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## **To Graze or Not to Graze? Livestock Grazing on Public Lands Policy and the Sierra Club**

by Mike Hudak, author of  
*Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching*

Livestock grazing on public lands is the most damaging extractive use of U.S. public lands; more damaging to our natural resources than logging and mining.

As described by Thomas Fleischner (1994:630): “[It] occurs on the majority of federal lands in the West, including most of the domains of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service, as well as in many national wildlife refuges, federal wilderness areas, and even some national parks. In 16 western states, approximately 165 million acres of BLM land and 103 million acres of Forest Service land are grazed by 7 million head of livestock, primarily cattle. Of the BLM lands in these states, 94% is grazed. Of federal wilderness areas, 35% have active livestock grazing allotments . . . . Urbanized areas, some dense coniferous forests, and a few rock-and-ice peaks are about all that is free from the influence of livestock.”

Livestock’s impact on the number of endangered species, according to Wilcove et al. (1998) is approximately equal to that of logging and mining combined: 22% impacted by livestock, compared to 12% by logging, and 11% by mining. Details about specific endangered species and ecosystem disruption can be found in the previously mentioned article by Fleischner. Here are discussed impacts on western forests, deserts, chaparral, and grasslands, although, for the most part, not grasslands whose flora evolved in the presence of animals even remotely like cattle. Bison were absent from most areas encompassed by western public lands.

Contrary to common thought western public lands do not supply a significant amount of U.S. beef. With regard to the 48 contiguous states, forage on western public lands accounts for only 2% of the total feed consumed by beef cattle, while beef cattle producers with federal permits represent only about 3% of the U.S. total (Bureau of Land Management & USDA Forest Service 1994:3-65). Even as a contribution to the economies of the eleven western states, public lands ranching is insignificant: providing only 0.06% of the jobs, and 0.04% of the income (Power 1996:Table 8-2).

Nevertheless, subsidies to the livestock industry (including supplemental feed, killing of predators, and various “range improvements”) cost taxpayers up to \$500 million annually (Hess & Wald 1995). On lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management taxpayers subsidize more than 90% of the management costs (Nelson 1996).

Given the significant environmental threat to such a large area of the United States (approximately forty-two times the size of Maryland) yielding relatively small production, while demanding a considerable subsidy, one might wonder where the Sierra Club stands.

The Club's current grazing policy, adopted in 1992, begins with what seems like an endorsement of livestock grazing: "The goal of the management of grazing on the public lands is to restore and maintain fully functioning natural ecosystems, with their full complements of native species."

It is a curious statement because, traditionally livestock have done just the opposite to western lands. It is further curious because there is no credible scientific evidence that any grazing management method can actually accomplish that goal. And yet it is a statement essentially identical to livestock industry propaganda: "Livestock grazing has been proven to be essential to proper management of wildlife and other natural resources." (From statement adopted by western state Farm Bureaus, Cattlemens Associations, and Wool Growers Associations, as quoted in Jacobs (1991:136).

The Sierra Club policy contains other "curious" statements. For example: "Livestock grazing is not an appropriate use for every acre of public lands." Practically anyone would realize the truth of that. Certainly there are mountain peaks above timberline and slick-rock canyons where livestock couldn't even survive. But what strength does such a statement have in protecting ecosystems that are "inappropriate" in the sense that the ecosystem would be harmed by the presence of livestock?

Given the diversity of interests in the Sierra Club it should not be a surprise that the current policy has led to paralysis of the Club aggressively working to end public lands ranching, or even to severely curtail its extent.

Instead, some Sierra Club activists are participating in grazing management "consensus groups" including ranchers and agency personnel. I will give one example to illustrate my point. The March 1, 1999, edition of High Country News included what it touted as a grazing management "success story": "The Ranch Restored: An Overworked Land Comes Back to Life" by Tom Knudson. Rose Strickland, one of the authors of the Sierra Club's grazing policy, is prominently featured in the article as an "informal part of the group's consensus process," but not an official member of the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group. Nevertheless, her remarks lend additional credibility to the positive tone of the article.

