

BRENDA RICHARDS
PUBLIC WITNESS TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF
**PUBLIC LANDS COUNCIL, NATIONAL CATTLEMEN’S BEEF ASSOCIATION AND
IDAHO CATTLE ASSOCIATION**
BEFORE THE
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES**
APRIL 16, 2013

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Brenda Richards. I serve as vice president of the Public Lands Council (PLC) and am also a member of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) and the Idaho Cattle Association (ICA). While I am officially testifying on behalf of PLC, NCBA and ICA, as a cattle rancher actively involved in our five-generation family business, I personally appreciate the opportunity to share with you the western livestock industry’s priorities for fiscal year 2014 (FY 14) appropriations regarding the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

PLC, NCBA and ICA share the mission of supporting a stable business climate in which their members are able to conduct economically viable and sustainable livestock businesses operating on a combination of private and public lands. PLC is the only national organization dedicated solely to representing the roughly 22,000 public land ranchers. PLC has sheep and cattle affiliate organizations (including ICA) from thirteen western states, as well as three national affiliates: NCBA, the American Sheep Industry Association (ASI) and the Association of National Grasslands (ANG). NCBA is the nation’s oldest and largest national trade association for cattlemen, representing more than 140,000 cattle producers through direct membership and their state affiliates. ICA is the official voice for all segments of the beef industry in Idaho, representing the interests of more than 9,000 cattle producers across the state.

First, I would like to thank the subcommittee for your recognition, by increasing funding of the range management programs in the fiscal year 2012 (FY 12) and subsequent continuing resolutions (CRs), of the importance of livestock grazing both to the management of our nation’s federal lands and to rural economies in the West. I also thank you for recognizing the importance of reducing the regulatory burdens stemming from federal agencies that continue to hamper the productivity and profitability of our nation’s ranchers. Below, I outline the environmental and economic need for a thriving ranching industry, along with a list of our FY 14 appropriations priorities which will support our industry.

Environmental Benefits of a Stable Public Lands Grazing Industry

Public land ranchers own nearly 120 million acres and manage more than 250 million acres of land under management of the BLM and USFS. These ranchers provide food and fiber for the nation, protect open spaces and critical wildlife habitat, and promote healthy watersheds for the public. Wildlife depends on the habitat and water sources these ranchers provide. In the West,

where productive, private lands are interspersed with large areas of rockier, less desirable public lands, biodiversity of species depends greatly on ranchland. Should these ranchers go out of business, their private lands would likely be converted to uses less hospitable to wildlife. Furthermore, ranchers across the West are purposefully implementing grazing practices to improve habitat and help prevent the listing of species such as the Greater Sage-Grouse. Well-managed grazing encourages healthy root systems and robust forage growth—and reduces the risk of catastrophic wildfire, one of the West’s biggest threats to wildlife, watersheds, property and human life.

Economic Benefits of a Stable Public Lands Grazing Industry

Countless communities across the West depend upon the existence of the public lands rancher. Approximately 40 percent of beef cattle in the West, and half of the nation’s sheep, spend some time on federal lands. Without public land grazing, use of significant portions of state and private lands would necessarily cease, and our industry would be dramatically downsized—threatening infrastructure and the entire market structure. In my own county of Owyhee, 78 percent of the land is publicly owned, and our ranchers’ dependency on public land forage during the spring and fall is about 85 percent. A 1992 Census of Agriculture for two Idaho counties revealed that two out of three commercially viable ranches held federal grazing permits. I know that many communities across the West depend just as we do on the tax base, commerce, and jobs created by the public lands grazing industry.

Challenges Facing Industry and the Agencies

Despite the broadening acclaim for public lands livestock grazing’s environmental and economic benefits, today’s public land livestock industry faces intense challenges, making stability and long-term planning increasingly difficult. Wildfire and drought are destroying infrastructure, forage and livestock. Meanwhile, burgeoning government regulation and the resulting litigation demand ever-greater investment of both financial and human resources. Many grazing permits are in jeopardy due to a significant agency backlog of analysis under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). This in turn is facilitating litigation by extreme, predatory “environmental” groups, many of whom use taxpayer dollars to wage war against public lands grazing. The following detailed requests are concrete ways to promote good range management, stymie the vicious cycle of litigation, and promote the continued presence of ranchers on the range:

Range Programs – BLM & USFS

We sincerely appreciate the increases Congress provided to the BLM and USFS range programs in FY 12 through FY 13 and ask that those funding levels continue in FY 14. Range personnel positions are being eliminated or not being filled, and resources are scarce for completion of NEPA and other environmental documentation, contributing to backlogs and the resulting environmental litigation. We request that you appropriate funding to BLM and USFS range programs with levels equal to those of FY 12.

