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JULY 1999

Winning the War for the West

After fiercely battling each other over the best use of public lands, some ranchers and environmentalists are beginning to agree: letting livestock graze can benefit the environment

by [Perri Knize](#)

(The online version of this article appears in three parts. Click here to go to parts [two](#) and [three](#).)

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IN June of last year, while ranchers in Natrona County, Wyoming, waited out three days of rain to finish branding their calves, vandals calling themselves "Islamic Jihad Ecoterrorists" cut the barbed-wire fences separating [Bureau of Land Management](#) public range from private land, allowing the unbranded cattle of seven neighbors to mix. More than 150 cuts were made, resulting in about \$100,000 in damage. At least two perpetrators left notes under rocks and nailed to posts on county roads reading, "No more welfare for cowboys" and "Just in time for the welfare cowboys' convention."

It was only one of the more extreme

offensives in an ongoing regional battle over who owns the West. Ranchers today are up against a world that no longer views cowboys with nostalgia. The epithet "welfare cowboys" has become common in the national media, along with calls for an end to subsidized grazing on public lands. At the forefront of the grazing controversy are environmental groups, from the [National Wildlife Federation](#) and the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) to grassroots organizations like the [Southwest Center for Biological Diversity](#) and the [Oregon Natural Resources Council](#). The time has come, they say, to make rich and politically powerful "corporate" ranchers -- an elite that has dominated the affairs of the West for more than a century -- pay the full cost of the range program and manage their herds to environmentally correct standards. Better yet, some groups say, run them off the range, and use the land only for wildlife and recreation.

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From the archives:

["The Rancher Subsidy,"](#) by Todd

According to critics, domestic livestock that spend some time on the public range -- 88 percent of western sheep and roughly half of western cattle -- are defecating in trout streams, trampling stream banks, and denuding the ground of forage and protective cover needed by wildlife, wreaking havoc on fragile ecosystems. Even worse, the public is paying for this devastation: federal outlays for the management of public grazing lands exceed permit fees from ranchers.

This call to arms is based on half-truths,

**Oppenheimer
(January, 1996)**

The West's fabled ranchers are in trouble. The damage done to the land by cattle has become a contentious environmental issue. The ranchers' greatest enemy, though, is the free market.

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

**Flashbacks:
"The American Way of Beef," (May 20, 2003)**

Concern for the character of American beef, as articles from *The Atlantic's* archive show, is not new, and might demand an old-fashioned solution.

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skewed facts, and outright fallacies. The typical public-lands rancher is not a wealthy cattle baron. Though his ranch may be registered as a family corporation, he is barely making a living. His permit fees are not a form of subsidy -- he has already paid full market value for the right to graze public lands. Overall the federal range is in better condition than it has been in more than a century. Furthermore, many scientists who study what happens to land where cattle graze admit that no definitive case can be made for or against livestock grazing.

It would be comforting to believe, for the sake of the West's future, that the Islamic Jihad Ecoterrorists terrorized the Wyoming ranchers only because they do not realize how debilitating any extra burden can be for a struggling ranch family. But then, few people in our technological age can comprehend the backbreaking physical labor during every daylight hour -- with no vacations and little financial reward -- that a western livestock operation requires.

Even worse for these families, cattle prices are about the lowest they have been in twenty years -- and operating costs and land values have skyrocketed as new residents inundate the region. This means that the pickup truck a rancher could buy in the 1950s with the proceeds from selling eight steers now costs more than forty steers. On average, ranchers make only a two percent return on their operations, and many don't do that well. They would be better off

**Non-Federal
Grazing Lands
in the United
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"Well-managed, healthy grazing lands are important for food and fiber, water quantity and quality, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, sustainable agriculture and rural life, and mitigation of global climate change." A report posted by the United States Department of Agriculture.

**Federal
Rangeland
"Management"
Manages to
Destroy the
Environment**

"Friends of the Earth has collaborated with Range Watch to put together this exposition on the damage caused by commercial grazing on our public lands."

liquidating their assets and putting them in a passbook savings account. Instead they turn down big offers from real-estate developers, put up with "ecoterrorists," and hang on by taking temporary jobs in town when the cattle market bottoms out. Ranching, it would seem, is a profession for romantic idealists, not profiteers. Those who hew to it do so for only one reason -- they love the land and their way of life.

Caught in the Crossfire

DEAN Welborn, a lifelong cattle rancher, was sixty-three, suffering from bursitis, and looking for a way that his son and daughter-in-law and their four children could continue to ranch without him.

