

Albuquerque Journal



April 12, 2004

Grazing-Permit Buyout Would Help Lands and Ranchers

By Justin Baca

National Public Lands Grazing Campaign

The contentious saga of New Mexico rancher Kit Laney points to all that is wrong with public lands ranching in the arid West.

Laney is the Catron County rancher who defied Forest Service directives and a federal court order to remove his cattle from federal land for overgrazing the Gila National Forest. He was arrested and indicted on eight federal charges.

The U.S. Supreme Court has long held that livestock grazing on public lands is not a right but a revocable privilege.

While Laney's misguided beliefs and actions are not representative of public-lands ranchers in the West, he is not alone in his economic plight.

His case sets in bold relief the state of emergency that now exists for ranchers who rely on drought-stricken public lands of the West to support them.

Across the West, drought, environmental regulations, litigation and conflicts with other public uses have led to reductions in grazing on public lands. Conditions even worse than those of 2003 are predicted for the next three years. Beef markets are changing, and public-lands ranchers feel the pinch.

John Whitney III, a fourth-generation rancher who holds the largest U.S. Forest Service grazing permit in Arizona, is one of them. Whitney's 158,000-acre Sunflower allotment in Tonto National Forest northeast of Phoenix has been closed for three years due to drought. Since 1996, grazing in the Tonto, which comprises 3 million acres, has been cut by 94 percent of the maximum permitted level.

Whitney explains: "The whole situation has changed down here with new restrictions and recreation just going through the roof. It's got to the point where I really need to move my operation to somewhere more suitable. But I have so much invested here. I really should get something back."

There is a solution to the plight of public-lands ranchers. Reps. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., have introduced the Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act and the Arizona Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act. Both bills would compensate public lands ranchers who choose to relinquish their federal grazing permits.

American taxpayers pay about \$500 million annually to subsidize grazing on 257 million acres of public lands (grazing fees return to the Treasury only \$7 million). The buyout bills would not only provide a safety net for cash-strapped public-lands ranchers, they would produce enormous savings by reducing the need for this subsidy.

This would not be the first time Congress has acted on such a proposal. Last November, 80 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives, including New Mexico Reps. Heather Wilson and Tom Udall, voted overwhelmingly to reform our national flood insurance program.

The reforms comes as a plan to essentially buy out "multiple loss properties"— which flood repeatedly and account for about \$200 million per year in damages— and build a new structure on safer ground. This will eventually save hundreds of millions in tax revenue and give families ravaged by flooding a road to safety.

Those public-lands ranchers who opt for the buyout would be paid generously for their grazing permits. The compensation would allow them to restructure their business on private lands, transition to another business, pay off loans or retire.

Under both bills, the public lands allotments associated with bought-out grazing permits would be permanently retired from commercial livestock grazing, freeing the land for alternative uses including recreation, hunting, fishing, wildlife conservation and watershed management.

We no longer live in the Old West. Time magazine estimates that 328,000 ranchers and farmers will lose their jobs in this decade alone. The scenario facing the 24,000 ranchers who operate on the most marginal lands (typically public lands) in the 21st century is bleak and getting bleaker.

The legislation is a win-win solution for permittees, taxpayers and the environment. A voluntary grazing buyout program would heal the land as well as the wounds of ranchers caught in a box like Laney, with nowhere to turn for relief as the sun sets on public lands ranching in the West.

Baca, an Albuquerque native and son of former Mayor Jim Baca, is the Washington, D.C., representative for the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign (www.publiclandsranching.org)