Forum





Campfire Conversations at the 2020 annual meeting: Insights and lessons learned from "cuss-and-discuss" rather than "chalk-and-talk"

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On the Ground

- The 2020 SRM Annual Meeting piloted "Campfire Conversation," round-table discussions styled after the World Café approach.
- The event attracted 280 attendees and enabled multidirectional knowledge exchange (i.e., "cuss and discuss"), rather than one-way "chalk-and-talk." Attendees participated in three 20-minute facilitated round-table discussions around three topics they selected from a menu of 13 timely rangeland issues.
- Change was a common theme for many Campfire Conversations, including social, climatic, ecological, management, and policy changes.
- Participants highlighted a desire for SRM to grow as an organization by enhancing members' opportunities and resources for multidirectional knowledge exchange among students, scientists, practitioners, and policy-makers; cross-generational mentorship; crossdisciplinary training; diverse ways of knowing; and greater inclusivity and connection to the SRM.
- A post-event analysis of the Campfire Conversation event revealed valuable lessons for organizing successful World Café-style sessions at future SRM meetings, including virtual meetings.

Keywords: change in rangelands, collaborative dialogue, diversity and inclusion, multidirectional knowledge exchange, round-table discussion, World Café.

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Envisioning a campfire

"I am tired of slideshow presentations. I wish we could all just sit around the campfire and actually talk to each other." Bob Mountain (paraphrased).

A team of Society for Range Management (SRM) members designed and hosted "Campfire Conversations" at the 2020 annual meeting to enable lively, collaborative roundtable discussions around pressing questions in rangeland management and the future of SRM. The concept emerged from discussions during meetings of the program committee about the limitations of traditional concurrent oral sessions and informal social interactions to engage rangeland practitioners and scientists from different backgrounds, perspectives, and career-stages in meaningful discourse and mutual learning. Members who responded to an informal survey in 2018 expressed a desire for more innovative session formats to enable interactive conversations, between SRM members who typically walk in different social circles, and to amplify new and under-heard voices, ultimately to generate new ideas about the rangeland profession's most challenging and contentious issues. SRM member and rangeland management philosopher, Bob Mountain, helped catalyze the idea expressing that land managers, ranchers, and scientists often find common ground by "cussing and discussing" around a campfire. The planning committee engaged with facilitation methods expert, Terri Schulz, and applied the World Café method (see Box #1) to design an inclusive session to bring the "campfire" concept to life for all SRM members (new or established, introverted or extroverted), without slides or theater seating (i.e., modern-day chalk-and-talk), at the 2020 annual meeting.

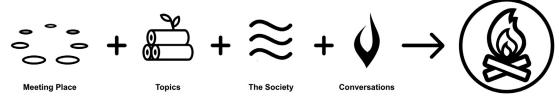


Figure 1. Components needed for a successful "campfire" include a meeting place (i.e., the firepit), hot topics (the fuel), the 2020 annual meeting participants (the oxygen), and two-way conversation around a compelling opening question (the spark).

To build a successful campfire, start with a safe and inviting fire-pit. The 2020 annual meeting provided this—a gathering place for people to congregate around their shared interests in rangeland management. The next ingredient of a successful campfire is the fuel or wood, arranged deliberately in the fire-pit. Topics proposed by SRM members, based on current, on-the-ground issues, provided this fuel. To spark a vibrant campfire conversation, each topic leader crafted a compelling opening question about a timely rangeland management challenge, one that could benefit from diverse voices around the firepit. The final element for a successful campfire is oxygen. SRM members who participated in the campfire topics provided this oxygen. SRM also provided a greater contextual basis for the conversations that emerged and voices that were heard during the sessions, serving as a platform for dialogue and discourse. With a sturdy fire-pit, energy-packed fuel, lively spark, and abundant oxygen, the campfire conversations were ignited and roared to life (Fig. 1). Encompassing a wide variety of thoughts and opinions, participants took turns stoking the flames, keeping their thoughtful conversations burning bright around many important challenges, opportunities, and themes in rangeland management.

Hosting a campfire conversation

The campfire conversations followed the World Café model of facilitation, ^{1,2,3} which is used widely in community meetings as well as at the 2019 Australian Rangelands Conference. ⁴ This process allowed annual meeting attendees to engage in 20-minute round-table conversations about each of three topics they chose from a menu of 13 options (Table 1). The topics were submitted by SRM members interested in hosting a conversation around an issue they considered of immediate importance or interest.

