

The Impacts of Retiring Grazing Permits

Issue

Federal rangelands administered by the U. S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are grazed by livestock under permits issued to private ranchers. Federal grazing permits are essential to the economic viability of many ranches and to the balanced use of private, state, or other lands that are intermingled with the federal land. In recent years, some have promoted the concept of “permit buyout” as a means of reducing and limiting the amount of grazing on public lands. Though no legislation has been introduced in the 109th Congress, there have been attempts in recent years to support legislation that would provide federal taxpayer money to pay ranchers to relinquish their federal permits and would direct the management agency to put the permitted rangeland into perpetual non-use. This potential buyout could eliminate approximately 571,000 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) of grazing off Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service Lands in the western United States.

Problem

The threat of losing livestock grazing on public rangelands in the western United States is increasingly real. With more public pressures on these lands, environmental activists and special interest groups are funding their agenda to put an end to historic public lands grazing permits. Besides using appeals and litigation against grazers and federal land management agencies over grazing allotments, these groups are lobbying to pass legislation to pursue the strategy of using taxpayer dollars to voluntarily buy out ranchers who use public land allotments to help sustain part of their ranching operations.

If this permanent grazing buyout were to be passed into law, the effects to local economies, rangeland health and ecology, and the culture of western communities would be devastating. Many public lands grazing opponents underestimate or don't understand the productivity and profitability of grazing renewable forage resources from these lands. They use emotional propaganda instead of sound science to gain public support, and raise money to fight public lands grazing and multiple use practices. In addition, the benefits from grazing to maintain or improve the health of watersheds and the resources are not understood in today's public lands management decisions as it once was.

How this would affect your constituents

In Utah, animal agriculture contributes to almost 80% of the state's agricultural receipts, with the majority of these animals relying on forage from the state's public lands. These contributions would also be consistent with the other Intermountain States around us. The majority of Western farmers and ranchers rely on public lands to support their cattle herds for part of the year. Without federal land grazing, these producers would not be able to support the same number of cattle that they can with federal land grazing allotments. Ranchers who would support selling their allotments to a buyout program would be forced to:

- Cease cattle production
- Drastically reduce their cattle numbers they are currently running
- Subdivide their privately owned ranchlands to replace income lost from their annual cattle sales (unless rancher is already wealthy).

This would create a significant negative impact from the agricultural dollars that are turned over in a community many times before it falls out of circulation i.e.; (banks, gasoline/diesel suppliers,

ranch/cattle supplies, veterinary services, equipment, grocery stores, trucking industry, etc.) versus a one time, short term benefit to a producer.

This permit buyout program would have only one objective- the elimination of grazing on public lands, and therefore, the virtual elimination of livestock production in the western states. Properly conducted range livestock production is not only ecological sound, but also provides an income to both the federal government and local economies that otherwise would come out of the taxpayers' pockets. Where grazing is discontinued or private ranches are subdivided the long-term health of watersheds is at risk due to the fragmentation of habitat and changes in land uses at the urban interface with public lands which eventually demands ongoing additional costs to be serviced and protected by county and state governments.

What you can do about this issue

Support the laws enacted by Congress regarding how grazing is to be governed, and the public planning process that has been established under those laws. Any decision to graze or not to graze public land grazing allotments must be consistent with direction in land use plans. Neither individuals nor government agencies have the right to make land use decisions not consistent with existing land use plans, government policy, and federal law.

Support efforts to strengthen federal multiple use policy and encourage agencies to be more proactive by touting the benefits of grazing and multiple use, publicizing successes, and telling how grazing can be compatible and a good management tool. The federal land should benefit communities in areas without large private land bases to take advantage of.

Finally, Congressman Renzi (R-AZ) has introduced H.R. 411, the "Cattlemen's Bill of Rights". H.R. 411 (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c109:1:/temp/~c109Ep9Vlp>;) would recognize the importance of livestock ranching to the continued economic vitality of the western states; reinforces our national policy of the public grazing; and would compensate ranchers when they are forced by law to relinquish their grazing permits.

Help educate your counterparts in Congress from the non-public lands states about the realities and impacts permit buyout legislation would have on the western states regarding loss of local economies, cultural diversity, sustainable public lands and rangeland health.

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