

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS GRAZING CAMPAIGN

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TAXPAYERS LOSE OVER \$120 MILLION ANNUALLY ON FEDERAL PUBLIC LANDS GRAZING

A new report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concludes that the federal government spends at least \$144 million each year managing private livestock grazing operations on publicly owned land but collects only \$21 million in grazing fees—for a net loss of at least \$123 million per year.

“\$123 million is the minimum cost to the taxpayers, as several agencies failed to provide cost estimates to GAO. “Total fiscal subsidies are much more and the cost to the environment is immense,” said Andy Kerr, director of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign.

Several agencies, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Environmental Protection Agency, which spend money mitigating for grazing damage such as non-point source water pollution, did not provide estimates of their grazing related costs to the GAO.

The report also does not address the environmental costs of livestock on public lands. “Livestock displace native species, pollute watersheds and damage soil; you can’t put a price on saving those for future generations,” added Kerr.

A small number of the nation’s ranchers (representing about 2% of domestic livestock operations) have permits and leases to graze their livestock on 235 million acres (about the size of Texas and Colorado combined) of federal public lands. Grazed lands include Bureau of Land Management land, National Forests, wilderness areas, national parks, national monuments, national wildlife refuges, national conservation areas and military installations.

Most public lands ranchers pay a nominal fee of \$1.79 per month for each cow-calf pair on federal lands, while ranchers who graze privately owned land in the West pay an average of \$13.30. Kerr notes, “not only do the BLM and Forest Service fail to obtain market rates for the forage they provide, they fall five times short of even recovering their administrative costs.”

While the report describes the low fee—less than one fifth of what is necessary to recover costs—as originally designed to stabilize the ranching industry, the fee formula is based on 40-year-old data and has not been updated in almost 30 years. “It is time for Congress to re-evaluate this spending and I’m sure that almost every member of Congress can think of a more productive way to spend \$100 million per year,” stated Kerr.

Recognizing the hardships faced by many public lands ranchers and the changing priorities for public lands toward resource protection, Congressman Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) has sponsored the Multiple-Use Conflict Resolution

Act (H.R. 3166). Kerr observes, “This bill provides a voluntary way for ranchers with unprofitable public lands grazing operations to recapitalize while reducing land management costs and protecting natural resources on public lands.”

Quick Facts on Federal Public Lands Grazing:

Environmental Problems with Federal Public Lands Grazing

- Grazing damages entire landscapes and is a major source of non-point water pollution.
- Domestic livestock compete with and displace native species. Grazing is listed as a contributing factor in the decline of 22% of species listed on the federal threatened and endangered species list.
- Grazing alters natural fire regimes and encourages the spread of invasive plant species.

Grazing is a Privilege Not a Right

- Federal grazing permits and leases are often but wrongly referred to as “grazing rights.” Federal law clearly states and the Supreme Court unanimously agrees that permits and leases are revocable licenses to graze public lands.

Problems for Federal Public Lands Ranchers

- Public lands ranching is at best a marginal economic pursuit. Most public lands ranches have a negative to 3% nominal return on investment, which fails even to keep pace with inflation.
- The average acre of private lands pasture in the East is 82 times more productive than the average acre of Bureau of Land Management grazing lands in the West.
- The current drought has increased hardships for ranchers, forcing many to reduce or eliminate their herds. Even if the drought were to end now, many ranchers could not afford a new herd to resume their grazing and would stand to lose their grazing permits and the market value they once held.
- Many permittees are approaching retirement age and have children who are unable or unwilling to come back and take over the family ranch.
- Conflicts with other uses of federal public lands (endangered species recovery, wildlife habitat, protection of water quality/quantity, recreation and others) are making public lands livestock grazing more problematic.