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JULY 1999

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The Ranching "Subsidy"

IN fiscal year 1998 the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service together spent at least \$75 million on the federal grazing program, and took in only about \$20 million in grazing fees. This deficit does not mean, however, that ranchers underpay. Setting aside for the moment the questions of whether ranchers should bear the full cost of the range program and whether taxpayers benefit from it, the fact is that 90 percent of ranchers with grazing allotments have paid full value for their leases, though the money didn't go to the federal government.

The value of a ranch is based on the number of cows it can support, so a grazing allotment attached to a ranch adds significant value to the deeded land. The buyer of a ranch has no choice but to pay for this added market value. Although courts have ruled that grazing permits are not private commodities to be traded, federal agencies customarily transfer them to the buyers of private land to which they are attached. Banks recognize them as a

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commodity by financing their purchase, and the government recognizes their private-property value by taxing it.

Only the approximately 10 percent of public-lands ranchers who are still on their families' original homesteads are receiving a subsidy, in that they did not have to pay for their ranches or their allotments. These subsidies were legislated because grazing on the public range was a necessity if the West was to be settled. The Homestead Act granted pioneers only 160 acres in country where that much land might support just one or two cows; the land's aridity and ruggedness make it useless for most other forms of agriculture. Both the allotments and the homesteads were given as incentives to build communities in the West, and fees were set low to encourage private investment to improve these public lands.

Such incentives are of course obsolete today, when the West is growing faster than any other part of the country. But when all the costs of private and public forage are compared, it becomes clear that in many cases ranchers pay more for public range than they do for private. On average, according to some economic studies, it is a wash.

Even so, many ranchers say they would pay more for their permits before they would give up ranching -- if their banks would let them. They've invested money and sometimes the effort of generations in their

allotments, and consider these to be part of their ranches. Ranchers say they will pay more if need be even though they are subsidized far less than the average citizen: agricultural landowners get back only twenty-one cents' worth of local public services for every tax dollar they spend, whereas people living in low-density residential areas get a return of \$1.36, according to a 1990 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Related link:

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An argument
against grazing,
posted by
George
Wuerthner on
the U.S. Forest
Service's
message board.

When confronted with these facts, many of ranching's harshest critics say that their central concern is not federal spending but the impact of grazing on biodiversity. In their view, all grazing is environmentally destructive, and it is impossible to manage livestock responsibly on the West's fragile, arid public lands. George Wuerthner, an ardent and well-known anti-grazing activist, claims, "Livestock grazing is the single most ecologically damaging activity we engage in."

Yet it is the rancher who monitors land and wildlife conditions that would otherwise be neglected by short-staffed agencies. It is the rancher who enters into agreements with state fish-and-game departments to allow the public to hunt and fish on his ranch, because that is where most of the wildlife is. And it is the rancher who through the winter feeds much of the wildlife the public enjoys watching.

Both ranchers and wildlife would suffer if cattle were entirely removed from the

public range. BLM and Forest Service lands together support about four million cattle. If those cattle had to be sold quickly because there was no place to put them, prices would plunge, and the cost of private forage in the West would rise by about 10 percent, destabilizing even ranchers not dependent on grazing allotments. Those public-lands ranchers who did survive would have to graze their private land intensively, regardless of the impact on wildlife. After failed ranches had been sold and divvied up into suburban-style lots with tract houses, dogs, fences, and noxious weeds, it would be difficult at best for wildlife to find what was left of their winter range. When ranchers are forced to sell, we lose precisely what environmentalists say they are fighting for -- wildlife habitat.

What Is a "Natural" Landscape?

IN 1990 the Bureau of Land Management reported that the public range was in the best condition yet this century, and improving. The Forest Service has said the same thing. But a report issued by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the National Wildlife Federation at about the same time declared that the condition of the public range was "unsatisfactory."

Both views may be correct, and both may be wrong. According to the National Research Council, a division of the National Academy of Sciences, we have no consistent field data that can be used to test theories or make general statements about

the health of grasslands. The agencies' and the environmental groups' reports used the same data, according to a follow-up study by the General Accounting Office. The GAO, for its part, found that 29 percent of BLM rangelands are in excellent to good condition, 43 percent are in fair to poor condition, and 28 percent have not yet been classified. The BLM points out that it does not define these terms as we might in common parlance: "fair" or "poor" conditions might include high-quality forage, cover for wildlife, watershed protection, and an aesthetically pleasing landscape -- but not conditions that fulfill some management objectives, such as the presence of plants like those found by the first settlers.

