



U.N. designates 2026 international year of rangelands, 'pastoralists'

By MATTHEW WEAVER Capital Press; Mar 25, 2022

The United Nations has declared 2026 the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.

"For a lot of ranchers, they will say, 'What the hell is a pastoralist?'" said Jim O'Rourke, global chairman for the international year. "Yeah, you are one. A rancher, a cowboy, a cowgirl, whatever, you are a pastoralist. Our hope is that everybody will realize they are a part of this celebration, get involved in their local communities and showcase the good job that they're doing."

The opportunity is "tremendous" for the industry to tout the importance of rangeland and grazing benefits to the public, O'Rourke said. Half of the planet is rangeland, he said. "It's the dominant ecosystem in the world," he said. "Far more carbon sequestration happens on rangeland than any other ecosystem."

O'Rourke is emeritus professor and founder of the range management program at Chadron State College in Chadron, Neb. He and his wife manage a ranch south of Chadron.

A well-managed and grazed ecosystem continually stores carbon, O'Rourke said. "The segment of society that wants to do away with livestock, you're giving away an active carbon sink by doing that," he said. A carbon sink absorbs more carbon from the atmosphere than it releases. "People look at the drive between, let's say, Lincoln, Neb., and Reno, Nev., as drive-through country," O'Rourke said. "They don't realize how important that country is for off-setting the carbon dioxide produced by their cars, buses, airplanes and industrial pollution."

"A lot of people think of rangelands as the 'leftovers' of culture — in fact, in rangeland textbooks, that used to be how they were defined," said Tip Hudson, rangelands and livestock specialist for Washington State University Extension in Ellensburg. "Everything else that didn't fit some perceived higher value of land use could be called rangeland. ... That's no longer the definition."

Within the last 50 years, a more modern definition emerged, calling rangelands landscapes and plant and vegetation communities dominated by grasses, forbs and shrubs that are not forests. The people who use the rangelands tend to be similarly marginalized or forgotten around the world, Hudson said.

The international year designation could raise the visibility of rangeland in useful ways, he said. "Rangelands-based livestock production is probably by definition the most sustainable form of agriculture," he said. "It relies on producing food and fiber from naturally occurring plant communities. If we do it right, we can produce food and fiber in a landscape without diminishing the other ecosystem goods and services that we expect from that landscape, like habitat values, clean air and aesthetic values (and) recreational opportunities."

The international year is a good way to highlight the "fundamental shift" from how things were done 100 years ago to how they're done today, Hudson said.

The designation process for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists began in 2008, O'Rourke said. The IYRP resolution passed March 15. The government of Mongolia submitted the resolution. "It's a rangeland country, it's dominantly rangeland," O'Rourke said. "Mongolia has been very progressive in developing ecological site descriptions, mapping and grazing management."