

JULY 7, 1977

Good rains have fallen over the Shortgrass Country. Soft summer rains that sounded like harp music. Then heavy rains that washed away needle grass and made the earth fresh and delicious to smell.

Several weeks before the rain, one Shortgrass county was declared a disaster area. Not because of drouth, but by error. Odds nowadays, you know, of living in a disaster area are much higher than other times. Four or five different departments have the power. Also anything from a milk cow drying up to a light bulb burning out in a refrigerator is apt to set off a federal program that'll make the Chicago fire look like the sparks from a cub scout's campfire.

Designating disaster areas in the Shortgrass Country is a difficult decision. About 95 percent of the time, the whole country is in desperate condition. After a disaster is called, I don't know how they ever decided to call it off. Such organizations as Federal Land Banks or private jugs must be the ones that blow the final whistle.

On the ranches, it'd take half of the government to keep score on the different disaster areas. Last week I helped run some sheep through the chute. The humidity was running right along in the same 90s that the temperature was at. The windmill was stilled and the woolies had about as much life as you find at the circus ground after the show's left town.

Without putting one sheep in the crowd pen, I'd called that setup a disaster. In fact, disaster is hardly the word for a June sheep work. Calamity doesn't fit. Catastrophe, the dictionary says, applies to any public or personal situation that has a tragic outcome. I kind of think that by adding hopeless to catastrophe, you'd be close to analyzing the deal. A pessimist, of course, would have taken a darker view.

Herders brush off disasters as easy as they change their boots. Lots of times old boys will think they are getting along pretty good when the scorekeepers like the loan companies and the loan committees don't feel that way at all.

After a fellow has followed the hallow horns and the sheep trade for a few years, he may overlook a disaster that'd give city folks a heart failure. You never hear ranchers worrying about the national debt. All of us have a real flair for owing money. It's having money that makes us uncomfortable.

Similar to a lot of fields, the government doesn't belong in the disaster business. Politicians think that the club room running out of imported scotch or being short of salted peanuts is a disaster. To them, a blabber-mouthed reporter nosing around in the expense ledger is the definition of trouble. They're apt to grieve more over a defeated tax bill than the citizens are over having to pay taxes. I think if I were to need some real disaster experts, I'd go up on the plains and hire those old boys that run feedlots for a living.

Whatever the government thought was a disaster is over now. Grass and weeds are green again. We are back in the game for at least a couple more months.