
RANGELAND REFORM

The Good News... and the Bad

By BARBARA LABARBARA

There are few guarantees in life. In ranching there are next to none. For ranchers who use federal grazing lands there are fewer.

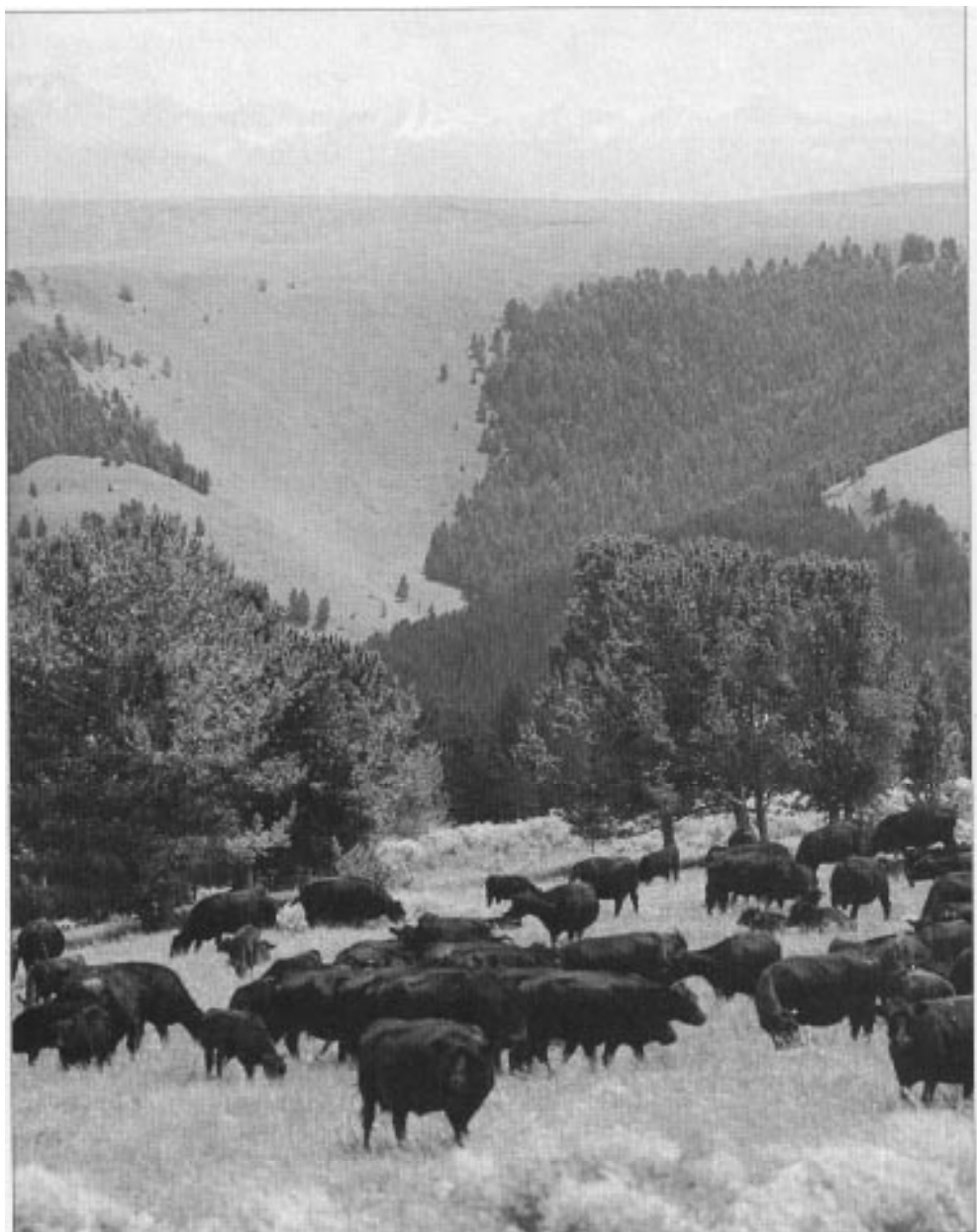
For the 27,000 ranchers in the western United States who depend on federal lands for survival, rangeland regulations are a continual scenario of good news and bad news.

Eighty-seven percent of ranchers who graze cattle and sheep on western land run small, family-owned operations. The average ranch family of four earns \$28,000 a year. A patchwork of public and private lands is necessary to make their operations viable.

