

The Benefits of Livestock Ranching in the Rocky Mountain West

by Tom Compton

Last year, the Sierra Club developed a policy committed to eliminating livestock grazing on most federal lands. Another group, Rangenet 2000, was formed solely to remove all livestock from federal grazing permits. Should these agendas succeed, the law of unintended consequences may become fully operational. These activities pose a serious threat to livestock ranching in the West and to the many benefits ranching families provide to society.

Professors Gerhard Rostvold and Thomas Dudley made an interesting

report to Congress in 1992: "One of the leading myths surrounding the management of the natural resources on public lands is that the public grazing lands in the western states are overgrazed and on the edge of extinction. This myth denies (1) the efficacy of U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management [BLM] public lands policies and programs of the past several decades and (2) the commitment of the western livestock industry in the areas of soil and water conservation, year-to-year rotations in the use of grazing lands, improvements of wildlife habitat, and ongoing cooperation with the Forest Service and BLM in the management and utilization of the public land resources for multiple use."

Nearly 75 years ago the ranching industry requested, and was granted, changes in federal land management

policies. The result was the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. From that day on, we have experienced a slow but steady improvement in the ecological health of most federal range lands, because the ranching community made the commitment to improve conditions.

In 1993, range scientists such as Thad Box of New Mexico State University and John Malacheck of Utah State University stated, "It is our professional opinion that American range lands are in the best condition of any time in the past 100 years and that, on an average, they are improving."

This information evidences the commitment of ranching families as good stewards of the land on which they live and work. I believe the loss of this stewardship commitment and expertise would have serious conse-

continued on next page

Restoring Wildness to the West

By George Wuerthner

Livestock production, particularly on public lands, severely compromises the full recovery of wolves across the West. Wolf recovery is more than merely sustaining viable populations of wolves in a few token areas such as Yellowstone National Park. Wolves, as the top carnivore, have affected everything from the fleetness of antelope and elk to the condition of wildlife habitat. We need to restore more than a few wolves to the West—we need to restore the evolutionary influence of predation.

This simply will not happen if livestock production continues to



Walter Medwid

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dominate the majority of the West. With the few exceptions of some national parks and rugged large wilderness areas, livestock production dominates most of our public

lands, including 90 percent of all Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, 69 percent of all Forest Service lands and even a large percentage of western national parks, monuments,

continued on next page

THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE OF LIVING WITH WOLVES

The Benefits of Livestock Ranching in the Rocky Mountain West

continued from page 17



Mike Phillips

The 1990 End of the Year Report by the Colorado Bureau of Land Management indicates that 89% of federal lands are either improving or in a steady state trend.

quences to the overall health of many western ecosystems.

A testimony to the improvement of the range lands is the increase in big game between 1960 and 1990, including a 30 percent increase in deer, a 682 percent increase in elk, and a 376 percent increase in moose, according to BLM statistics. Based on a 1992 study by New Mexico State University, the average Colorado ranch supports 193 deer, 155 elk and 96 antelope. Although many of these animals occupy federal lands during summer, private ranchlands are essential to their survival during the critical winter season when forage is in short supply.

In the Rocky Mountain West, most ranches rely on federal grazing permits for their existence. A great patchwork of intermingled lands under different ownership (federal, state, county, tribal and private) exists in the West.

Restoring Wildness to the West

continued from page 17

and wildlife refuges. In short, there are almost no public lands that can sustain a cow that do not have cows on them.

The pervasiveness of livestock production has been and will continue to be a major obstacle for the full restoration of wolves across the West. Much of the problem is due to natural aridity that places real limits on plant productivity. It often takes as many as 250 acres of land to sustain one cow in the West, compared to a single acre in places like Wisconsin or Missouri. As a consequence, cows must wander widely to get enough to eat. This places them at far greater risk of predation than animals that can graze close to farmhouses in Minnesota and be in a barn at night. In the West, most

cows are dumped out on the range and at times are not even checked on again until they are rounded up in the fall. As a consequence, opportunities for predators are greatly enhanced, and sooner or later, most wolves cannot resist that opportunity, often with lethal consequences.

But even so called “predator friendly” beef production negatively affects wolves, whether a rancher or a government agent kills the wolves or not. Many prey species such as elk are socially displaced by the presence of cattle. When cows move on to a pasture, the elk move out. This has two potentially negative effects. If the wolves are denning and cannot readily follow the elk to new pastures, they may resort to killing livestock to make up for the local absence of prey, particularly if they are feeding pups. This “trains”

wolves to eat cows and even if one or two ranchers tolerate the losses to wolves, these cow-killing wolves will sooner or later prey on an animal owned by a less sympathetic rancher.

Even if wolves avoid killing stock, their prey base is still negatively affected. The displacement of elk and other prey species ultimately reduces their overall populations. After ranching was eliminated from most of Jackson Hole with the creation of Grand Teton National Park, elk populations and density in the valley doubled. Even if a rancher does not kill wolves, his cows are literally taking food out of the mouth of the wolf—or at least out of the mouth of wolf prey.

Should we allow commercial business to supplant native wildlife on our public lands? That is a philosophical question, but in my mind, the

Without access to federal grazing leases, many ranches would not be economically viable. A New Mexico State University study indicates that the loss of federal grazing lands in western states would result in the loss of 48 percent of current ranches, with the remaining 52 percent continuing on a smaller scale.

It would be shortsighted to cause the loss of nearly half the ranches in the Rocky Mountain West and the commensurate loss of the open space, wildlife habitat and scenic viewsheds. Opponents claim that grazing is subsidized on federal lands, I suggest otherwise. Public grazing is a quid pro quo arrangement, whereby society not only receives a fee from the rancher but also a great deal of public service in the form of environmental stewardship activities.

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public lands are about the only place where wolves can potentially be wolves and sustain the evolutionary influences upon the land that are necessary for healthy ecosystems. If wolves cannot roam unfettered on public lands, where can they roam? ■

George Wuerthner works as a consulting biologist, writer and photographer. He has written 24 books on natural history topics, and has been involved in wolf issues in the Rocky Mountains, U.S.A. for more than 20 years.

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