

Subsidised cow chow

Is there an alternative to expensive grazing subsidies?

SHERIDAN, WYOMING HERE'S what it takes to fulfill the conditions for a federal land-grazing permit. Buy some cattle. Buy a branding iron. Brand the cows. Truck the cattle to the federally-owned land that you have leased. Let them mooch around for ten minutes or so, then load them back into the truck. Sell the cattle. Sell the branding iron.

This, in fact, is precisely what an Idaho-based conservation group plans to do in order to comply with the bewildering grazing regulations of the United States Forest Service. The Western Watersheds Project, whose aim is to restore wet riparian habitat to the west's arid state- and federal-owned lands, bought a ranch that came with a 40,000-acre grazing allotment on the Challis National Forest in Idaho. The group argued that the location in the Salmon River watershed made it a prime habitat for wildlife, and far too valuable to waste on grazing. But the Forest Service refused. It insisted that, in order to validate its permit, Western Watersheds must continue to use the land for grazing.

For years, environmental groups have been trying to reduce the number of cattle grazing on the 270m acres of land owned by the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). But the efforts of grazers' lobbying groups and politically-connected landed families have seen to it that federal regulations remain pretty much intact. The average charge for federal land is \$1.43 per animal unit month, or AUM (ie, the amount of forage needed to sustain a cow and a calf for one month). On private land it is closer to \$11.

Water, water nowhere

Very slowly, however, the balance has tilted. In the endless battles over enforcing the 1973 Endangered Species Act, it has become clear that riparian zones in the west need protection from livestock. These streams and wetland areas occupy less than 1% of the surface area of federally-owned western lands. Yet few creatures, large or small, can survive without them. Even stockmen, who hate the act, have grudgingly come to realise that retiring grazing leases is preferable to waging costly environmental battles in court-all the more so as green groups are prepared to buy them out of those leases.

Such buyouts make particularly good sense for federal grazing leases in national parks and recreation areas (which are exempted from the usual land-use conditions). In 1996, Congress allowed permit-holders in the Great Basin National Park in Nevada to donate their grazing permits to the Park Service (and deduct the money from their tax bills). In 1999, three permit-holders within Mt Moriah Wilderness, also in Nevada, retired their leases in exchange for compensation from a number of conservation foundations.

Perhaps no group has been more successful in arranging the retirement of leases than the Grand Canyon Trust. Most of its conservation work is in the Colorado plateau, home to the greatest concentration of national parks and monuments in the country. Since 1996, the trust has retired about 750,000 acres of federal grazing leases. The trust pays a one-time fee-on average about \$75 per AUM-to take the

lease out of circulation, more or less permanently. Bill Hedden, a conservation director at the trust, stresses that agreement among all parties is essential to brokering a successful deal. "Generally, the rancher comes to us. We don't go to him." They also need the Forest Service and the BLM to agree that grazing on the allotment is not in the public interest.

Since late 2001 a consortium of conservationist groups called the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign has taken the debate to another level. Developing an idea that has been under discussion by environmental groups for several years, they want the federal government to buy out permit-holders for \$175 per AUM. If all 27,000 public-land ranchers were willing to sell up, it would cost the federal government \$1.5 billion. A rancher in charge of 300 head of cattle would stand to make around \$262,500. This may seem generous, but federal grazing subsidies currently cost taxpayers upwards of \$460m every year. Within four years, it would look like a good deal.

Grazing, along with hard-rock mining, represents the last bastion of government-subsidised extraction of commodities from public lands. The American taxpayer deserves a viable alternative.