

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS GRAZING CAMPAIGN

Position Paper

Livestock Grazing and Wilderness

Domestic livestock grazing in Wilderness areas is anathema to the wilderness ideal, but legal nonetheless.¹ Livestock degrade wilderness landscapes² — grazing threatens native species;³ reduces water quality;⁴ spreads invasive weeds;⁵ alters natural fire regimes; and accelerates soil erosion, damaging riparian and upland ecosystems and forests.⁶ Any forage consumed by domestic livestock is not available for native wildlife.⁷ And if you have ever camped or picnicked or swam among sheep or cattle — or more likely their droppings — you know that livestock detract from the Wilderness experience.

Domestic livestock grazing was (is) grandfathered in Wilderness areas because it was a necessary political compromise to enact The Wilderness Act of 1964.⁸ Ever since its passage, Wilderness advocates have usually avoided the issue of livestock grazing when campaigning for new Wilderness designations, even though grazing is comparably more destructive to wildlands than logging, mining, roading and other activities that receive far more attention from conservationists.

The designation of primarily high elevation, forested (U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service) Wilderness to date has usually meant that livestock grazing was not an issue, or considered a lesser problem on these landscapes — compared to the more imminent threats of roading, logging or mining. However, as the National Wilderness Preservation System is expanded to include more tree-free (Bureau of Land Management) landscapes,⁹ livestock grazing has become a key issue that demands attention. Ecologically, livestock grazing is nothing less than the annual clearcutting of grassland and desert ecosystems.¹⁰

Increasingly, the question for conservationists is to decide whether to address livestock grazing in an area at the same time it is being proposed for Wilderness designation.

Some Wilderness advocates seek to maintain livestock grazing and Wilderness designation as separate issues. They contend both that Congress has never amended the Wilderness Act and that a Congressional amendment would be required to address grazing in Wilderness areas (which could in turn invite additional, unrelated and unfriendly amendments to the Act). While the claim that the Wilderness Act itself has never been amended is technically true, in fact dozens of exceptions to the Act — for roads, motorized water access, landing strips, water projects, mineral prospecting — have been added to subsequent, individual Wilderness designation bills due to political necessity.¹¹

Not to be left out, Congress has also drafted new rules for grazing in Wilderness in a Congressional report in 1980 (the "Colorado" language)¹² and a wilderness bill in 1990 (the "Arizona" language).¹³ Nearly every wilderness bill passed during the last two decades has referenced or incorporated the Colorado or Arizona language, which preserves, and even increases grazing in new and existing Wilderness areas. Thus, livestock grazing in Wilderness has changed since the 1964 Wilderness Act was enacted, even though the Act has never, technically, been amended.

NPLGC believes local Wilderness advocates need to decide how to treat livestock grazing in proposed Wilderness areas at the time of Congressional consideration. There are several options available.

- 1. Maintain livestock grazing and Wilderness designation as separate issues.** Please note that, when evaluating the impact of livestock grazing in prospective Wilderness, the current Congressional policy guarantees, and could even increase present grazing levels in new Wilderness areas.
- 2. Legislate a livestock-free Wilderness area.** In 2000, Congress designated a portion of the Steens Mountain Wilderness in Oregon as livestock-free.¹⁴

3. **Legislate for a third-party voluntary buyout of federal grazing permits/leases in the Wilderness area.** Provide a mechanism whereby a third-party conservation organization or funder can purchase and retire federal grazing permits or leases from willing sellers who graze in the proposed Wilderness area. Model legislation was enacted for Great Basin National Park, which allowed conservation organizations to pay a permittee to end their grazing inside the park.¹⁵
4. **Legislate for a federal voluntary buyout of federal grazing permits/leases in the Wilderness area.** This would essentially be a site-specific version of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign voluntary federal grazing permit buyout proposal.¹⁶

Conclusion

Even with the grandfathering of livestock grazing (and subsequent accommodations) in Wilderness, public lands grazing interests have rarely favored Wilderness designation. Opposition by the public lands grazing industry to Wilderness has been undiminished. Perhaps, if a *voluntary* exit strategy to generously compensate grazing permittees/lessees was included in Wilderness legislation, their opposition might be reduced or eliminated.

¹ 16 USC § 1133(d)(4).

² See Domestic Livestock-Scourge of the West (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/publiclandsgrazing.htm>).

³ See Grazing Impacts on Threatened and Endangered Species (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/infopacket.htm>).

⁴ See Livestock and Water (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/infopacket.htm>).

⁵ See Livestock and Alien Weeds (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/infopacket.htm>).

⁶ See Livestock and Forest Health (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/infopacket.htm>).

⁷ See Livestock versus Wildlife (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/infopacket.htm>); Livestock Feed and Acreage Requirements (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/infopacket.htm>).

⁸ For a brief political history of livestock grazing in Wilderness, see Kerr, A. and M. Salvo. 2000. Livestock grazing in the national park and wilderness preservation systems. *Wild Earth* 10(2): 53-56.

⁹ Branding the Tree-Free Landscapes of the American West (<http://www.sagebrushsea.org/sbseagrasslands.htm>).

¹⁰ See Livestock Grazing is Annual Clearcutting (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/publiclandsgrazing.htm>).

¹¹ See Gorte, R. W. 1998. Wilderness laws: permitted and prohibited uses. 98-848 ENR. Cong'l Res. Serv. Washington, DC.

¹² House Comm. on Interior and Insular Aff. Designating Certain National Forest System Lands in the National Wilderness Preservation System, and for Other Purposes. HR Rep. No. 617, 96 Cong., 1 Sess. (1979).

¹³ Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990, Pub. L. 101-628, § 101(f)(1).

¹⁴ Salvo, M. and A. Kerr. 2000. Congress designates first livestock-free wilderness area. *Wild Earth* 10(4): 55.

¹⁵ 16 U.S.C. § 410mm-1(f)(2).

¹⁶ NPLGC Federal Grazing Permit Buyout Proposal (<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/endorsement.asp>).