The article's author lauds the accomplishments of the ranchers under the management of the working group: "Today, it is the ranchers who are making the area known beyond its borders, and they are doing it by succeeding where others have failed, by turning adversity into opportunity. ... And they have done it not in the customary fashion—with angry words and legal challenges. They have done it by joining with government and conservationists to develop new grazing methods that produce not only hamburger but healthy habitat for fish and wildlife." ...

"Few people ... quibble about Trout Creek riparian areas. They're looking great. That was apparent on last year's tour, which began along Willow Creek on publicly owned allotments used by the Whitehorse Ranch. From March 16 to April 30, 871 cattle grazed the

area. But you wouldn't know it by looking at Willow Creek. It was a riot of vegetation and alive with cutthroat trout."

The example of Trout Creek is put forward by Knudson as a model for public lands management throughout the West. Quoting one of the rancher-consultants to the working group, Doc Hatfield: "If you can graze cattle in an ecologically sensitive manner in the Trout Creeks, you can graze them anywhere."

Ms. Strickland then weighs in with her observations and opinions. "There's only one criterion I use in evaluating this stuff: What happens to the land? Does it get better? That's why I am still around in the Trout Creeks. I am very impressed with the recovery of the grasses." ...

"I don't think the issue is grazed or not grazed. The issue is what is the best way to manage that piece of country. If you are getting good fish and wildlife habitat with grazing, grazing is not an issue."

"I can see that in certain places, like the Trout Creeks, grazing can occur. But I can count the number of those situations on the fingers of one hand in Nevada. Good public-land management is still the exception, not the rule."

Despite Ms. Strickland's qualification, the impression left by her remarks and that of Doc Hatfield: "If you can graze cattle in an ecologically sensitive manner in the Trout Creeks, you can graze them anywhere" is clear: cattle can be grazed anywhere in the West if one uses the correct grazing method.

In response to the publication of Knudson's article several knowledgeable people submitted letters to the editor pointing out significant facts omitted from the Trout Creek story. A major issue is the replication of the grazing management methods throughout the West. George Wuerthner points out: "Writer Knudson describes how Whitehorse Butte ranch owner, Naftzger voluntarily removed his cattle from the allotment for three years to provide some much needed rest from his four footed locusts, but fails to point out that this isn't really an option for many ranchers, nor a significant financial burden to millionaire Naftzger. Nor does he mention that the lands on the South Fork of the Crooked River in central Oregon leased by Naftzger had not been grazed for years, and were hammered by his cattle. So the Trout Creeks were rested at the expense of other Oregon lands." ...

"Knudson tells us that willows are growing back on some parts of the Trout Creek riparian areas, but he doesn't mention that this 'improvement' has come at the expense of upland meadows, headwater seeps, and wetlands after cattle were transferred from the riparian creek bottoms to uplands that previously were barely touched by cows and are now trampled by cattle."

And what was the cost to taxpayers for the "improvements" achieved in the Trout Creeks? Again Wuerthner: "By some accounts the BLM spent more than a million dollars on the implementation of the Trout Creek project alone, including construction of several water pipelines, miles of fencing, dozens of water developments, water reservoirs, plus development of an EA [Environmental Assessment], and the expenditure of tax dollars on the salaries, per diem, and travel of numerous BLM specialists, all to mitigate the impacts of private cows using public resources."

Ms. Strickland's one criterion ("What happens to the land? Does it get better?") for evaluating grazing management fails to account for this enormous taxpayer burden, while at the same time she suggests that this project is a model for management throughout the West.

At the conclusion of Knudson's article Ms. Strickland is again quoted: "I am on the anti-grazing side where grazing is not appropriate, where the land is either not capable or not suitable for livestock grazing. But I am desperate. I will try anything—anything—to improve conditions on public lands."

As to why the Sierra Club needs a strong, unequivocal statement opposing the grazing of livestock on public lands one need look no further than the desperation expressed by Ms. Strickland and her inadvertently counterproductive involvement with the Trout Creek project.

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