

April 26, 2004

## Western Drought Limits Options for Public Lands Ranchers

Dear Colleague:

Drought has now plagued the American West for five years and there is no end in sight. Drought affects everyone from urbanites to rural farmers but few have felt the impact as severely as ranchers dependent on federal public lands. Even in good years, turning a profit on these – the most marginal of rangelands – is a long shot, but in times of drought, it has become unfeasible for many.

The PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER recently reported that dryness may be the rule and moisture the exception in the West. Julio L. Betancourt of the U.S. Geological Survey writes:

*In the upper Colorado River Basin, none of the dry spells in the 20th century approach the severity or duration of extreme droughts in the tree-ring record, and the last 100 years stand out as the wettest century of the millennium.<sup>1</sup>*

Only one in five western ranchers raise livestock on federal land. In places, this land is relatively ill-suited to grazing when compared with nearby private land and especially private land in the Mid-West and East. Despite paying below-cost grazing fees, permittees are lucky if their investments keep pace with inflation. The unforgiving nature of these lands, amplified by drought, and coupled with changing beef markets has left federal grazing permittees and lessees with stranded investments and few options.

With inadequate forage and looming loan payments – many permittees/lessees, particularly in Arizona, have had no choice but to sell their herds and go to work in cities to pay the bills. For these ranchers, returning rains would do little good because current law would require them to begin grazing again or risk losing their permits. Those unable to afford new herds would be left with no choice but to subdivide and sell their private land.

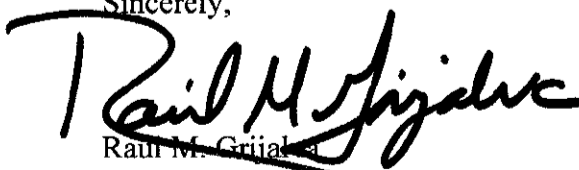
**Legislation has been introduced that would provide an alternative for the hardest-hit permittees/lessees.** The Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act (H.R. 3324) and the Arizona Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act (H.R. 3337) would give ranchers the option of voluntarily relinquishing their permits in exchange for a generous one-time payment. With this, they could restructure their operations on more viable private lands, start a new business, get out of debt, or retire.

Besides providing much needed aid, this legislation – by retiring the associated allotments – would provide considerable savings to taxpayers. The federal grazing programs cost the Treasury between \$130 and \$500 million annually while collecting only \$7 million. For every dollar spent under these bills, the Treasury would realize nearly five dollars in savings.

The vegetation not used by domestic livestock would be made available for native wildlife and retained to improve both water quality and quantity.

**This legislation is completely voluntary and applies only to federal lands.** Please contact Rachel Kondor in my office at 225-2435 to cosponsor H.R. 3337 or 3324.

Sincerely,



Raul M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress

<sup>1</sup> Betancourt, Julio L. *The Current Drought (1999-2003) in Historical Perspective*; Desert Laboratory, U.S. Geological Survey & University of Arizona