At the 2020 annual meeting in Denver, there were morning and afternoon sessions of the Campfire Conversation event, which provided participants with a table for each of 12 topics (a 13th topic was offered only during one session). Each table had a host (the person or team of people who originally proposed the topic) and a facilitator; some topics also had a designated note-taker.

At the beginning of each campfire session, topic hosts were given 1 to 2 minutes to present a short "pitch," concluding with a powerful question to attract participants and drive their campfire conversation. A powerful question generates curiosity, is thought-provoking, and stimulates reflective conversation. The facilitators' role was to lead the round-table

discussions, keeping the conversation constructive, engaging, on-topic, and creating an inclusive environment where everyone was encouraged to participate.

In the days following the annual meeting, each topic team (host, facilitator, and/or note-taker) synthesized the conversations and summarized their findings in a "harvest worksheet." These worksheets, in addition to the original submitted abstracts, were used to inform the thematic analysis below.

Campfire conversations attracted a range of participants. Some tables hosted intimate conversations (six participants per session), and others hosted large gatherings of participants (up to 25 attendees). Across all topics, approximately 200 people attended during the morning session, followed by about 80 people during the afternoon session.

Analyzing the campfire topics and conversations

After the 2020 annual meeting, the campfire organizers convened interested hosts, facilitators, and note-takers to conduct an "after-fire" analysis of the campfire process, topics, and conversations. An interdisciplinary team of social and physical scientists collaboratively reviewed and analyzed the original topic abstracts and associated harvest worksheets (i.e., post-conversation summaries prepared by each topic team). We used iterative rounds of open coding, whereby researchers annotate qualitative data to describe, name, or classify events or phenomena, as well as collaborative discussion to distill key themes in the topics and conversations.

Harvest worksheets were available for most topics, but not all. Among those available, the extent and detail of their content varied. The harvest worksheets themselves, along with any transcripts or detailed notes taken during the conversations, are not publicly available. This is because we did not ask participants for their permission to share them publicly, nor did we pursue approval from an Institutional Review Board to undertake human subject research. For this reason, we focus here on high-level, synthesized themes, insights, and lessons learned.

Campfire observations

We present our results from two perspectives. The first perspective explores themes that emerged from the campfire topics and driving questions proposed by the topic hosts

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Table 1
Campfire conversation topics and their associated driving questions at the Society for Range Management 2020 Annual Meeting

Campfire topic	Driving question
Rangelands & climate change: what can we learn from each other about impacts and adaptations?	How are your rangelands changing? What tools are working, and which might need to be adapted in a changing climate?
2. Examining flexible grazing on public lands	What do you see as some of the chief challenges, if any, preventing producers from adapting to changing conditions on public rangelands?
3. Can there be a carbon neutral livestock system?	If SRM had to create a position statement regarding livestock's greenhouse gas footprint on global emissions, what would it say?
4. Facilitating transfer of knowledge and experiences from one generation of range professionals to the next	How can we better identify and assume our role as students or teachers to transfer knowledge?
5. How will a certification of targeted graziers ensure the endorsement of the most knowledgeable, well-vetted practitioners?	How can a Targeted Grazing Certification give value to a targeted grazing business and how can SRM structure and advertise the program?
6. Land ownership transitions in rangelands: issue or opportunity	What opportunities and challenges accompany new patterns of rangeland ownership from a scientific, managerial, cultural, and/or socio-economic perspective?
7. Building resiliency into working rangelands: are conservation, profitability, and modernization at odds?	Are conservation, profitability, and modernization realistic goals or are they fundamentally at odds with one another on working rangelands?
8. Enhancing diversity and inclusion to increase recruitment and retention of new SRM members	What should SRM do to achieve a more diverse and inclusive environment?
9. Wild horse management to conserve riparian areas	With riparian areas losing riparian functions it is now clear that lower AML or animal movement tools are needed for wild horse riparian management to maintain horse and wildlife habitat and ecosystem resilience –what should we do?
10. Oil and gas reclamation	How can reclamation or the oversight of the reclamation process following oil and gas development be done better?
11. What is the most significant challenge in beef sustainability?	What is the most significant current challenge in beef sustainability?
12. Bringing Rangeland taxonomy into the 21st century	What are the ways we as an educational field can integrate new technologies and knowledge of genetics and evolution with the tried-and-true practices of traditional, hands-on rangeland taxonomy?
13. Getting science onto the landscape	How can we better communicate "range science" to land stewards in an efficient, effective, and usable form to foster their application of the "art" of range management?

