

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC SERVICE ON THE ROUTT NATIONAL FOREST

“A Century of Grazing on the Routt National Forest”
by Mary Peterson, Forest Supervisor

The history of livestock grazing on the Routt NF over the last 100 years is not one that can be written about in a short paragraph. It is one of the more colorful parts of our forest's history.

Cattle interests were the first to settle in the Little Snake River and Bear River Valleys. The pressure from sheep grazing came from the Red Desert country in Wyoming. In the 1880's the Snake River was a cowman's country with sheep barons continually crowding out the range at every opportunity. No sheep were permitted south of the Wyoming-Colorado "deadline".

At first, the "deadline" for sheep was the Little Snake Valley. In about 1890 Johnny Wilkes brought two bands of sheep into the Battle Creek country and immediately the cowboys on the Snake and Yampa Rivers mobilized. They gathered at Dixon, Wyoming and sent two men to Wilkes' camp to tell him to get out of the country. Wilkes moved out.

A few years later, a man by the name of Jack Edwards started a band of sheep for the Yampa Valley. James Adams of Egeria Park organized the cowboys as far south as the Eagle River and 200 armed men met at Hayden. They went on to Fortification the next day, met the sheep and turned them back without bloodshed.

Johnny Wilkes moved into Big Red Park with a big band of sheep a year or so after he was chased out of the Savory Country. By this time the deadline had been moved south to the Colorado-Wyoming boundary. About 50 cowboys gathered at the upper Gardner ranch and rode toward Red Park. Word had reached Wilkes of their coming and when they arrived at the park he had rushed his sheep across the State line. Hundreds of sheep were killed or abandoned in the wild rush to safety. This must have been in the mid 1890's and is the first report of sheep grazing on the forest. Sheep owned by the Cow Creek Sheep Company were caught in Red Park in 1903 and were run out by 300 riders in one of the greatest sheep stampedes in history. No one was killed.

1906 was the year when livestock were first placed under permit on the Routt National Forest. Even though sheep had not been allowed south of the "deadline", they had evidently entered Jackson County in North Park previously because on Jan. 24, 1907, a document signed by officers of the Carbon County Woolgrowers Association of Wyoming and the Snake River Stockgrowers Association of Colorado agreed that sheep could enter and "graze upon a certain portion the Park Range National Forest lying west of the land in Colorado now used by the sheepmen, said land to be hereafter used by the sheepmen". This was also described in a letter from Thomas Hogan, forest supervisor of

the Park Range NF to J.W. Nelson, supervisor of the Sierra Madre NF, of the date of Nov 9, 1907. This letter is lost from the Routt files, but it evidently opened up the Encampment River area and Damfino Creek south of the Wyoming line. It went south as far as Seven Lakes.

The deadlock that had existed for years, whereby Wyoming sheep were barred from Colorado, broke in 1907 as a result of extreme overgrazing on the Sierra Madre Forest Reserve (later called the Hayden NF, and now the Medicine Bow NF). It is recorded that the Sierra Madre issued permits on a priority use basis for 300,000 sheep in 1906 on range that in 1935 grazed 42,000 sheep and still was classified as overused.

Wyoming sheep grazed on the Routt in 1907 but there is no record of the permitted numbers. The Hayden Forest issued grazing permits for the Wyoming sheep at least until 1917. On Feb 10, 1908, Will Barnes, Acting Chief, wrote a letter to Supervisor Hogan of the Park Range NF and to Supervisor Jesse Nelson of the Sierra Madre NF extending the area in which sheep could be permitted. This area added Whiskey Park and Big Red Park to the sheep range on the Routt. Barnes' letter gave authority to stock 10,000 sheep pursuant to a final agreement between the Carbon County Woolgrowers Association and the Snake River Stockgrowers Association. In 1909 about 9,000 sheep were trailed to Steamboat Springs from Wyoming after summering on the Routt.

