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How Livestock Degrade Public Lands at Taxpayer Expense

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

Livestock graze approximately 254 million acres (roughly ten times the area of Kentucky) of federal public land in seventeen western states. Most of this land is unsuited to livestock, being arid or of short growing season. Consequently, more than 265 native plant and wildlife species are now listed, or proposed for listing, as threatened or endangered with livestock implicated as a factor in each species' decline. Livestock production impacts almost twice as many such species as does logging or mining.

Here are a few examples of how livestock, or the practices of the livestock industry, contribute to the degradation of our native plants and wildlife on western public lands.

- Fencing: An estimated 600,000 miles of fences obstruct wildlife movements, and can cause injury or death.
- Roads: An estimated 500,000 miles of roads represent a bare area of about 2 million acres—the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.
- Pest and predator control: The US government annually kills approximately 100,000 predators, and countless competitors, such as prairie dogs. Several of these species are now considered “keystone” species upon which other species depend for survival—170 vertebrate species depend on prairie dogs, for example.
- Vegetation management: To increase forage for livestock, native vegetation is sprayed with herbicides, chained, plowed and reseeded with exotic grasses. Consequently, populations of native wildlife have declined that depend on particular native plants.
- Spread of exotic weeds: Through selective grazing, disturbance of soil crusts, and the transport of seeds in their fur and dung, cattle are a major disperser of weeds such as cheatgrass, medusahead and starthistles over tens of millions of acres. Some of these plants are highly flammable, or unpalatable to both livestock and wildlife.

- Social displacement of native wildlife: mule deer and elk avoid areas grazed by cattle and are thus forced into less suitable habitat.
- Water pollution: Livestock production is the greatest source of non-point water pollution in the West. Contaminants include siltation, excess nitrogen, fecal coliform and fecal streptococcus bacteria. Native trout populations throughout the West have plummeted.
- Destroyers of riparian habitats: Throughout the West, 75–80% of wildlife species depend on riparian areas for survival. Trampling by cattle of stream banks and saplings has, over decades, removed much of the vegetation and degraded the structure of approximately 80% of the West's riparian zones. A 1990 EPA study found Western riparian areas in their worst condition in history.
- Disease transmission to wildlife: Cattle and domestic sheep transmit blue tongue, the most serious disease of pronghorn. Domestic sheep have also been responsible for die offs of bighorn sheep populations.
- Destabilization of fire regimes: By removing fine litter and grasses that suppress tree seedlings, fire regimes in western forests have been altered. Frequent, cool, grass fires have now been replaced by less frequent, but catastrophic stand replacing fires.
- Taxpayer subsidies, estimated at \$500 million annually, allow the western public lands livestock industry to compete with more efficient eastern and midwestern producers. In effect, the destruction outlined above is made possible only by these subsidies. And what do the western public lands ranchers provide in return?—about 2% of the US beef supply, and, in the eleven western states, less than 18,000 jobs.

Want to know more? Mike Hudak will show slides from his visits to livestock-degraded Western public lands during 1997–1999 at the Greater Louisville Group, Tuesday, April 18th [2000].