Welborn figured he'd have to sell the Lima Peaks outfit in southwest Montana that he has owned for thirty years and buy a smaller, more manageable place. But before he could buy the nearby Briggs ranch, he needed to know if federal managers would let him run enough cattle on the ranch's attached 25,000-acre grazing allotment on public lands, known as the Muddy Creek allotment, to make the operation pay.

It looked promising. The Bureau of Land Management's file on the allotment -- habitat for elk, mule deer, nesting waterfowl, and a pure strain of West Slope cutthroat trout -- reported that it was showing continual improvement from the years when the land had been severely overgrazed by domestic sheep and cattle. BLM managers had recommended the

**Livestock
Grazing and
Water Quality**

"Grazing damages more river miles than any other source of non-industrial pollution in the West." A briefing on the hazards of grazing by the Natural Resources Defense Council.

**Congress --
Save Our
Western Range**

"Wilderness areas and national parks have been victimized by overgrazing. Meanwhile, ranchers have been rewarded for ravaging the West by reaping subsidies from taxpayers." A delineation of the National Wildlife Foundation's position on Western public rangelands.

Muddy Creek permit holders for a Stewardship Award in 1989, and had granted a 15 percent increase in cattle numbers for 1990. Welborn bought the ranch in the spring of 1992, believing that the BLM's glowing review made it safe to assume that stock allocations would remain the same.

But 1992 was a bad year for safe assumptions in the cattle business. Anti-grazing sentiment was running high in the environmental movement and in Washington, D.C.: the cry was "Cattle-free in '93." After the election of Bill Clinton the Department of the Interior -- parent agency of the BLM -- came out in force against grazing. The new Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, proposed a series of "range reforms," including doubling grazing fees, setting national land-management standards, and changing the agency's objectives from cattle and grass production to ecosystem health.

In response to these pressures the U.S. Forest Service -- the other manager of the federal range -- and the BLM set new standards and guidelines for grazing permits. The region where Welborn ranches became a demonstration area for what some characterize as a "cookbook" grazing prescription: throw the cows off the stream banks when animal tracks exceed a certain number, and throw the cows off the grass when stubble height is down to a certain number of inches. The goal was an easily

applied standard that would help riparian zones, along the banks of streams and lakes, and uplands, above the stream banks, recover from more than a century of destructive overgrazing.

The Muddy Creek allotment was one of two areas chosen for aggressive implementation of the Beaverhead Riparian Guidelines, named for the Forest Service office that drafted them. After the BLM transferred the allotment to Welborn, managers reduced his allowable herd by 72 percent. This not only left Welborn financially hamstrung (he has since used up his family's savings trying to keep the ranch afloat) but also ended up threatening the trout fishery it was intended to protect. With his cattle sometimes thrown off Muddy Creek after only three days of grazing, Welborn has no choice but to graze them on his own deeded land -- the location, ironically, of most of the prime West Slope cutthroat-trout habitat.

Being forced to degrade fisheries habitat does not sit well with Dean Welborn. He hardly fits the profile of the environmentally rapacious cattle rancher: he and fellow members of the Snowline Grazing Association, a ranching collaborative, have fenced off riparian areas for neotropical birds; pulled noxious weeds so that they don't go to seed; and put in water troughs to lure cows away from riparian zones. "We've gone out of our way to be good stewards of the soil," he says.

Ecosystems are far more complex and

chaotic than anyone fully understands, and the Beaverhead guidelines, critics say, don't allow for that complexity. With cows moved off his allotment after very short use, Welborn claims, the upland grass is not being grazed enough to attract wildlife. Elk, deer, wild sheep, and antelope prefer the younger, more palatable shoots that are stimulated by the pruning of cattle grazing - a function that bison once provided in the same region. So the wild animals, instead of grazing the uplands, make camp in the riparian areas, where the vegetation is tender and lush. Hundreds of elk pound the stream banks and pollute the water with their droppings, just as cattle do. But the BLM doesn't manage wildlife.

In 1994 Welborn persuaded the BLM to reconsider the Beaverhead Riparian Guidelines. A new BLM area manager who was sympathetic to Welborn's predicament and understood the threat to the trout drafted a remedial management plan, but it was quickly appealed by a local environmentalist. After three years of waiting for a hearing in federal court, the BLM finally withdrew the remedial plan and at press time was drafting another allotment-management plan. In the meantime, Welborn has had to abide by the standards and guidelines in the 1993 grazing plan. He says he hopes that the new plan will allow him to run enough cattle to make his ranch viable while enhancing the natural-resource value of the land. Otherwise, he says, he will have to put his

ranch up for sale, and the grazing restrictions will oblige any new owner to subdivide it.

Continued...

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