

The Future of Grazing on Public Lands

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Public perception of livestock grazing on federal lands has historically been either neutral or positive. As environmental awareness and concerns relative to natural resource management increased, grazing has fallen under greater scrutiny. Future policies framing public land use will be determined by considerations of history, ecology, economics, and structural changes in the livestock industry. Allocation of scarce resources for multiple uses will be determined by societal values and perceptions.

Rangelands include 770 million acres or about 34 percent of the nation's 2.3 billion acre land base with over half of these lands being federally managed. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and United States Forest Service (USFS) administer 87 percent of this half. Federal lands provide forage for approximately three percent of the U.S. beef cattle population and 28 percent of the total sheep, but provide 17 percent of all livestock forage in the West (Backiel 1985).

The first federal grazing administrative policy was dated April 14, 1894, and prohibited the presence of livestock on forest reserves (Rowley 1985). This regulation impacted approximately 17.5 million acres of forest reserves under the control of the Department of the Interior. Within three years, the mandate had been rescinded. Nonetheless, federal grazing policy continued to create controversy.

Three trends stand out in the history of grazing policy on federal lands. First, major political and economic events (World War I, the Depression, and World War II) limited implementation of consistent, well-funded programs. Secondly, interest groups have been adept at consolidating power and operating in the arena of Congressional decision making. Finally, the changing natural resource and social policies of individual executive branch administrations have created difficulties in establishment of consistent federal programs.

Grazing on public lands is regulated not only within the context of livestock and forage management, but also relative to economic and social considerations, wildlife management, and concerns for preservation of natural resources. Policy decisions have been debated in light of individual and states' rights, ecological and economic impacts, and multiple use concerns.

A concern of many public rangeland users is vegetation condition and trend. Inconsistencies in both the quality and quantity of data are apparent. A 1988 GAO report states that range condition reports from Forest Service managers for 40 percent of the agency's allotments are based on data more than ten years old. The report said "both agencies (BLM and USFS) stated that they had no basis to judge the conditions and trends for much of the

land they manage." "Agency officials agreed that the reliability of range condition information being reported was questionable because of varying analytical techniques and age of much of the data" (GAO 1988). Range condition and trend were unknown for 28 and 26 percent of BLM lands and 23 and 12 percent of Forest Service lands, respectively.

On federal lands where range condition and trend were known, 83.3% of BLM lands were in fair or better condition and 90.5% of the range was either stable or improving. Estimates on Forest Service lands for fair or better condition and stable or improving trend were 85.7% and 89.7%, respectively.

Summarization of the current condition of Western rangeland would suggest the lands are diverse and conditions are generally improving. However, continued emphasis on improvements is needed. Condition must be evaluated from a multiple-use perspective and coalition is needed as opposed to confrontation and conflict.

Profitability of the livestock industry is a major factor relative to demand for grazing leases. Since 1982, the number of cattle and calves in the United States has declined nearly 15 percent. For the same time period, sheep and lamb numbers have diminished by nearly 17 percent. These decreases have been fueled by diminished demand for red meat products. Per capita consumption of lamb has stabilized at approximately one pound for the last decade while beef consumption has decreased by 22 percent from 1976 to 1987 (AMI 1988).

The eleven continental Western states contain 19.1 percent of the cattle and 50.9 percent of the sheep in the United States. However, the same region has experienced a 280,000 head drop in beef cow numbers from 1987 to 1988 (AMI 1988). These data suggest that grazing pressure is decreasing in the West. Furthermore, both the sheep and cattle industries appear to have reached maturity. There is little indication of prospects for significant expansion.

Grazing is not the sole economic benefit derived from public lands (Table 1). On a percentage basis, oil and gas leases pay the vast majority of revenues (81%) while the greatest number of users (recreation) pay less than one percent of the direct user payments to the BLM and Forest Service (Clawson 1983).

BLM grazing management costs in 1986 totaled nearly \$39 million. Grazing fee receipts for the year covered only 37 percent of the program costs. The Forest Service costs were about \$24 million and receipts covered only 30 percent of these expenses (GAO 1988).

