

The West *For* Itself—Perhaps At Last¹

Mike Hudak, 19 January 2012 (revised 20 February 2012)

Imagine the West's public lands without fences, without stock tanks, without wells and pipelines. And with fewer roads.

Imagine public lands where bison, wild horses, ground-nesting birds like sage grouse, and large carnivores can roam free of conflicts with people who financially profit from these lands.

Imagine these lands with lush streamside grasses, forbs, and trees—alder, willow, and cottonwood. Trees filled with songbirds. Trees lining clear, deep streams teeming with large numbers of healthy fish.

And imagine some implications of these changes: over time fewer roads would mean fewer weeds. Fewer weeds, less need for herbicides. Less herbicide, less poisoning of stream invertebrates, and less bioaccumulation in the fish that eat them.

Fewer fences would mean less hindrance to movement of deer and antelope. And less predation on sage grouse, as the fences provide convenient perches for raptors that prey on nests and young birds.

Less extraction of groundwater would mean a higher water table. Springs and streams currently dry may again support aquatic life.

For communities adjacent to public lands, imagine greater economic opportunity and diversity, particularly in businesses related to recreation, but extending to many providers of goods and services.

These benefits, and many more, would emerge if we did just one thing—reduce the presence of ranching on public lands. And I'm not talking just about making livestock grazing less harmful. Ranching really must be reduced, because much of ranching's harm is inherent in its essential infrastructure and practices—fencing, the building and use of roads, the extraction of water, the alteration of fire regimes, even the truncation of the food web.

How might we begin to reduce ranching in a way that simultaneously benefits the environment, the taxpayer, rural communities, and even ranchers? The means are already at hand in the form of legislation introduced last November by Congressman Adam Smith (WA-9). Known as the Rural Economic Vitalization Act or REVA (rhymes with "Reba"), this bill would accomplish these objectives in a manner that is timely, cost effective, and agreeable to everyone involved.

1. The title recalls Bernard DeVoto's January 1947 article in *Harper's* titled "The West Against Itself" in which DeVoto stated that "The cattlemen came from Elsewhere into the empty West. They were always arrogant and always deluded. They thought themselves free men, the freest men who ever lived, but even more than other Westerners they were peons of their Eastern bankers and of the railroads which the bankers owned and the exchanges and stockyards and packing plants which the bankers established to control their business. With the self-deception that runs like a leitmotif through Western business, they wholeheartedly supported their masters against the West and today support the East against the West. They thought of themselves as Westerners and they did live in the West, but they were the enemies of everyone else who lived there."

The legislation is really very simple. It transfers a certain authority from the U.S. government to ranchers who hold federal grazing permits—specifically, the authority to direct the government to both retire one’s permit and to permanently close the associated grazing allotment. That authority is needed because the government is usually too intimidated by the “grazing lobby” to permanently close a grazing allotment even under the most dire environmental conditions.

Why might a rancher choose to take such an action? In most cases, because someone has offered him money, and because the rancher has concluded that for him it makes sense to receive value for his grazing permit without the need to sell his base property.

Since the late 1990s, private financial donors have teamed up with ranchers in ad hoc agreements to retire grazing permits at several locations—Great Basin National Park, the Mojave Preserve, the Greater Yellowstone region, and Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument among them. At this time, several million dollars are available for permit retirement in the Great Basin. REVA’s enactment would surely bring even more private funding to the table, especially in regions where there are high-profile conflicts between ranching and wildlife—conflicts that negatively impact birds, fish, wolves and other “problem” animals.

Reasons why a rancher would accept money for his grazing permit will be as varied as the people involved. Frequently, he’ll want to retire or to restructure his business. Perhaps prolonged drought has greatly reduced the income producing value of his grazing permit.

As ranchers would begin to cash in their permits, the numerous advantages of the legislation would become obvious. For the taxpayer, government overruns of the federal grazing program would decrease. By the government’s own admission, this program is a perennial money loser that spends six dollars for every dollar brought in through grazing fees.² And these are just for the direct costs of managing grazing on federal lands. When indirect costs are included, the ratio of expenditures to income is more like twenty to one.³

Then there are economic benefits to rural communities. In fact, the legislation is titled the “Rural Economic Vitalization Act” specifically because of its potential, not just to inject capital into a community through funding received by a rancher for his grazing permit, but to vitalize a variety of rural businesses.

I’ll give you a few examples of what we might expect. In the Central Winter Ecosystem Management Area on Arizona’s Kaibab Plateau, the current hunting level for mule deer produces an annual economic benefit of \$922,604 compared to \$45,988 for livestock grazing.

2. United States Government Accountability Office. *Livestock Grazing: Federal Expenditures and Receipts Vary, Depending on the Agency and the Purpose of the Fee Charged*. GAO-05-869, Sept. 2005, 6.

3. NPLGC, “The Cost of the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Livestock Grazing Programs,” available at www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/PDF/FS_Fiscal_Costs.PDF. Examples of indirect costs include programs for “Land Management Planning,” “Inventory and Monitoring,” and “Wildlife and Fisheries Habitat Management.” See Table 1 (Forest Service Indirect Grazing Costs) and Table 2 (Bureau of Land Management Indirect Grazing Costs) for the complete list of affected programs and annual appropriations. Comparable amounts for the total of direct and indirect costs of the Forest Service and BLM grazing programs have been independently reported in “Subsidized Cow Chow,” *The Economist* (March 7, 2002), 39; Karl Hess Jr. and Johanna H. Wald, “Grazing Reform: Here’s the Answer,” *High Country News* 27, no. 18 (October 2, 1995).

