

Originally published in *VegNews*
October 2002, Volume 25, pp. 12–13

Public Lands Ranchers: Heading for the Last Roundup?

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Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

Livestock production is more damaging to the environment than any other activity on our western federal public lands. It contributes to the imperilment of more plant and animal species than logging or mining, and only slightly less than recreation. But livestock production impacts a much greater area than these other activities: roughly 260 million acres each year in the seventeen western states. In contrast, only about 1 million acres of federal lands are annually logged.

What is livestock production? Quite simply it's livestock grazing plus a variety of activities and structures that increase the profitability of the livestock industry. But even without these additional factors, livestock grazing alone is extremely damaging in arid environments where the plants have not evolved defenses against intense grazing by large herbivores. After only a few hundred years of livestock grazing in the American West many native plants have been displaced by a variety of weedy species that are toxic or noxious to livestock and wildlife. The decline of native plants, particularly grasses, directly underlies the shrinking populations of many avian species: greater sage-grouse, masked bobwhite, Botteri's Sparrow, and many more.

Livestock grazing has also devastated the riparian forests which grow along waterways, ponds and springs. Although they comprise only half a percent of the West, roughly 75% of the wildlife species, primarily birds and fish, depend on these forests for survival. Due largely to livestock grazing or related agriculture only about 10% of these riparian forests remain in healthy condition.

The additional aspects of livestock production: roads, forage manipulation, fire suppression, fences and water developments extend and magnify the "speciesscide" initiated by livestock grazing. For example, forage manipulation by the Bureau of Land Management has converted several million acres of diverse native grasslands into monocultures of crested wheatgrass, a species native to Russia. Although cattle benefit from a greater supply of forage, wildlife, such as the sage-grouse, have suffered from the removal of plants necessary for survival. Prior to the introduction of livestock the West supported an estimated population of 2 million sage-grouse, now only 140,000 remain.

Although the decline of wildlife populations from habitat degradation is largely an unavoidable consequence of livestock production, every year many additional animals

viewed as predators or competitors of livestock are targeted for death by ranchers and the agencies that work on their behalf. Best known of these agencies is the federal government's "Wildlife Services" whose agents every year kill roughly 300 mountain lions, 300 bears, 650 badgers, 1,800 bobcats, 5,000 foxes and 85,000 coyotes. For more than eighty years the agency also poisoned millions of black-tailed prairie dogs. So successful has that program been that in 2000 the US Fish and Wildlife Service declared that the prairie dog warranted threatened species.

A Comprehensive Approach to Protecting Federal Public Lands from Livestock Production

For several years a campaign of sorts has been underway to protect Western public lands from the damaging effects of livestock production. Waged primarily by regional environmental organizations, the campaign has consisted of numerous lawsuits against government agencies for inadequately enforcing the Endangered Species Act. Many such lawsuits have been won, but they are costly and time consuming, often taking several years to work their way through the courts. There simply isn't enough money available to environmental organizations, nor sufficient time remaining for several species, to rely solely on this tactic.

Last year six western organizations banded together in an alliance known as the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign to protect Western lands in an additional way: by sponsoring legislation that would compensate ranchers who voluntarily relinquish their federal grazing permits. The logic of this initiative rests on two premises. First, ranching on much of the federal lands will need to end within a decade or so if extensive species extinction is to be avoided. Other legislative approaches would most likely require much longer to garner the support necessary for victory. Second, taxpayers already spend roughly \$500 million annually through subsidies to keep public lands ranchers in business. Paying ranchers to relinquish their grazing permits would cost \$3.3 billion, thereby yielding a financial benefit to taxpayers after only seven years.

More than a hundred environmental, vegetarian and animal protection organizations have already endorsed the buyout proposal, including EarthSave International, The Humane Society of the United States, The Fund for Animals, and numerous regional groups such as Carolina Animal Activists Together [now "Humane Carolina"], Rochester Area Vegetarian Society and Pittsburgh Vegetarian Society. If this effort to rid our public lands of livestock production is to succeed it will require a broad and committed coalition of activists. Please visit the campaign's website where you can obtain more information about the campaign and register your organization's support for the buyout proposal. This is the best chance we've yet had to protect our federal lands from the scourge of the livestock industry.