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Why the Sierra Club Should Adopt a Policy Opposing Commercial Livestock Grazing on Public Lands

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Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

Sierra Club conservation policy is not legislation. Nor is it a training manual for grassroots activists. It is, rather, according to the Club's own Policy on Policies, "statements of Sierra Club conservation objectives ... It is often framed in broad terms and it embodies ideals to which the Club aspires."

It is three such *ideals* which the Draft Grazing Policy #3 (End Commercial Grazing), issued by the Club's Grazing Task Force, embodies. The first ideal is that of *protection*: to protect public lands from the ravages, not only of "livestock grazing," but of "commercial livestock production."

The second ideal is that of *restoration*. Often lands damaged by livestock production will require more than the removal of livestock to heal. Fences and other structures for livestock should be removed. Riparian recovery may be facilitated by planting willows and cottonwoods along banks. Controlled burns may give competitive advantages to native perennial grasses over exotic annuals.

And the third ideal is that of *preservation*. Recognizing that the achievement of the first objective will contribute to the economic pressures on ranchers to develop the private portions of their ranches, the Sierra Club will support efforts to maintain significant habitat as open space. That will most likely occur through legislation providing money for economic assistance, conservation easements or outright purchase of base properties that encompass significant habitat.

In 1996 Sierra Club members voted overwhelmingly to oppose commercial logging on federal public lands. Let's consider some positive consequences for public lands protection stemming from that logging policy, as they will likely have counterparts in our opposition to commercial livestock grazing. First, our logging policy has broadened the spectrum of debate over public lands logging, from "how much" to "whether." Increasingly, the timber

industry has had to defend any logging on public lands. This is a major change from only a few years ago when few people questioned the primacy of “Big Timber” in our national forests. In a letter published in the *Wall Street Journal*, March 22nd, 2000, National Director, Chad Hanson, noted that since the Sierra Club adopted its policy opposing commercial logging, logging levels on federal lands have declined by half. Might we expect a similar change in view from our adoption of a policy opposing commercial livestock grazing?

Second, opposition to commercial logging has focused the debate on subsidized logging. Activists have discovered that it is the entire timber sales program, not just individual sales, that loses money for the government. The enormity of the losses was not realized until people began questioning the sales program as a whole. We can expect similar revelations regarding the grazing program once we have questioned its existence.

Third, the End Commercial Logging campaign has become the first effective challenge to the Multiple Use philosophy of public lands. By demonstrating that the entire logging program is ecologically and economically destructive, activists have raised the issue of whether commercial logging should be a legitimate use of public lands. Since, the Sierra Club adopted its policy opposing commercial logging, support for the Club’s position has risen from 50% to more than 70%, as reported by Chad Hanson in the above mentioned *Wall Street Journal* letter. Similarly, an End Commercial Grazing campaign would demonstrate the ecological and destructive nature of the grazing program, which provides benefits for a small number of private beneficiaries at great cost to taxpayers.

Fourth, as activists have repositioned themselves in fighting at the level of individual timber sales, the government is on the defensive. Now the U.S. Forest Service has reason to believe that the Sierra Club may appeal every sale. Similarly, with an End Commercial Grazing policy federal agencies would have reason to believe that the Club might appeal every allotment management plan.

Finally, the activists who continue to fight individual timber sales are greatly benefited by the “big picture” work of the End Commercial Logging campaign. The very existence of a no-logging campaign has given more power to the activist who sits across the table from an agency appeals officer. Federal agencies know that eventually public pressure will become so great that there can be no more sales. This puts pressure on the agencies to offer fewer sales and to reduce the destructive impact of the ones they do offer. Similar benefits would likely accrue to activists appealing allotment management plans.

An End Commercial Grazing policy would accomplish two additional objectives: it would more easily allow the Club to support federal legislation that would end the federal grazing program. And second, by raising the topic to the national level, it opens the way for creating a broad coalition that includes not only advocates for protecting and restoring fisheries, wetlands, endangered species, birds, and wildlife, but also includes advocates of animal rights and animal welfare, as well as hunters, advocates of public health and true fiscal conservatives.