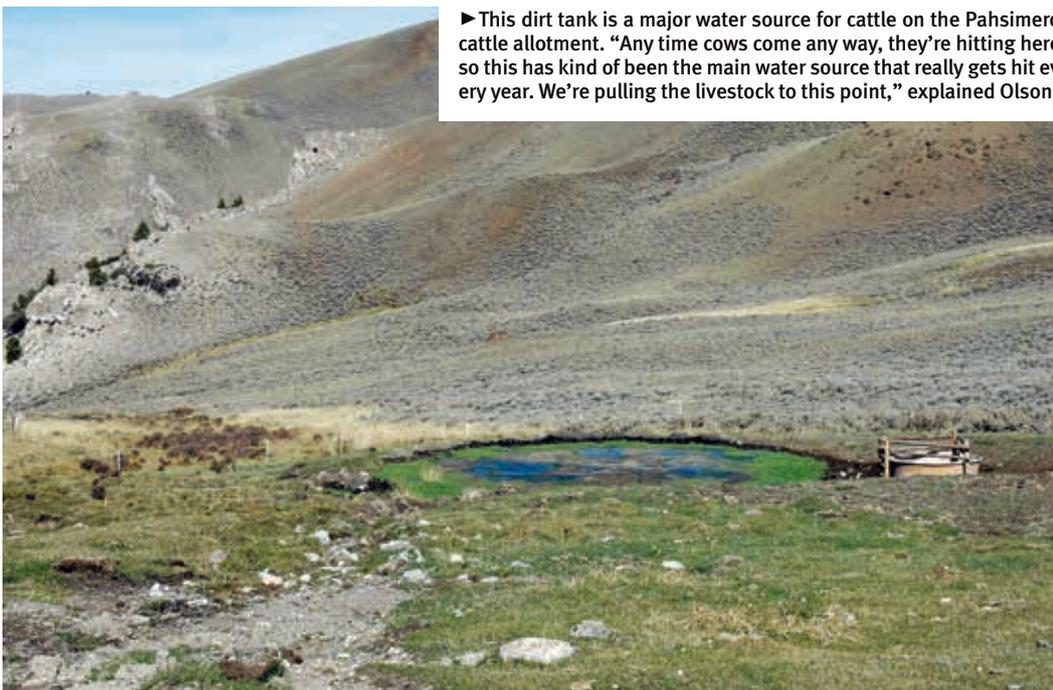
“I guess the ‘ask’ here on the part of the livestock people to the Forest Service,” Butler said, “is for this area to be considered for some grazing at some point, whether it’s a very limited number of animals for a limited number of days, we don’t know. We just want it to be on the table.”

“The fence is here now, so can we look into using it at some point?” Butler asked.

Wood replied, “Last night, I read the EA (environmental assessment) that actually closed this out, and it sounds like there were only 381 acres that were fenced out, which



► Forty-five people attended the Pahsimeroi Allotment range tour. More than 25 miles were covered on four-wheelers, motorcycles and side-by-side vehicles. This fenceline keeps cattle from grazing the Carlson Lake area. The original fence would have been built around the lake only. Later, the decision was changed to include the ridgeline above the lake.



► This dirt tank is a major water source for cattle on the Pahsimeroi cattle allotment. “Any time cows come any way, they’re hitting here, so this has kind of been the main water source that really gets hit every year. We’re pulling the livestock to this point,” explained Olson.

equates to about 1% of the total AUMs (animal unit months).”

Olson disagreed, saying the amount of acres the fence took away weren’t as important as the time the cattle spent in that area.

“The cattle did use all that country,” he stated. “If you take 100 head of cows that are on this top and over on the other side that stay over there for a month, that makes a substantial difference in what you see in use on these dirt tanks and other high-traffic areas on this side. This fence has taken and tripled the amount of cows that are hitting the same water site.”

Drake Draw

Drake Draw was the third stop of the day. This riparian area consisted of a moss-filled dirt water tank and an empty stock tank. According to Hoffman, in the spring of 2014 the Forest Service requested that permit holders install an electric fence further down the draw below the tanks to protect the riparian runoff. Similar to the first enclosure, the contrast between grass height inside and outside of the electric fence was dramatic.

Butler’s request for this site was to fence out more of the riparian area.

“Fence out everything that’s a riparian deal, then run a tank off in each direction, so there’s two water sources outside of the riparian area,” he said. “Reducing the effect and taking care of the resource is absolutely what we want to be doing here.”

When asked why the area needed to be fenced, Olson explained: “Any time cows come any way, they’re hitting here, so this has kind of been the main water source that really gets hit every year. We’re pulling the livestock to this point.”