The U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manage a total of 270 million acres that the federal government leases to ranchers. To give you an idea of their vast ownership consider, for example, that 49 percent of Wyoming and 85 percent of Nevada belongs to the federal government.

Fifty percent of U.S. lambs and 20 percent of calves going to feedlots come from public lands in the western states. In Idaho, 88 percent of the cattle depend in part on public forage. That figure is more than 60 percent in Arizona.

In the report, "State of the Public Rangelands - 1990," BLM officials stated, "Public rangelands are in better condition than at any time in this century, and continue to improve."



Public land grazing in western states such as Montana is still a national, front page issue.

Yet radical environmentalists reiterate that livestock grazing is damaging wildlife habitat and decreasing biodiversity. They claim the government's low fees have allowed ranchers to, overgraze and ignore the long-term health of the land.

U.S. Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt says the environmental damage blamed on grazing and the subsidized fees levied on ranchers running 6 million animals on public forests, deserts and ranges have become national issues.

Ranchers counter that their stewardship has resulted in more and healthier wildlife and better overall biodiversity.

Stephanie Licht who works on a ranch in eastern Nevada declares, "These people (ranchers) spend 365 days of the year, 18 hours a day, taking care of the public's wildlife and land."

In 1994 the National Cattlemen's Association (NCA), in partnership with *Beef Today* magazine, commissioned a study by Rockwood Research to analyze cattlemen's use of conservation practices.

The study found that 82 percent of cattlemen surveyed said in the past 10 years their range or pasture had improved. Only 5 percent said it had declined. Fifty percent indicated the condition of grazing land along their riparian areas had improved. Again only 5 percent said it had declined. Sixty-three percent said wildlife populations had increased on their lands while 10 percent saw a decrease.

"The environmental movement did a great job of creating awareness," says Bob Budd of Red Canyon Ranch in Wyoming. "But ranchers and federal agencies deserve some credit too. It's frustrating that the environmentalists will not admit users have made progress."

Benefits of Public Land Grazing



The livestock industry is harvesting a renewable resource. Although improper grazing can damage an area, proper grazing can make the plant community more healthy and vigorous.

Grazing allows for better solar reception. Livestock actually cultivate the soil as they work it, allowing for increases in rainwater penetration and greater seed distribution resulting in vegetation diversity.



Wildlife numbers increase and habitat improves with livestock grazing practices such as salt distribution, brush and predator control.



Springs and water development benefit wildlife and foliage. It helps control erosion, recharge aquifers, and enhance riparian conditions.

Ranchers have installed windmills, water tanks, water traps, small reservoirs, spring boxes and miles of pipeline that distribute spring and well waters to areas otherwise unusable by livestock or wildlife.



Livestock grazing helps prevent accidental forest and prairie fires by impeding buildup of combustible brush and forage.

Besides making wildlife and environmental progress, ranchers contribute to sound economic conditions. Ranchers and public land permittees provide a stable economic base for thousands of rural communities. They create jobs and spend proportionately high amounts of money for food, fuel, machinery and local services. Their tax base supports local schools and roads.

Bill Laycock, department head of rangeland ecology and watershed management, University of Wyoming, believes that if cattle disappear from the range, many small agriculture-based communities may be replaced with tourism such as what happened in Jackson Hole, Wyo., and Vail and Aspen, Colo.

Alan Savory, a noted range management specialist who teaches the concept of holistic resource management, talks about two kinds of dollars — solar dollars and other dollars.

Solar dollars are generated from solar energy such as livestock, crops, fish and other renewable assets. They are new dollars that go into the economy and have a multiplier effect. Tourist dollars are generated someplace else and do not have a multiplier effect.

While public lands are critical to ranchers, private lands are crucial to wildlife. In many western states up to 70 percent of big game animals winter on private land because it is usually in a better climate and more productive than public lands. Winter range is what controls population numbers and size. Since 1960 big game populations have increased dramatically — 782 percent for elk and 112 percent for antelope.

Laycock believes if livestock grazing is removed from public lands, the rancher who has public land permits will do one of two things:

1. Those who are poorly

capitalized, in debt or have large amounts of federal land will go broke and their private lands will be sold. In some areas other ranchers will be able to take up the slack. In many areas the property will be purchased by developers who will create 40-acre ranchettes. The range will disappear. People who move into those areas have what is called "subsidized predators" (dogs and cats) that harass wildlife. Those lands become useless as winter range.

2. Ranchers who are able to remain in business are going to intensify production on their own land, making it less suitable for winter range for wildlife.

