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Cows Still on the Dole, but on the Run

by Mike Hudak, author of
Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

Since publication of my article “Cows on the Dole,” *EarthTimes*, Jan/Feb 1998, livestock grazing on western public lands has received increasing attention as an environmental and economic disaster of national significance. Before delving into an update, here’s a synopsis of the issue. Livestock, mostly cattle, graze on approximately 244 million acres of federal public lands in the eleven western states—a region roughly eight times the size of New York state. The aridity of these regions during the past 10,000 years prevented survival of any native species even remotely similar to cattle. Hence the vegetation that evolved there never developed defenses against intense herbivory. Consequently, the introduction of cattle into those ecosystems beginning in the 1860s—in some places by the 1600s by Spanish settlers—initiated widespread degradation. Streambanks eroded, water tables dropped, soil productivity declined, weeds invaded and forests became more dense and fire prone. As a result, populations of many wildlife species dependant on these ecosystems have declined—some to the extent that they are now federally listed as threatened or endangered. American taxpayers participate in this environmental tragedy by contributing 90% of what federal agencies spend on their grazing programs; ranchers pay the rest through their meager grazing fees.

So what’s new?

The August 1998 article by Wilcove et al. in the journal *BioScience* disclosed how seriously livestock grazing impacts individual species. Looking at 1,207 species that have been federally listed as endangered, threatened or proposed for listing, mining (including oil and gas extraction) impacts 11% of the species, logging impacts 12%, while livestock grazing impacts 22%. Upon breaking the livestock impacts into two categories the authors found: “Livestock grazing ... is particularly harmful to plants, affecting 33% of endangered plant species compared to 14% of endangered animals.”

In September 1998, at the Sierra Club Council’s meeting in San Francisco, I gave an informal presentation about environmental impacts of livestock grazing in the West. Later that day the delegate from the Rio Grande Chapter (encompassing New Mexico and western Texas) proposed a resolution to the council requesting that the club’s board of directors appoint a task force to examine whether the club’s livestock policy is inconsistent with other club policies, such as those dealing with wilderness, forests and wildlife. The resolution passed overwhelmingly.

As Sierra Club groups in the East have become more aware of livestock grazing's enormous threat to western ecosystems they have increasingly urged the national Sierra Club to oppose grazing on federal public lands. During the past six months Sierra Club groups in Pennsylvania, New York and Wisconsin, as well as the entire chapters of New York and Vermont, have approved such resolutions.

Last February the western livestock industry suffered a major legal defeat with a ruling by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in the case of *Diamond Bar Cattle Company v. U.S.* Contrary to a long-standing contention of many ranchers that they have a "right" to graze livestock on federal public lands, the court reaffirmed earlier court rulings that such grazing is a privilege, subject to revocation by the government at any time.

Just when the courts and environmentalists seem to have the cows on the run, *The Atlantic Monthly*, a mainstream, mass-media magazine published in its July 1999 issue the most glowing article the livestock industry could have hoped for. Cattle, a threat to western ecosystems? Not according to Perri Knize, author of "Wining the War for the West." Although livestock caused damage in the past, Knize acknowledges, modern management actually makes them beneficial to the land. So skillfully written is her article, that its many claims will likely be accepted at face value by the vast majority of readers. I hope that my critique of the article will provide an antidote to the half-truths and outright falsehoods that it perpetrates.

And so, the "War for the West" continues.