“One of my biggest concerns, for full disclosure, is that there are a number of enclosures on this allotment, and there’s a lot of infrastructure on this allotment. One of my reservations is that we have trouble maintaining the current infrastructure that we do have. I’m not saying it’s not on the table, but when we can’t maintain what we do



► After the Forest Service initially suggested fencing this riparian area, permit holders Hoffman and Olson designed a plan for fencing out all of the riparian area and installing water troughs on each side of the fence, downhill from the spring.

“In the four years that I’ve been here, there have been only nine months where we have been fully staffed.”

— Faith Ryan

We can’t always do it all, so we are moving forward. I just don’t think we’re going to get 100% of everything tomorrow. It just isn’t reality for us,” she explained.

Chase Whitaker, a rancher in Lemhi

have, it worries me for the future,” stated Wood.

“This is one allotment of an entire forest. It’s not me trying to be difficult by any means. It’s just that I’ve said it a thousand times: It’s a zero sum game. I only have so much staff, so much money, etc.

County, posed the question, “What is the best thing to do? If you can see that [the fenced-off grass] regrew that much in one season and you don’t have the supplies, don’t have the people to put it up, don’t have anything to maintain it, do you just say ‘Hey [permit holders], why don’t you just go clean the ponds and keep using them?’”

“I think that warrants more intimate discussions; not with 45 people. I think there are a lot of different ways to solve a problem,” answered Wood.

“The point we have agreed upon is that water improvements need to be made. We

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► The electric fence was put up earlier in the year, before the cows were allowed to graze this unit. The growth seen here is from one growing season.

► The Mahogany Creek unit hasn't been grazed by cattle since 1994. When the unit was set aside, the condition for reopening it was that the vegetation along the stream bank must meet late seral stage.



“I’ve been here for three years, and we’ve been off around the first of September each year.”

— R.J. Hoffman

need to have continual conversations going on between the [permit holders] and the Forest Service, because if this is a priority of the [permit holders], it will become a priority of the Forest Service,” concluded Zak Miller, Idaho Farm Bureau regional manager.

Mahogany Creek

The fourth and final stop for the group was Mahogany Creek. The unit containing this live stream has been fenced off to grazing since 1994 for riparian protection and restoration. According to Edwards, when the creek was closed off to grazing, the condition for reopening it was that the late seral (ecological) species needed to be dominating the stream banks.

Just prior to the range tour, Forest Service personnel had collected data on the stream banks, but the numbers had not yet been calculated.

Butler explained to the group that after a casual observation of the area, he thought it was in “pretty dang good shape. There are good, stable banks and so forth.”

He asked that the Forest Service consider, “some level of grazing, at some point in time, and eventually work into a rotation system under a highly controlled type situation. . . . We’re just asking for it to be on the table and

be considered,” he said.

“I think it’s important to understand that this area was closed out for a reason,” clarified Wood, “so we have to take a hard look at why we would be

opening it, and if it’s in the best interest of the resource.

“We’ve been out here taking the data, and we’ll take a more substantial look once we have all the numbers crunched,” she promised.

Olson concluded, “I just see it as giving us a chance to put this in a rest-rotation system where we could rest different pastures and maybe help some of the stuff we’re actually using get a chance to regrow and reestablish.”

Final thoughts

At the conclusion of the tour, Butler thought the goal had been reached.

“I had some concerns coming into this today, that if anybody got adversarial that the whole tone of the thing might go south. It absolutely did not. I thought everybody was positive, maintained their professionalism, their composure, but still made their points,” he said.

Addressing Butler’s concerns about charged feelings, Ryan explained her perception of the day.

“I witnessed something that I have

witnessed before, and my sense is that it’s increasing, and that is the pressure that [permit holders] feel in regards to the demands of resource management on public lands.

“Being public land resource managers, endangered species act or not, we are beholden to think about all the species. . . . It’s an excellent reason for their frustration,” she stated.

Wood said her own goal of fostering better relationships with the permit holders and general public had been reached. She said she hopes to develop attainable solutions with the permit holders.

“That being said, this is one allotment and these are two [permit holders] out of a large picture when you think of 800,000 acres,” she said. “I think I have 23 different allotments with various different permittees.

“With limited resources and staff, we can only move as fast as we can move, but my commitment is to continue to foster relationships and do the best that we possibly can given the constraints that we’re under,” she explained.

For a video of the range tour, visit the Idaho Farm Bureau (IDFarmBureau) YouTube channel.



Editor’s Note: Paige Nelson is a field editor from Rigby, Idaho.