Grazing fee assessments must help both agencies and users maintain a reasonable degree of economic and

Table 1. Payments by user classification to the BLM and USFS, 1980.¹

Activity	No. of Users (1000)	Payments to Govt. (million \$)
Grazing	30	27
Timber	90.8	1033
Fuels and minerals	108.2	4755
Recreation (visitor days)	298,255	18

¹Clawson 1983.

management stability. Agency concerns include feasibility of administration, reliability of data, equitable reflection of fair market value, and impact on ranch and community stability (Backiel 1985). Stockmen are concerned about the potential for economic destabilization of ranch units due to rapid changes in the fee, separation of political influences from determination of equitable fees, ability of agencies to maintain reasonable administrative costs and impacts on monies available for range improvements (Spann 1988).¹

A study by Radtke and Brokken (1984) evaluated the effects of public lands grazing on local economies via the evaluation of 13 livestock dependent counties in the western United States. These researchers utilized a simulation model to study the impact of increased grazing fees on local economies. Both minimum and maximum responses were evaluated.

They found that the impact of an increase in grazing fees varied due to degree of dependency of the local livestock economy on public lands, the contribution of the livestock sector to the local economy and the strength of the local economy. Opponents of grazing on public lands often contend that the loss of livestock grazing leases would have little economic impact. Increasing the grazing fee to \$4.00 per AUM and assuming a minimum affect on the local economy resulted in economic losses ranging from \$1,081,546 in Harney County, Oregon to \$1,490 in Garfield County, Washington. Impacts measured on a national scale would be minimal compared to the economic and social disruptions that would occur on a local or regional basis.

Still, livestock interests must recognize that grazing is often not the use of greatest economic value. Table 2

¹Ken Spann, Colorado rancher.**Table 2. Estimated annual dollar values of rangeland outputs on three experimental stewardship areas (based on average use figures 1980-84).¹**

Output	Modac-Washoe Calif-Nevada	Challis Idaho	East Pioneer Montana
Recreation	12,361,000	957,400	2,605,000
Livestock forage	978,900	244,800	176,000
Est. timber	2,927,000	155,200	950,600

¹Floyd 1988.

(Floyd 1988) outlines the economic values of three uses from three regions involved in the Experimental Stewardship Program. In these cases, recreation is the leading producer of annual dollar output.

Ninety percent of the U.S. population engages in some type of outdoor recreational activity. Seven hundred million acres of federal lands and a majority of state lands are open to recreational use. Additionally, the public has access to 25 percent of private lands nationwide for some types of recreational activities. In the West, private land access is 45 percent. Significant increases in recreational demands on federal lands is expected over the next fifty years (Darr 1988).

User fees remain an issue relative to recreational use of public land. Four percent of private lands are leased for recreational purposes at an average fee of \$3.64 an acre (Darr 1988). If a corresponding fee were charged on the 700 million acres of federal lands, the government could expect revenues in excess of two billion dollars. The joint conditions of a large federal deficit and increasing competition for use of public lands suggest that grazing fees will increase to some degree and that noncommercial use fees will be implemented.

The status quo appears to be the most likely scenario for the remainder of this century. The 1987 Forest Service publication, "Changing Times, Changing Values . . . New Directions," while firmly advocating the continued use of grazing livestock as a sound means to effectively manage vegetation, clearly outlines the future of resource management on federal lands. The report cites six factors that are changing the emphasis of range programs.

1. Need for integrated management.
2. Expanding the scope beyond livestock management.
3. Restructuring of the livestock industry due to economics.
4. Increasing interest in wildlife, recreation, and water.
5. Pressure to base decisions on cost and benefit analysis.
6. Increasing public pressure against misuse by livestock.

What expectations can be held for the future?

I. The western livestock industry is characterized by a significant dependency on public lands and limited opportunities for enterprise diversification in many cases. Environmental limitations and historical foundations often dictate a generally traditional method of operation. These factors coupled with a mature red meat industry, lender resistance to expanding agricultural credit, and opportunities to sell deeded land for nonagricultural uses suggest that grazing pressure on the public lands will decrease due to attrition in the livestock industry.

