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Public Lands Ranching: Environmental Destruction at Taxpayer Expense

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

In the eleven western states approximately 254 million acres of federal public lands managed by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are grazed by domestic livestock—an area more than 205 times that of Delaware. Grazing also occurs on many wildlife refuges, and units of the National Park Service, including Grand Teton (WY) and Great Basin National Park (NV). These federal lands encompass a wide diversity of ecosystem types including creosote bush deserts, blackbrush deserts, slickrock mesas, sagebrush flats, pinyon-juniper woodlands, chaparral, ponderosa pine forests, and alpine meadows above timberline. Unlike Midwest prairies, these are areas which, during the past 10,000 years or so, have not experienced intense grazing pressure from large herds of large ungulates. Hence the grasses in these regions have not evolved mechanisms (such as asexual reproduction) to protect themselves from such grazing.

Consequently, livestock grazing in the arid West is a major cause of species endangerment. Among 1,207 plant and animal species listed as endangered, threatened or proposed for listing, 11% are impacted by mining, 12% by logging and 22% by livestock grazing (Wilcove et al. 1998). Here are a few example impacts drawn from the survey paper by Tom Fleischner (1994):

- In a sagebrush desert of Idaho, a grazed site had one-third of the plant species richness of an ungrazed site.
- In a riparian area of Oregon, plant species richness increased from seventeen to forty-five species nine years after removal of livestock.
- Among songbirds, raptors and small mammals there was a 350% increase in use and diversity after eight years rest from grazing in Rich County, Utah.
- In southeastern Oregon, abundance of the Yellow Warbler increased by eight times when grazing intensity was reduced by 75%.

Livestock, of course, typically impact wildlife through alteration of habitat. Although such alterations take different forms in different ecosystems, there are few as surprising as this one summarized in the above-mentioned article by Fleischner: In central Washington, grazing was responsible for changing the physical structure of ponderosa pine forest from an open, park-like overstory with dense grass cover to a community characterized by dense pine reproduction and lack of grasses. Similar forest conversions have been documented elsewhere in the West, and indicate that even if poor logging practices such as high-grading and clearcutting are eliminated from our forests, livestock grazing alone will lead to a decline in forest health and an increase in catastrophic fires.

Can Better Livestock Management Correct These Problems?

Some proponents of the livestock industry (e.g., Knize 1999) have claimed that environmental degradation resulted from long-abandoned grazing practices that have now been replaced by “ecologically sensitive” methods that actually benefit native plants and wildlife. (See Savory (1988) for details.) Sadly, despite anecdotal reports of great environmental improvement with these methods, they have not stood up well to scientific scrutiny.

For example, Pieper and Heitschmidt (1988:135) confront the fundamental claims of Allan Savory by examining a major component of his grazing management system. His claims being “... that dramatic improvements in range condition would occur following proper implementation of a short-duration grazing system ... and ... that both rate of improvement and individual animal performance would be enhanced as stocking rate increased.” Since the time of Savory’s claims “... a considerable number of scientific studies have been completed that specifically address the effects of short-duration grazing on above-ground forage dynamics, hydrologic integrity, and livestock performance. ... In general, these studies do not support the claims that prompted the research.”

Economic Benefits from Grazing Livestock on Federal Lands?

In the eleven western states, ranching on federal public lands provides less than 18,000 jobs (0.06% of total jobs) and 0.04% of the income (Power 1996:Table 8-2). Only about 22% of ranchers in these states even hold federal grazing permits (BLM and USDA 1994:3-65). On a national basis, these ranchers represent only 2% of America’s 1.1 million cattle operators, producing only 3.8% of the nation’s beef cattle, according to the US Department of Agriculture (Rogers and LaFleur 1999).

Why Should Non-Westerners Care What Occurs on Western Public Lands?

Aside from the extensive damage caused by livestock to western ecosystems—loss of clean water, increased soil erosion, decline of forest health, loss of native plants and decreases in wildlife populations—our federal taxes subsidize the very presence of livestock on these lands. A recent investigation by reporters from the San Jose Mercury News revealed that the US Forest Service and BLM together spent \$94 million more on their grazing programs in 1998 than they collected in fees from ranchers (Rogers and LaFleur 1999).

Other investigators claim the subsidies are even greater. Regarding just the western lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, Nelson (1997:666) placed the annual cost of the grazing program at \$200 million, although ranchers paid only \$20 million through their grazing permits.

Hess and Wald (1995), considering both direct and indirect governmental subsidies to the western livestock industry, estimate their cost at \$500 million annually.

An End to Public Lands Ranching?

Many people believe that it is time to begin looking at legislative solutions that will phase out livestock grazing on federal public lands. The environmental impacts and taxpayer subsidies are simply not justified by the meager economic benefits, nor by the value to the nation of the beef coming from these lands.

Where to Learn More

Readers with access to the Internet can find a wealth of information about public lands ranching on the RangeBiome website: <http://rangebiome.org>. In addition to essays and archived news articles, the website provides links to dozens of livestock-related websites throughout the US.

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