AML indicates Appropriate management level for wild horse and burro populations; SRM, Society for Range Management.

Box 1The World Café Process¹

- Seat people at Café-style tables, covered in drawing paper, with sticky notes and markers.
- \bullet Station one facilitator and one note-taker at each table, responsible for an assigned topic.
- · Ask an engaging opening question about a topic or issue that genuinely matters.
- \bullet Facilitate a 20-minute discussion, ensuring that all voices around the table are heard.
- Encourage participants to write, doodle, and draw their key ideas on the table paper.
- ullet Upon completing this initial round of conversation, have participants move to different tables to discuss a new topic of interest.
- Guide participants through a total of three topics/conversations, approximately 20 minutes each.
- Facilitators and note-takers stay at their designated table to share ideas from previous rounds of discussion. Participants build on each other's ideas across the three rounds.
- By providing several rounds of conversation, with diverse participants sharing their perspectives, facilitators and note-takers usually see themes that link and connect.

(Table 1). Abstracts associated with each topic are available in the supplementary material (see Supplementary Text S1). The second perspective explores themes that emerged from the campfire conversations themselves.

Perspective 1: Themes from the campfire topics

Looking ahead—Many of the campfire topics had a forward-looking perspective, asking participants to consider key changes that affect their work or research. Some top-

ics dealt with large-scale changes in rangeland ecosystems and socio-ecological conditions (see topics #1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 in Table 1 and Supplementary Text S1). Other topics addressed changes in policy and management strategies (#2, 3, 7, and 10), land ownership (#6), markets, funding availability, and allocation (#2, 3, and 7), and ecological change over short and long-term scales (e.g., climate change; #1, 2, 7, and 10). These topics posed meaningful questions to participants about changes they were already seeing, and potential changes in future policy, management, technology use, or research needed to support adaptation and resilience.

Looking within—A second theme that emerged across the campfire topics involved asking participants to consider more operational issues, such as the dynamics and mechanics of rangeland management practices and policies. The emphasis was commonly on grazing practices and policies, yet topics also broached communication and engagement issues (#2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 13 in Table 1), and negotiating increasing social, ecological, and management complexity in rangelands (#1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 13). Regarding communication and engagement, topics explored how to exchange knowledge more effectively between rangeland researchers and managers to improve management outcomes (#2, 10, and 13). Other topics tapped into participants' differing generational perspectives to brainstorm ways to exchange knowledge more effectively between rangeland professionals with more experience and those who may be new(er) to the field (#1, 4, and 6). Regarding complexity, several topics sought proactive ways to adjust management practices in response to policy

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changes, or to address "wicked or sticky" problems, which we do not yet fully understand, are enduring or evolve over time, and may be politically intractable, such as managing for multiple uses to increase resilience (#1, 2, 3, 7, 9, and 10 in Table 1).

Looking beyond for growth—A final set of topics considered opportunities for growth and development, both within SRM itself and rangeland management more broadly. These topics asked questions about how to best increase communication and engagement among different groups involved in rangeland management, including researchers, practitioners, landowners, and policy makers (#2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, and 13 in Table 1).

Perspective 2: Themes from the campfire conversations

Expanding the circle—A key theme present in many campfire conversations was an emphasis on expanding the circle. While the issue of diversity and inclusion served as its own campfire topic (#8 in Table 1), it also emerged from multiple other campfire conversations as a cross-cutting theme. Many participants reflected on who is included or excluded, and who might feel more or less comfortable as a part of rangeland science and practice at SRM. Topic organizers noted that while some table participants felt challenged or confused by the need for explicit action to increase diversity at SRM, others were emphatic about expanding the SRM's efforts to integrate diversity in conference agendas and programming. Discussions included ideas for SRM to conduct more outreach to underserved, under-represented, and marginalized communities. Participants suggested SRM could design new and different opportunities for more diverse participants to engage, including new venues and types of meeting sessions (e.g., World Café/Campfire Conversations). This could create space for new participants, as well as broaden the perspectives of SRM's existing members.