What almost everyone does agree on is that from about 1880 to 1930 livestock grazing did terrible harm to the public range, and the range is slow to recover. But conditions have vastly improved since the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, in 1934, which for the first time restricted grazing and imposed fees on what are now BLM lands. The number of western livestock sank drastically, from 28.6 million in 1934 to 10.3 million in 1994. Additional protective legislation was passed in the 1970s. And grazing management has improved. Rangeland acreage rated good or excellent has more than doubled since the 1930s, according to the BLM, and acreage rated poor has been halved. Wildlife populations have been rebounding; more wildlife is on

these lands today than at any other time in this century.

Although it is generally acknowledged that riparian zones are still suffering, until a decade or two ago no one understood their importance, and riparian recovery efforts are just beginning. Aggressive restoration programs are now in place, using methods such as installing water tanks to divert cattle from streams, selective exclosure fencing to keep cattle off stream banks, and rotational grazing systems that change the timing and the duration of grazing. The GAO has found these efforts to be very successful, calling the improvements "dramatic." When we see degraded rangeland today, for the most part we are seeing the sins of ranchers' grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Today's progressive ranchers have no plans to return to those methods; they have found that ecosystem management is ultimately more economical, producing healthier cattle and better forage.

Yet environmentalists would have us believe that cattle grazing is an ecological evil on a par with clear-cut logging and open-pit mining. There is no justification for this claim. Modern livestock grazing has comparatively little environmental impact. Nevertheless, many environmentalists simply want all ranchers off the public lands. Some two dozen U.S. environmental groups have signed on to the Wildlands Project, a plan to create a reserve stretching from Central America to the Arctic Circle,

in order to protect biodiversity. Dave Foreman, a founder of Earth First! and now chairman of the Wildlands Project, describes it as a vision of "extensive areas of native vegetation ... off-limits to human exploitation. Vast landscapes without roads, dams, motorized vehicles, powerlines, overflights, or other artifacts of civilization."

The appeal for many is the idea of restoring the West to its natural condition. But what is "natural"? Researchers call it an unscientific and unrealistic standard. We do not know what "natural" looks like, and even if we did, it is probably no longer achievable, in view of the changes that have occurred on the land during the past century, including the introduction of exotic species -- especially noxious weeds.

Although it might seem logical to say that because domestic livestock were introduced, they are inherently undesirable, longtime observers of range ecology have discovered otherwise. In recent years wildlife biologists at the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks have returned cattle to wildlife management areas as part of a cooperative arrangement with local ranchers. They have observed that when cattle remove rank vegetation, in the fall, they enhance spring fodder for geese, elk, and antelope. Cattle are also used in these areas as a reseeding tool; they knock the seeds from mature seed heads to the ground and plant them with their

trampling. The capacity of cattle to revegetate has proved useful, too, for reclaiming mining sites in Arizona that have resisted reclamation by other means.

Efforts to remove all cattle from wildlife areas have proved in some instances to be misguided. Managers at the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, in Oregon, are perplexed by a drop in antelope numbers only seven years after livestock were banished from the refuge so that the land could "recover." The managers theorize that the problem is a rising number of coyotes, which prey on antelope fawns. But local ranchers say that the managers have it wrong: numbers are dropping because pronghorn antelope depend on cattle to clear away older grasses and make available younger, more palatable shoots.

"Whatever you do to change habitat will benefit some species and negatively impact others," Jack Ward Thomas, a wildlife biologist and a former chief of the U.S. Forest Service, says. "It's not as simple as getting the cows on or off."

It is likely that ungrazed grasslands will burn far more frequently than grazed ones; if cows are removed, wildlife populations will change, as palatable forage for elk, antelope, and deer decreases and annual plants and the animal species that prefer them also decline. There will be fewer rodents, which will mean less food for raptors, coyotes, and other predators.

"The question is, How do you make changes that will improve range conditions in a reasonable time frame and also not negatively affect people's ability to make a living?" says Donald J. Bedunah, a plant ecophysiologicalist at the University of Montana. "I don't believe rapid change is necessary. We don't have to persecute ranchers to accomplish what is needed."

Continued...

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The Atlantic Monthly; July 1999; Winning the War for the West - 99.07 (Part Two); Volume 284, No. 1; page 54-62.

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