Because hunter demand outstrips availability of deer tags, reduced ranching that would allow more forage for deer production would increase economic benefit to the region.⁴

Reducing the forage consumed by cattle in California's X5 hunting zones would allow deer populations to increase from 5,200 animals to 15,000 animals, with the resulting economic benefit increasing from 16-times to 54-times current management—even further when including other game species as well as nongame wildlife values that would benefit from reduced cattle grazing.⁵

Economic benefits that would accrue from recreational fishing on streams restored through reduction of livestock grazing in California's Golden Trout Wilderness are conservatively estimated at between \$148,000 and \$713,000 annually, while current economic benefits from livestock grazing are estimated at only \$35,000.⁶

Removing cattle from Arizona's San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (NCA) in 1987, by 1991 led to increased density of herbaceous vegetation by four- to six-fold in riparian and mesquite grassland communities. Of 61 bird species studied, mean detections per kilometer increased for 42 species and decreased for 19 (species commonly found *outside* of riparian zones such as desert-scrub species and cavity nesters). The number of individuals of all avian species detected on surveys increased from 103/kilometer to 221/kilometer.⁷ Annual non-resident birder visitation to the San Pedro NCA during 2000–2001 was estimated at 25,194,⁸ producing direct expenditures of \$9.64 million and total economic output of \$16.2 million.⁹

As riparian areas and uplands recover their plant productivity¹⁰ after removal of livestock, opportunities such as these will arise throughout the West. Today's public lands ranchers can be among the people who will benefit from these opportunities, if only they have the courage to move beyond the limitations of their current profession.

Many public lands ranchers already have such a vision. A study from 2006 found that about half of Nevada's public lands ranchers would cash in their grazing permits for the

4. Viewed in terms of an "animal unit month" (AUM) of forage, that's \$22.95 of economic benefit for each AUM consumed by livestock compared to \$129.41 for each AUM consumed by mule deer. J. A. Souder, "Valuing Resources and Uses in the Central Winter Ecosystem Management Area, North Kaibab Ranger District" (College of Ecosystem Science and Management, School of Forestry, NAU, Flagstaff, AZ, 1997), 21–22.

5. B. Roach, J. Loomis, and R. Motroni, "Economic Analysis of Deer Management Alternatives on Public Lands in Northern California." *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* 1 (1996): 14–23.

6. The estimate for recreational fishing is conservative because it does not include non-fishing recreation values—passive-use values. There would be the option to maintain the species for future fishermen, to assure the general public that the California state fish continues to thrive in the wild, and to bequest viable populations of the golden trout to future generations. Studies suggest that these passive-use values are at least equal to and may be several times greater than recreation use values. Carolyn Alkire, "Economic Value of Golden Trout Fishing in the Golden Trout Wilderness," California (California Trout, 2003), 3.

7. David Krueper, Jonathan Bart, and Terrell D. Rich, "Response of Vegetation and Breeding Birds to the Removal of Cattle on the San Pedro River, Arizona (U. S. A.)," *Conservation Biology* 17, no. 2 (2003): 607.

8. Patricia Orr and Bonnie Colby, "Nature-Oriented Visitors and Their Expenditures: Upper San Pedro River Basin" (College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, The University of Arizona, February 2002), 5.

9. Extrapolated from "Nature-Oriented Visitors," Table 6.

10. "In 1980 the United States Department of Agriculture estimated the vegetation on more than half all western rangelands was deteriorated to less than 40% of potential productivity, and to less than 60% of potential on more than 85% of the rangeland." Ed Chaney, Wayne Elmore and William S. Platts, *Livestock Grazing on Western Riparian Areas* (Environmental Protection Agency, July 1990), 5. Working through the math in the quotation suggests that overall vegetative productivity had declined 50 percent or more. No broad-based studies indicate that productivity has significantly changed since that report.

right price.¹¹ Why then isn't there a groundswell of ranchers in support of legislation that facilitates permit retirement? In large part we need look no further than the ranching organizations that oppose this legislation. As best that I can determine, their position reflects the preference of large ranchers, which in this regard is at odds with the best interest of small ranchers—large ranchers preferring to acquire small ranches at low cost rather than to cash in their own permits at this time. And what better way to improve one's chance of acquiring a small ranch at low cost than to curtail the options of the person selling one?¹²

But although neglectful of the greedy, the Rural Economic Vitalization Act holds the promise of boosting the West's broad economy through payments to ranchers and by initiating the restoration of that region's natural heritage.

And those of you who enjoy the sight of our western landscapes populated by cattle need not fear that even the most enthusiastic application of this legislation would lead to their disappearance. More than 75 percent of western ranchers run cattle only on private land.¹³ Perhaps a little less competition from highly-subsidized public lands ranchers would improve their bottom line as well.

11. G. Cornelis van Kooten, Roy W. Thomsen, and Tom Hobby, "Resolving Range Conflict in Nevada! Buyouts and Other Compensation Alternatives," *Review of Agricultural Economics*, 17, no. 4 (2006), 529.

12. This story is as old as western ranching itself as we learn from the statement: "...the big cattlemen squeezed out the little ones wherever possible, grabbing the water rights, foreclosing small holdings, frequently hiring gunmen to murder them. And, being Western individualists and therefore gifted with illusion, the little cattlemen have always fought the big ones' battles, have adopted and supported their policies to their own disadvantage and to the great hurt of the West." Bernard DeVoto, 1947, "The West Against Itself," *Harper's*.

13. Number of beef ranches obtained from United States Department of Agriculture, *2007 Census of Agriculture*, Vol. 1, Geographic Area Series, Part 51, AC-07-A-51, Table 1. State Summary Highlights: 2007. Number of Forest Service permits obtained from United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Grazing Statistical Summary FY2009*, February 2011. Number of BLM permits and leases obtained from U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, *Public Land Statistics 2010*, Vol. 195, BLM/OC/ST-11/001+1165 (June 2011), Table 3-9c.