Campfire conversation participants recognized the value of expanding knowledge production and the practice of rangeland research by including Traditional Ecological Knowledge, local knowledge from producers, and a wider spectrum of the social and physical sciences. Participants highlighted a need to include people with different perspectives and experiences in decision-making processes. Better outcomes can come from increasing interaction and communication among practitioners, managers, large and small landowners, researchers, policymakers from different agencies, stakeholders from different backgrounds, and representatives from different geographic regions, scales (e.g., local, state, regional, national, international), and interests (e.g., wild horses). Applying "science coproduction" methods, this communication and exchange of knowledge should happen while research is being proposed, conducted, and applied, and well before decisions or policies are made. Including these perspectives early on may also help conservation actions appropriately scale up or down from a national level to a local level by taking into account ecological and social differences that arise.

Adapting to change—Because many campfire topics touched on the theme of change, many participants reflected on changes they themselves are seeing, in both the social and ecological aspects of rangeland management. Participants noted that management practices are changing in response to, or in anticipation of, social and ecological changes that impact range management at various temporal and geographic scales. For example, one topic's harvest worksheet described an on-going effort to develop a certification program for targeted graziers, who would be knowledgeable of how invasive plants respond to grazing at different growth stages. Another worksheet highlighted adaptive business models that involve diversification and managing for multiple uses, accompanied by dynamic management plans, supported ideally by policies that allow increased flexibility. Others noted the need for more consistent field monitoring and accessible long-term datasets to document site trajectories and the response of landscapes to disturbance and management, to foster evaluation of long-term land management goals. The use of technology was also mentioned, including both the need to put available technology and information to new uses, and to develop new technologies to support producers, particularly spatially explicit information. For instance, participants discussed the potential for decision support tools that integrate climate forecasts and ecological site maps and could be readily used in the field via phone or tablet-based apps.

Participants also noted that rangelands are undergoing changes in land ownership (e.g., from local, on-site owners to remote, high net-worth owners), changes in land use (e.g., energy development and recreation), and changes in leadership of research, management, and production. Climate change and resulting ecological changes were also discussed, with several participants noting the relevance of federal policy and associated availability of funding for local adaptation efforts. For example, one participant noted the increasing problem of invasive species due to climate change, which are driving out native grasses on rangelands and are not selected for by grazing livestock. Another participant noted a need for additional support for Tribal climate adaptation efforts, specifically, for the implementation of adaptation plans that have been developed in recent years. Several participants also noted that disaster assistance programs, like crop and livestock insurance, focus primarily on covering losses from drought or heat, but do not necessarily encourage or incentivize long-term adaptation that could reduce such losses in the future.

Keeping the fire burning—A key theme that emerged from many campfire conversations was a desire to build an even brighter future for rangeland science and intentional actions needed to achieve it. Participants focused on the evolution of SRM as a community for both research and practice. The need to build both funding and capacity emerged for issues like adopting new management practices, diversifying business ventures, and adapting to climate change. Participants identified important capacity-building efforts for SRM to consider supporting, including the inclusion of diverse ways of knowing; the creation of new knowledge and a deeper understanding of technical information; opportunities for building

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and accessing long-term data sets; and improving platforms for information-gathering, information-sharing, and science-practitioner networks.

The transmission of knowledge across SRM generations was a key concern for some participants. The more diverse, upcoming generation of rangeland practitioners and researchers (e.g., youth and early career members of SRM) would benefit from being better connected and integrated into SRM. This could be achieved through enhanced outreach to schools and young professionals, and providing more professional learning opportunities such as apprenticeships, internships, and certifications. These efforts would also build up essential skills of emerging and future professionals, such as communication, marketing, and emotional intelligence, in order to encourage and enhance their outreach and engagement activities.

There was a feeling that SRM could better connect with some members, and also that membership could expand to include others who are unaware of SRM, or do not feel welcome or comfortable as a part of SRM. Keeping the fire burning will require active work to include, expand, and connect.

