

## commentletters

**From:** Cheryl D <cazthedesigner@hotmail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, August 25, 2015 11:13 PM  
**To:** commentletters  
**Subject:** Do not stop the grazing regulations



### **MYTH** ***Public Lands Grazing Supports the Family Rancher*** **TRUTH**



Cowboys herding cattle.

Public lands grazing subsidies, like most agricultural subsidies, disproportionately benefit large landholders. In a 1992 Government Accounting Office profile of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permittees, the largest 500 permittees, out of nearly 20,000 total, controlled 36 percent of the public lands forage. Just 16 percent of all permittees controlled 76.2 percent of the AUMs (animal unit months-one AUM being the amount of forage required by a cow-calf pair for a month) available on BLM lands. Most of these permittees were big corporations or very wealthy individuals. The smallest 2,000 permittees controlled less than 0.13 percent of BLM forage.

This inequality is a result of the process for assigning public lands allotments. Access to permits requires ownership of private base operations. Since wealthy ranchers own more land, and thus more base property, they wind up with more federal lands allotments. In addition, few ranchers depend entirely on their public lands allotments to meet all their forage needs. Although the percentage varies from operation to operation and state to state, most ranchers fulfill the majority of their annual forage needs from private lands. Only the largest operations actually use public lands for a significant amount of their livestock's forage. If the public lands were to become unavailable to these large ranches, most of their operators could reasonably afford alternatives for grazing their stock.

Alternatively, most smaller ranches today represent status or lifestyle choices for their owners-the vast majority of ranchers who use public lands. Most western ranches do not depend exclusively on livestock for their income, or for even an important fraction of their income. Growing and selling livestock is usually a break-even enterprise at best. Jobs in town or other business ventures are what allow families to maintain their status and appearance as "ranchers"-not running cattle or sheep on the range. If these ranchers chose to give up, or were forced to relinquish, their public lands allotments, most would adjust

through reducing their herd size to match their private holdings, or through leasing the private grazing lands of other landowners. Family ranchers might also continue to diversify their income-as many are already doing-either with new enterprises on the ranch (for example, guest ranches, and guided fishing and hunting), or with other work off the ranch.

### **MYTH** ***Ranching Is the Foundation of Rural Economies*** **TRUTH**



Cows in stream, southern Arizona.

Many livestock supporters attempt to portray public lands livestock production as an essential element of rural economies. It's easy to see the fallacy in this argument if you think about the numbers involved. For example, in Nevada there are fewer than 800 public lands grazing permittees. And in the entire state less than 2,000 people are engaged full-time as farmers or ranchers. One casino in Las Vegas employs more people than work in agriculture in all of Nevada. Although other states may have higher numbers of people involved in ranching, livestock production is proportionally a small part of the economic picture in all western states.

Ranching and associated activities provide very few jobs. Furthermore, most ranch operations, except the very biggest, are not highly profitable. Both of these truths help explain the rather interesting finding of one University of Arizona study: that instead of rural towns being dependent on the livestock industry for their economic survival, the reverse was true. Ranch families depend on nearby towns and cities to provide full- or part-time jobs that help keep the ranch financially afloat. Without family income from such positions as schoolteachers, local civil servants, store clerks, salespeople, and so forth, ranch ownership would be impossible. The vast majority of people who call themselves ranchers enjoy the lifestyle and the prestige, but they are not choosing a lucrative pursuit (as indeed many will complain!). Therefore, it can be argued that, financially, rural towns would likely survive without ranchers, but most ranchers would be hard-pressed to survive without the towns.

As ranching is relatively unimportant in local economies, it is even less important on state and regional scales. According to the Department of the Interior's 1994 Rangeland Reform Environmental Impact Statement, the elimination of all public lands livestock grazing would result in a loss of 18,300 jobs in agriculture and related industries across the entire West, or

approximately 0.1 percent of the West's total employment. Natural resource economist Thomas Power has calculated that all ranching in the West, on both public and private lands, accounts for less than 0.5 percent of all income received by western residents.

## **MYTH** ***Good Livestock Production and Ecosystem Preservation Can Coexist*** **TRUTH**



Cow-blasted riparian area, Elk Creek, Beaverhead National Forest, Montana.

Perhaps the biggest fallacy perpetrated by the livestock industry is the idea that if we would only reform or modify management practices, there would be room both for livestock and for fully functional ecosystems, native wildlife, clean water, and so on. Unfortunately, even to approach meaningful reform, more intensive management is needed, and such management adds considerably to the costs of operation. More fencing, more water development, more employees to ride the range: whatever the suggested solution, it always requires more money. Given the low productivity of the western landscape, the marginal nature of most western livestock operations, and the growing global competition in meat production, any increase in operational costs cannot be justified or absorbed. If the production of meat as a commodity is the goal, then an equal investment of money in a moister, more productive stock-growing region-such as the Midwest or the eastern United States-would produce far greater returns.

Even if mitigation were economically feasible, we would still be allotting a large percentage of our landscape and resources-including space, water, and forage-to livestock. If grass is going into the belly of a cow, there's that much less grass available to feed wild creatures, from grasshoppers to elk. If water is being drained from a river to grow hay, there's that much less water to support fish, snails, and a host of other life forms. The mere presence of livestock diminishes the native biodiversity of our public lands.

The choice is really between using the public lands to subsidize a private industry or devoting them to ecological protection and preserving the natural heritage of all Americans. On private lands, native species face an uncertain future. It would be a prudent and reasonable goal to make preservation of biological diversity and ecosystem function the primary goal on public lands. To suggest that we know how to conduct logging, livestock grazing, or other large-scale, resource-consumptive uses while sustaining native

biodiversity is to perpetuate the greatest myth of all.

For more information please read this website: <http://www.publiclandsranching.org/book.htm>

Thank you,  
Cheryl Devine