In either case, winter range for wildlife suffers. When the winter range suffers, wildlife populations suffer. The net result will be a decrease in wildlife numbers instead of increased numbers which environmental groups predict.

Babbitt, under pressure from environmental groups, had planned to revamp rangeland reform regulations and increase grazing fees from \$1.98 per animal unit month (AUM) to \$3.96 by 1997. He withdrew the proposed fee hike after the 1994 November election and deferred the fee issue to the new Republican-led Congress.

In 1978, during President Jimmy Carter's Administration, the federal grazing fee formula was established under the Public Rangeland Improvement Act (PRIA). President Reagan extended it by executive order in 1986. The formula reflects beef prices, production costs and private leases. It provides stability and predictability. It not only helps the BLM and the Forest Service budget and plan their operations, it's critical to the rancher's business planning.

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The 1995 BLM grazing fee will be \$1.61 AUM, down 37 cents from 1994. The fee on national grasslands will be \$1.89, down 19 cents. Compare those costs to private land leases of \$12 to \$15.

On the surface it appears public land ranchers are receiving government subsidies. In reality, the cost of using public rangeland is higher than the cost of leasing private lands. Such things as fencing, water, predator control, general management of livestock, transportation costs, labor and maintenance costs are incurred by the rancher. Private land leases generally provide those benefits. The difference between public and private land leases can be compared to that of furnished and unfinished apartments.

In August of 1993, the BLM did a study comparing 1992 non-fee costs of leasing public vs. private grazing lands. The cost for cattle, not including the AUM fee, on private land was \$11.33 and \$13.28 for sheep. On BLM and Forest Service land the cost for cattle was \$18.15 and \$25.87 for sheep.

The U.S. Forest Service says 20 percent of public grazing permits and allot-

ments go unused each year because of the high cost.

Grazing fees are not the only misconception in Babbitt's Rangeland Reform proposal. "Even with free grazing, regulation included in Babbitt's original reform bill would put public land ranchers out of business in 10 years," Laycock says.

Problems Laycock cites include:

- All range improvements (fences, ponds, roads and water development) become the property of the BLM whether paid for by federal or private dollars: The Forest Service permits have always had such a clause but it is a significant change for the BLM.
- Part of the grazing fee currently goes to a BLM fund for range improvement. Rangeland reform dramatically expands how those funds can be used. Besides grounds improvements, they can be used for almost anything including environmental analysis.
- Rangeland reform contains standards and guidelines from the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that are not based on science. They prescribe unmeasurable standards on which rangeland health will be based. The guidelines are unrealistic and unscientific.
- The EIS guidelines will be imposed with rapid assessment methods. A

BLM employee can ask a series of questions of the rancher who has to answer yes or no. Based on those questions, the range will be declared healthy or unhealthy immediately. No consideration has to be given to climate or weather conditions.

Grazing advisory boards will be replaced with multi-use boards. Local residents are required to serve on the boards, except for two members who will represent environmental organizations. They can come from Washington, D.C., or elsewhere in the United States.

Although not part of the rangeland reform proposal, the biggest challenge public land ranchers face is uncertainty. Where there is uncertainty, there are problems acquiring operating funds. Bankers seldom approve loans where 50 to 60 percent of a ranchers operation is dependent on federal lands.

When the new 104th Congress was elected in November 1994, expectation for realistic rangeland reform heightened. However, rangeland is not a Republican/Democratic issue. Some of the most outspoken supporters for ranchers rights were Democrats who were defeated. And members of this Congress are more urban with fewer rural ties than in the past.

The National Taxpayers Union and other generally conservative organizations who support the balanced budget amendment and the line item veto are supporting more restrictive rangeland reform and higher grazing fees. Legislators who listen to their conservative viewpoint on other issues have no reason to doubt their stand on rangeland reform or to believe that they might be misinformed.

It's never easy to get legislation passed. In the first two years of the Clinton Administration, environmentalists succeeded in passing only one major environmental bill, the California Desert Protection Act. They had a friendly Democratic Congress and President.

"Though we have an unfriendly President, this Congress is more willing to give us a fair hearing," says Bill Myers, executive director of Public Lands Council. "Despite being more urban, the new legislators are more conservative and less 'green'. I believe this is the first time in 40 years ranchers have had an opportunity to have scientifically based rangeland reform enacted. It's vitally important to get it done."

The good news is ranchers will continue to have access to federal grazing lands. The bad news is unless appropriate rangeland reform is passed, they will continue to be challenged by ever more restrictive government regulation.

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