Campfire tips and conclusions for future annual meetings

What worked well

The campfire conversation event organizers, by using the World Café approach at the 2020 annual meeting, hoped to engage diverse participants in an inclusive, multidirectional exchange of knowledge and experiences about important challenges and opportunities facing our rangeland ecosystems and communities. After the event concluded, campfire conversation topic teams agreed widely that the World Café approach worked well for generating conversation across diverse groups of people who would otherwise not gather around the same table. Networking and knowledge-sharing were reported in some harvest worksheets as significant positive outcomes of the sessions. Furthermore, the diversity of participants included many young professionals and graduate students, which is an encouraging sign for SRM's future.

A crucial step once the campfire conversation event concluded was to harvest common themes across topics, identify new connections and insights, and make them visible to participants and other SRM members by sharing them here. We hope that our use of the World Café approach demonstrated the value of providing a thoughtfully facilitated yet nontraditional space for discussion-based, horizontal sharing of experiences and knowledge, ideally leading to deeper social interaction, engagement, and synthetic learning. We agree with Bob Mountain on the power of sitting around a campfire and talking and listening to each other.

Lessons learned

Careful preparation by the campfire conversation organizers, topic hosts, facilitators, and note-takers was essential for

success, as was thorough documentation and follow-up with topic leaders. Training on facilitation techniques and dealing with difficult participants were beneficial. The formulation of effective "driving questions" required creativity and foresight, pretesting with topic teams, and a willingness to refine the questions to achieve active and inclusive engagement. Hosts were asked to prepare by learning the session format, practicing a pitch on their topic, refining their driving question based on feedback, and reflecting on their main goal for participating, such as gathering participants' experiences, outlining and describing a problem, or brainstorming solutions. Hosts who spent more time identifying the objective, refining the driving question, and preparing a compelling pitch, generally had a more satisfying experience.

A potential limitation (and opportunity) of using the World Café approach to campfire conversations is that the assemblage of participants is based on interest and availability; many may have relatively little knowledge of the topics and driving questions posed. For this reason, we recommend formulating driving questions that evoke discussion regardless of specific technical knowledge. Questions aimed at defining or generating hypotheses around a problem, rather than solving it, are more likely to stimulate engaging discussion.

The facilitator's role is also critical to the success of a campfire conversation. Facilitators should be attentive to participants' interests and knowledge, and flexible in guiding their group's discussion. Facilitators should also be unbiased about the topic, enabling them to listen to each participant with an open ear and hear each participant's input with an open mind. Facilitators should embrace their role as supporters, rather than directors, of conversation. Their goal is to ensure inclusivity in participation and protect the process by keeping people on topic and making sure the conversation space is shared.

The World Café approach is not well-suited to garnering validation for one's own opinion. Therefore, the program committee needs to carefully validate the topics, meet with the hosts to shape the topics and questions to ensure that topics and hosts are creating appropriate fuel for the conversations. Future campfires should offer training to session facilitators in how to fairly and impartially manage and navigate conversations while concurrently gleaning participants' thoughts and input.

Several hosts mentioned that a separate note-taker for their table, in addition to the facilitator, was (or would have been) highly advantageous because of the difficulty in accurately taking notes while also trying to listen and guide the discussion. Many hosts found participants did not write their ideas down on the paper or sticky notes. However, notes written down on the table can become useful catalysts for the next round of discussions. Therefore, we recommend both table-top/sticky-note-taking by topic hosts and facilitators as well as designating a note-taker who documents main points of the discussion. In some instances, the topic host took on the role of table-top note-taker; this encouraged other participants to begin jotting down their own thoughts, and also helped some hosts listen more actively to participants and resist the urge to share their own expert knowledge

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on the topic or direct the conversation. Other suggestions were, if appropriate, to prepare a single-page summary or infographic about the topic that can be quickly referenced during the discussion or to create simple polls for participants to assess overall opinions of key topics. For example, one table printed a large map for participants to interact with and mark locations where they are noticing changes or trends in land ownership.

The number of participants at each table is also important—too few make for a narrower discussion, and too many make it difficult to keep a discussion on topic. The World Café approach recommends 4 to 5 participants per table. Therefore, an important consideration for planning is the total number of topics relative to the anticipated number of participants. As the first Campfire Conversation event held at an SRM annual meeting, organizers were unsure how many participants to expect. The number of tables offered was based primarily on the number of qualifying topics submitted, and thus the number of hosts, facilitators, and note-takers. Based on the anecdotal reflections of campfire topic teams, conversation was most lively and inclusive at tables with at least six participants and no more than 10 (including the host, facilitator, and note-taker) during a single round of discussion. If a topic is especially popular, one option is to prepare another table and split the group of participants, assuming you have enough hosts and facilitators.