There was a comment in the first grazing report made in 1909 that indicates the tenseness with which the first sheep were introduced into the Routt: "No opposition was met from any source, which was particularly gratifying to me, as it had been rumored that these sheep would never reach the railroad. Some excitement was caused by the accidental shooting of a man named Williams of Steamboat Springs, and some Denver newspapers tried to make it appear that he was killed by cattlemen, who were opposed to the grazing of sheep. The facts are he was undergoing an attack of bad whiskey secured at a saloon near Steamboat Springs and shot himself."

The build-up in sheep grazing on the Routt was phenomenal. Permitted numbers passed 70,000 in 1911 and peaked in 1931 with 143,274 head under permit.

The Routt was opened to Wyoming sheep because the cattlemen used only the lower foothills in the early days, and of course, because there were no resident sheepmen in northwestern Colorado. The highest ranges were considered worthless for cattle grazing as indicated by the supervisor's report for 1910. When the door was opened, the excess sheep from the Medicine Bow NF literally poured into the Routt. The flood was so intense that in 1915, the supervisor reported: "By 1916 there will be no unused range on the Routt." Sheep had been put on allotment management in the Whiskey Park area in 1911.

The "High Trail" that followed the present Fireline and Wyoming driveways down the Continental Divide from the Wyoming line to Rabbit Ears was in use in 1910 as a service to Rawlins sheepmen by which they could trail their old ewes to market at Steamboat Springs, utilizing the excess forage on the backcountry of the Routt. A route up Slavonia

Canyon was in use by 1912. By 1914 the Supervisor was calling for more conservative use of this trail. In his 1915 report he mentioned the temporary nature of the "trail" permits and stated that use of the High Trail should not qualify the owners for additional preferences. In 1916 the Forest Service finally awoke to the fact that the High Trail was being used by the Wyoming sheep interests to summer excess sheep and it was scheduled to be abandoned and allotments made along it for the Wyoming sheep that used it. The trail was maintained thereafter as a driveway to reach the allotments.

By 1914 the demand for range by Colorado sheepmen began. In 1913 and 1914 permission was asked by the Supervisor to permit Colorado sheep on the Snake River and Walton Creek areas. In 1918 the Supervisor recommended that the sheep range grazed on Muddy and Franz Creeks, be closed. Depletion of a virgin range had occurred after ten short years of use! In 1922, the Supervisor reported all of the sheep range west of the North Fork of the Elk River and the Fireline Driveway, including the Bears Ears District, was overstocked. His estimate was 100,000 acres of sheep range overgrazed.

From 1922 to 1945 a number of surveys and inventories were done on Routt grazing lands to determine condition and stocking capacity. It was largely realized that allotments were overstocked, in poor condition, and stocking rates needed to be adjusted. In 1945, finally an objective inspection of both sheep and cattle ranges was begun with the result that a proposal was made to reduce the permitted sheep numbers 31,564 head and cattle numbers 435 head. This proposal was met with a storm of protest from stockmen and extensive rides with permittees were made in 1946 with members of the regional office. In 1947 after historic meetings with the Carbon County Woolgrowers and the Forest Advisory Board for sheep, preference for nearly 20,000 sheep and 100 cattle were extinguished. This action was a major factor in precipitating the investigation of Forest Service range management policies by the Congressional Subcommittee on Public Lands.

The following years resulted in increased cooperation between forest officers and permittees, resulting in improved systems of management and ranger improvements aimed at aiding these systems. By 1972 grazing use was much closer to grazing capacity.

The story of grazing on the Routt NF is typical of the history of range management on National Forests throughout the west. First, came the lusty stage of exploitation, that blended into a long period of recognition that rangelands were overstocked to the point of resource damage, and finally followed by vigorous and sound corrective actions based on both experience and research that good vegetative cover is essential to soil and water conservation and to the future stability of the range livestock industry.

Sources:

History of the Routt National Forest, 1905-1972. Developed in 1965 and partially revised in 1972.

