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## Livestock mobility as a policy for rangeland resource management in western China

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**Key words** : rangeland, western China, nomads, mobility

The grazing lands of Western China are one of the largest rangeland areas in the world, covering about 40% of China's land area. They are an important natural resource, providing critical environmental and economic functions. The rangelands are also complex ecosystems, not only in the ways that physical forces shape the landscape, but also in the ways that socio-economic, political, and institutional forces interact and impact upon the people using the rangeland resources (Sheehy, et al. 2006). For thousands of years, livestock mobility has been an important livestock management strategy in the pastoral areas of Western China (Miller 2002). Current policies to privatize rangelands and settle nomads are greatly altering pastoral production systems that have endured for millennia. Livestock mobility, a fundamental characteristic of the pastoral systems is being reduced or eliminated. For much of Inner Asia, decreased livestock movement has been found to be a major cause of environmental degradation, which suggests that mobility should be an important part of any future policies for the development of the rangelands of Western China (Humphrey and Sneath 1999).

The ecological rationality of livestock mobility is increasingly being emphasized in pastoral development (Niamer-Fuller 1999). In China, current policies and interventions to settle nomads go against state-of-the-art information and analyses for livestock production in arid lands. This body of scientific knowledge champions livestock mobility as a way to sustain the rangelands and nomads' livelihoods. Decades of experience with livestock development in other pastoral areas of the world, and considerable recent research in China, all lead to the conclusion that settling nomads is not appropriate (ALIVE 2007). In Western China, livestock mobility should be encouraged instead of eliminated and nomads should be empowered to manage their own rangelands. As Walker (2006) emphasized, top-down, command-and-control management doesn't work well in social-ecological rangeland systems.

Policies for the pastoral areas in Western China need to move away from the traditional approach of maximizing output to an emphasis on ecologically and economically sustainable development (World Bank 2001). Policies also need to take into account the interests and aspirations of the nomads. Leyland (2006) noted that building the capacity of nomads to advocate for their livelihoods is critical to the sustainable development of rangelands. Nowhere is this more applicable than among the Kazak, Mongolian and Tibetan nomads in Western China who are increasingly being affected by inappropriate development interventions under the Great Western Development Strategy. Nomads themselves need to be more involved in the formulation of policies and the design of development programs. There also has to be a change in attitudes towards nomads and their traditional livestock practices.

In the rangelands of Western China, the optimum ways to reduce risk in pastoral livestock production and promote sustainable livelihoods for nomads is to maintain flexibility of decision-making in livestock management practices, ensure mobility of animals, and guarantee access to a variety of spatially and temporally distributed rangeland resources (Sheehy et al. 1996). Livestock mobility needs to be seen as a positive feature in pastoral livestock production not a hindrance or a traditional practice to be done away with.

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