II. Multiple-use management of public lands will continue but with balanced emphasis on recreation, timber, mining, wildlife, preservation, and livestock grazing. The commercial interests will not dominate the decision mak-

ing process nor will they retain total political clout over other uses.

III. Natural resource allocation and management will continue to be an emotional issue and the public is unlikely to gain an informed, broad based view of public lands management. The livestock industry will continue to be faced with an image problem relative to its historical and potential use of the public rangelands. The best approach for organizations representing the livestock industry is one of planned programming that presents a moderate, concerned, cooperative, and responsible image. An appropriate model can be found in the successful repositioning of beef as a lean, healthful foodstuff.

IV. The ability to resolve conflicts external to the judicial system is necessary for implementation of multiple-use management strategies. Programs must be developed to decentralize decision making at the national level while affording stockmen a channel to effectively participate in a multiple-use setting (Floyd 1988).

V. The limitations and constraints of the federal budget leave little alternative other than at least moderate increases in user fees. The fee structure must be implemented on a broad base, including recreational activities. At the same time, agencies must develop cost-effective administrative and operating procedures. While the federal agencies have had a long-standing tradition of charging only commercial interests for activities on public lands, it is appropriate to expand the fee structure to recreational and preservational activities as well.

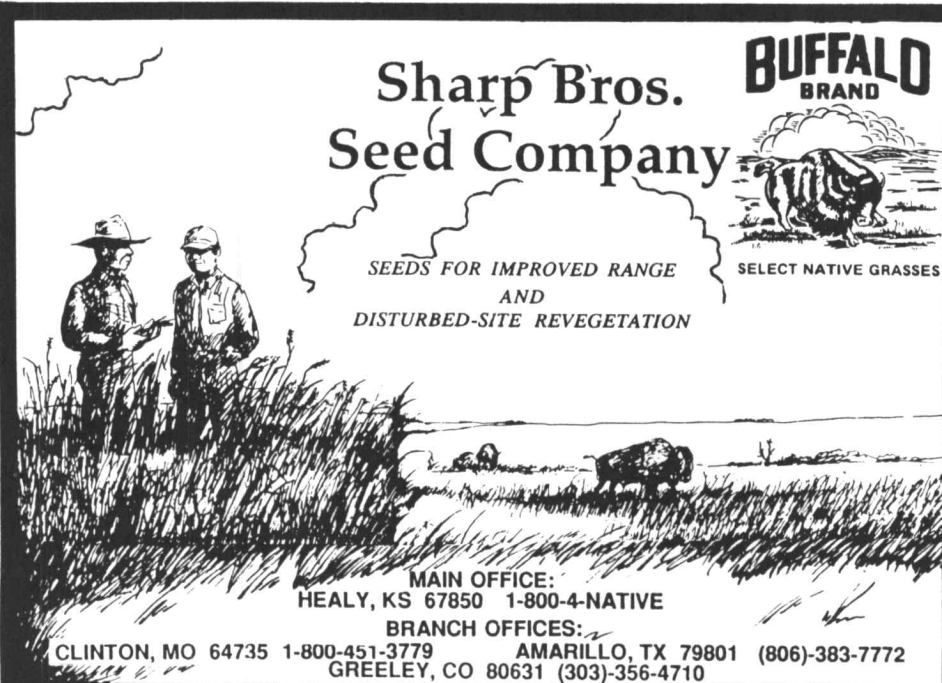
VI. Agencies and users must work more cooperatively to monitor both the condition and trend of rangelands. This monitoring process should incorporate advisory boards made up of the diverse user interests for a particular region. Local agency personnel must be given the flexibility to manage creatively and specifically to the

unique needs of their individual resources and clientele. Furthermore, the impacts of various types of recreation must be evaluated. Utilization by both commercial and recreational interests must occur within boundaries that provide for the long-term well-being and improvement of the range resource.

The range question is no longer one of seeking expansion of grazing opportunities, nor of livestock production, nor of improving the management of natural resources for both long- and short-term benefits. Instead it has become a question of maintaining a delicate balance of user interests and public perception. Who will remain and for how long will depend on the ability of user groups to adapt to the boundaries established by societal values and to successfully mesh with other interests in cooperative ventures.

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