

Inner Voice

Newsletter of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics

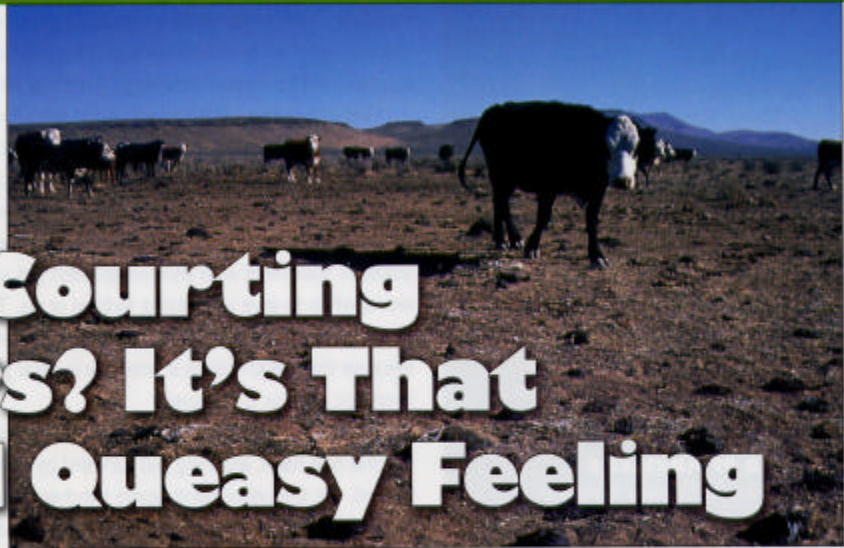
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“ Opponents find themselves in an awkward position.

Enviros Courting Ranchers? It's That Peaceful Queasy Feeling

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For more than 150 years, federal lands that are too dry to grow trees have grown livestock. After the Civil War, grazing expanded from 9 million head of cattle and sheep in 1870 to 45 million combined head in 1900. Overgrazing was rampant. The range in many western states still shows damage from more than 100 years ago. Few ranchers or range managers have stewarded pristine range conditions; some are not aware that the range they tend today is degraded.

The era of excessive overgrazing ended in the 1930s with the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act. Livestock numbers on public land dropped. Although the new law decreased grazing numbers, it continued to emphasize livestock production as the dominant use of federal rangelands. Little consideration was afforded wildlife, fisheries, recreation or other uses. This was to range management what the industrial tree farm was to forestry—grow as much harvestable product as possible for commercial use, regardless of other considerations or environmental consequences.

In 1976, Congress tried to balance the scales in both forest and range management. For forests, the National Forest Management Act required the U.S. Forest Service to write comprehensive forest plans that considered public input. For rangelands, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act issued the same mandate.

By the crudest of measures—board-foot production—federal timber policies have undergone a revolution since 1976. Logging levels have plummeted from a high of 12 billion board feet annually to 3 billion board feet, primarily as a result of wildlife protection mandated by law.

See Buyouts, p. 22

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Buyouts, cont. from p. 21

In contrast, public land grazing levels have remained virtually unchanged over the same period. Pundits have suggested several explanations for the disparity. Native grass prairies are not as awe-inspiring as ancient redwood groves. Even if they do inspire awe, what people never see is healthy native grass prairie. They don't know the difference between today's degraded range and the healthy condition. Thanks to Hollywood, ranchers (think John Wayne) have more public respect than loggers, which translates into more political clout.

Whatever the reasons, environmental reformers of public land ranching have been awfully quiet at joint conferences with their forest peers. That soon may change.

Six western grazing activist groups have joined forces to create the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign. The groups, including Forest Guardians, American Lands Alliance and the Center for Biological Diversity, are best known for their no-compromise political positions on a wide range of issues, from public land logging (zero cut) to recreation user fees (zero fees). But when it comes to livestock grazing, the organizations have all but abandoned their previous zero-grazing position for a new, politically pragmatic proposal championed by former anti-logging activist Andy Kerr.

Kerr proposes a voluntary buyout plan for public land ranchers. Ranchers may elect to receive a one-time federal payment, to be set at \$175 per animal unit month of forage, in return for relinquishing their grazing leases. Leases returned under the proposed new law would be permanently set off-limits to livestock grazing.

Proponents of the new law, yet to be introduced in Congress, argue that it's a win-win solution. Ranchers who choose to enlist get sufficient financial compensation to make it worthwhile to give up grazing federal grass. The environment, left to its own devices, can recover from a century and a half of excessive livestock grazing. Taxpayers are better off because the \$500 million a year the federal government spends to support public land livestock grazing is reduced.

Opponents, primarily livestock trade associations, find themselves in an awkward position. On the one hand, anything put forward by their archenemies in the environmental camp must be bad. On the other hand, some ranchers would welcome a buyout, as illustrated by successful deals already cut with ranchers in several national parks and recreation areas.

Notwithstanding their mixed feelings, opponents have unleashed a barrage of negative commentary against the buyout campaign, arguing that it endangers the very fabric of the rural West. Why such backlash against an idea still in search of a bill or congressional sponsor?

The reason may be that key officials in the Bush administration's Interior Department might support such a proposal. The buyout idea has many of the features promoted by free-market proponents, such as Karl Hess Jr., now an adviser to Interior Department Budget Director and fellow Libertarian Lynn Scarlett. Hess wrote:

If taxpayers could use the money poured into sustaining below-cost grazing to buy out bad ranchers and if environmental groups were given equal standing with stockmen to buy grazing permits on lands of their choice, then much of the historic animosity that has pitted greens against stockmen would dissolve in a market frenzy of win-win negotiations.

A political marriage of convenience between the Bush Interior Department and the anti-grazing forces may seem far-fetched. But if buyout proponents can muster even benign neutrality from the administration, it would bolster their fledgling legislative campaign.

Forest Service range conservationists have few choices when it comes to resolving conflicts between livestock and the environment. The range professional can penalize ranchers by seeking reductions in permitted numbers of livestock, but only if higher-ups in the Forest Service approve. A quick phone call from an irate rancher to a U.S. senator usually ends any talk of penalties in its tracks.

Voluntary buyouts would be a welcome addition to the conservation tools available to federal range managers. There is no panacea for range abuses. But the track record of regulatory reform of public land livestock grazing argues that we try a different strategy. Buyouts are the best game in town, for everyone. ||