

Livestock Grazing Damages Western Public Lands, Water and Wildlife

May 11, 2004

Dear Senator:

We write to urge you to support the Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act (H.R. 3324) and the Arizona Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act (H.R. 3337). These bills are a compromise that will benefit both the environment and federal grazing permittees/lessees.

No single activity adversely affects western landscapes more than commercial livestock grazing. Domestic cattle and sheep graze 257 million acres of federal public land in the arid American West, an area roughly the size of California and Texas combined. These parched lands produce only 2 percent of livestock forage and are so ill-suited to water-intensive livestock production that they are literally crumbling under the intense pressure.

Livestock grazing is the largest source of non-point water pollution in the West. Livestock gather in sensitive streamside areas, defoliating vegetation, trampling soil, increasing runoff and erosion, and leaving their wastes in the streams. This results in surface water that is not only unsuitable for human consumption or recreation, but also often lethal to native fish populations.

Conflicts between domestic livestock and native wildlife are on the rise. Grazing is listed as a contributing factor in the decline of 22 percent of threatened and endangered species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) – nearly as much as logging (12 percent) and mining (11 percent) combined. Domestic cattle and sheep out-compete native wildlife for water, forage and space, and also spread invasive plant species that displace native flora. Reducing or eliminating grazing is the only way to stop this decline that will surely lead to more ESA listings and species extinctions.

Exacerbated by a return to true desert conditions,¹ the situation on the ground has become so difficult that this rugged land can no longer support livestock grazing in many areas. The future of these allotments is bleak under the current grazing regime: fish and wildlife must contend with degraded habitat, while federal grazing permittees/lessees are increasingly left with stranded investments in public lands ranching. Out of this confluence of ecological crises and reduced production capacity – and after years of conflict – federal grazing permittees/lessees and conservationists have forged a compromise solution.

That compromise culminated in the introduction of the voluntary grazing permit buyout bills. Both bills would provide generous compensation to ranchers who choose to relinquish their federal grazing permits or leases. The associated grazing allotments would then be permanently retired from commercial livestock grazing and the forage reallocated to wildlife and watershed.

¹ While some describe the current situation in much of the West as drought, through the analysis of tree rings and other methods, scientists increasingly believe that the past hundred years have been unusually wet and that drier weather patterns are a return to the historical norm. It's not a drought, but a desert.

We must take decisive action to protect these public lands that support a vast array of wildlife and supply clean water to private farmlands and cities. **Please support H.R. 3324 and H.R. 3337.**

Sincerely,

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