

Stock And Stockmen Must Learn To Live With Mineral Development

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MERTZON — The weather thus far has been perfect for the early lambing season. The nights haven't been too cold. A thin haze of dust in the air has assured that the old ewes are bringing forth their young into our normal dry environment. (Editor's note: And last week the entire area got a good rain.)

One bunch of the ranch's sheep are lambing under slightly different conditions. Two oil rigs are running in the one section pasture. On the south side a pulling unit is busy completing another well. Thus, these old nannies are learning to be mighty selective of their nesting places.

Dust in that pasture is billowing in limitless quantities. Six drilling crews go in and out every 24 hours. Hombres peddling extra services move in numbers that would create a traffic jam in the concrete expanses of the cities. Big trucks roar back and forth, far into the night. The dust line along the roadway is gradually widening to 300 yards on each side.

If the oil game wasn't so rough, I'd try to get some damage money from the companies. However, the oil producers are always having all kinds of damage expense. It seems that every time they spill a load of acid-filled drilling mud or let a salt water leak scorch the range, a rancher comes charging in for a payoff. Somebody is always bad-mouthing them for polluting the fresh water table or rooting up the topsoil for roads.

The whole situation has been overdrawn. There isn't a drilling site in Shortgrass Country that won't eventually be put back into forage production. Oil soaked ground does take a while to hair over. Yet in 200 or 300 years, erosion will have washed the grease-stained earth into draws and gullies that could be of some use to mankind. Who are we to say that the rancher of the future will want the top of the ground to be level and covered with grass.

This argument doesn't stand a chance around the ranch country coffee houses. The herders, without exception, refuse to overlook the slightest injury to their land. A 40 mile pipeline right-of-way 50 feet wide, with a trench dug to bedrock, can be turned into a catastrophe that may destroy the balance of nature in 10 counties.

Ranchers all know that in a few short generations the native grasses will begin to push the weeds and brambles from the ditch-way, and that given sensible range management, their great grandkids will begin to find the land as useful as it once was.

The oil companies are here to stay. Ranchers are going to have to learn to adjust to ravages of iron cleats and earth killing liquids. Furthermore the old ewes and the herds are going to have to learn to be quick of foot or they will be run from their stamping grounds.