A final lesson learned is to consider in advance whether to publicly share transcripts or other detailed notes and quotes from the campfire conversations. If so, the human subjects review process will need to be followed through an Institutional Review Board, for example, and obtain approval for the research protocol, including informed consent procedures and forms for all participants. All campfire conversation organizers, hosts, facilitators, and note-takers might be required, as part of the approved protocol, to complete an online human subject research training program before interacting with participants.

Building a virtual campfire

The annual meeting was held virtually in 2021 due to COVID-19. We believe a virtual version of a campfire conversation event could be organized and facilitated successfully using commonly available technology. The same steps outlined here could be followed, with a few potential adaptations for an online venue. Although none of us have direct experience hosting a large virtual World Café/Campfire Conversation event, the following potential adaptations are based on our collective experience organizing, hosting, and facilitating interactive online meetings and conferences.

- Topic hosts could prerecord their "pitch" and upload them to an easily accessible location for potential participants to watch in advance.
- Participants could indicate, as part of the annual meeting registration process, which campfire topics (choose three) they wish to participate in.

- Campfire organizers would create virtual breakout rooms, one for each campfire topic during each round of discussion. Organizers then preassign participants to a breakout room that corresponds with a topic they selected during the registration process.
- Following a 20-minute round of discussion, organizers would send participants to, or have participants select, their next virtual breakout room and topic. Participants would complete three rounds of discussion, rotating between three different topics.
- Annotation/whiteboard features could be used to enable participants to jot down their thoughts on a shared screen, which could be built during the three rounds of discussion (i.e., a virtual version of table-top, sticky-note-taking).
- Alternatively, graphic illustrators could sketch visual representations of each topic's driving question, along with a live-sketch built during the three rounds of conversation. However, this visually engaging feature might be too cost-prohibitive, depending on the number of topics.
- A virtual campfire conversation could be more engaging if hosts or facilitators used live polls to ask a few questions at the start of each round of discussion to help participants get to know each other quickly and share some preliminary thoughts about the topic (e.g., a word-association exercise, or asking "What does this topic mean to you?"). A closing poll could ask participants to share one or two words that summarize the discussion from their viewpoint. Hosts or facilitators could create a live word-cloud from participants' responses, as an anonymous and creative way to stimulate engagement, share ideas, and inspire additional thoughts.

Summary

A post-event analysis of the 13 campfire topics and associated conversations revealed several valuable lessons for organizing successful World Café-style sessions, which could help inform similar sessions at future annual meetings (whether in-person or virtual). Broader insights for SRM as an organization also emerged in the form of common themes across multiple campfire topics and conversations. Change was a common theme of many campfire hosts and participants, including social, climatic, ecological, management, and policy changes. To address these changes within complex socioecological rangeland systems, participants highlighted a desire for SRM to grow as an organization by helping provide its members with the following:

- opportunities for multidirectional knowledge exchange among practitioners, managers, producers, policymakers, researchers, students, marginalized stakeholders, and rangeland professionals established or new;
- support for cross-disciplinary research and training among biological, physical, and social scientists from different career stages, including high school and college students;
- exposure to more diverse ways of knowing, such as Traditional Ecological Knowledge, local knowledge from pro-

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- ducers, practitioners' knowledge from the field, and crossgenerational differences in knowledge and understanding;
- support to implement rangeland management plans (e.g., resources for drought preparedness and climate adaptation) after the planning process is completed; and
- thoughtful, deliberate measures to make SRM more connected, inclusive, and welcoming to the diverse spectrum of rangeland trainees, professionals, and stakeholders who might not currently feel a sense of belonging within SRM.

Through these actions and opportunities, SRM members who engaged in the inaugural campfire conversation event could join more members around future campfires to "cuss and discuss" the most pressing rangeland issues, thereby stoking the flames for an even brighter, more vibrant, inclusive, and impactful SRM.

Declaration of Competing Interest

T.T.S. is a current member of the Rangelands Steering Committee, but was not involved in the review or decision process of this manuscript.

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Supplementary materials

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