Specific to Bureau of Land Management

We find BLM’s sustained position that livestock trailing and crossing permits require NEPA analysis problematic. We commend Congress for including language in the FY 12 appropriations bill to exempt this crucial activity from the NEPA process. Unfortunately, the language has not

been interpreted as Congress intended. We request that you deem trailing and crossing a minor agency action exempt from NEPA analysis.

We ask that you continue to block funding for implementation of Secretarial Order No. 3310, the “wild lands” order, which creates *de facto* wilderness and poses a threat to the continued multiple use of BLM lands.

Specific to U.S. Forest Service

USFS is in the beginning stages of implementing a new forest planning rule that is threatening to all multiple uses on National Forest System (NFS) lands. We encourage you to make funds available for implementation of the new plan on only the “early adopter” forests until Congress is able to confirm the rule will actually streamline the planning process.

Grazing Permits and NEPA

The backlog in processing permits is projected to remain a persistent issue for both the BLM and the USFS; we request Congress continue to support and make policies available that will help the agencies work through this process. We thank you for extending the statutory language on timing of completion of NEPA through FY 13 to ensure that grazing permits remain intact, without disruption, while the agencies work through the backlog of grazing permits requiring renewal. We encourage Congress to make this authority permanent as backlogs are likely to continue into the future. We also appreciate the inclusion of language providing for the transfer of permits from one party to another under the same terms and conditions. This will streamline the agencies’ resources and make the program more efficient overall.

Sage Grouse

Due to a backroom settlement agreement between the USFWS and radical environmental groups, an arbitrary deadline has been set for an ESA listing decision on the Greater Sage-Grouse. Its habitat covers 11 western states where ranchers are currently providing open space and improving its habitat. Rather than embracing the research-supported benefits of grazing, the agencies are beginning to make arbitrary decisions to reduce and eliminate livestock grazing on public lands. In my home county of Owyhee, a separate court order is driving the BLM to conduct environmental assessments and permit renewal work on 68 grazing permits, ostensibly in the name of sage grouse habitat conservation. The first of these permit renewal decisions was issued this month; it calls for over a 45 percent reduction in grazing. No ranch can sustain such a massive cut and remain viable. This decision also contains troubling language indicating that the agency intends to continue drastically reducing grazing in the name of sage grouse. We request that Congress provide direction to the agencies (BLM, USFS, & USFWS) to defer to state sage grouse management plans, and that it extend the 2015 deadline for USFWS’ decision on the sage grouse.

NEPA Climate Change Proposed Guidance

In light of the President’s recent announcement to include climate change considerations in every NEPA analysis, we encourage you to block the abuse of this law to push an economically damaging agenda not supported by Congress.

Federal Grazing Fee

Our industry supports the federal grazing fee established by the 1986 Executive Order requiring adherence to the Public Rangelands Improvement Act (PRIA) formula. The formula is based on

market criterion and accurately reflects the cost of operating on public lands. In order to provide stability to the industry, increases and decreases to the fee are limited to 25 percent in a given year. We request that you reject and block any attempts to effectively raise the fee via taxes or arbitrarily change the federal grazing fee formula.

Land Acquisition

We are strongly opposed to the use and funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund for land acquisition. During a time of strained budgets and already-inadequate federal land management, we find imprudent any proposal to expand the federal estate.

Economic Analysis of Grazing on Public Lands

There continues to be a gap in the analysis regarding the true economic contributions, both direct and indirect, of livestock grazing on public lands. We believe the figures currently being used by the BLM and USFS greatly underestimate the actual jobs supported by and economic impacts generated by public lands grazing. We request that Congress provide the funding and resources necessary to adequately analyze the full economic benefits provided by public land ranching.

Domestic Sheep Grazing

Spurious science regarding impacts our industry may have on big horn sheep populations has the potential to drive USFS to continue making decisions damaging to the domestic sheep grazing industry. We believe a thriving population of big horn sheep is possible to achieve without jeopardizing private industry; industry has already provided over \$100,000 to ongoing research to find a vaccine to protect them from pneumonia-related threats. Meanwhile, we ask that Congress provide language requiring the USFS and BLM not to reduce or restrict domestic sheep grazing due to bighorn sheep unless alternative forage of similar quality and composition is made available in a timely manner.

Range Improvement/Betterment Funds

We appreciate your continued support for BLM range improvement funds and USFS Range Betterment funds (RBRB), which are critical to our members' ability to stay in business and implement practices that improve forage condition, water availability, and wildlife habitat.

Cheatgrass Research

As many as 60 million acres are either infested or susceptible to cheatgrass invasion, which increases wildfire frequency and intensity. We support an increase in funding to continue research that is perfecting the use of livestock grazing for cheatgrass control.

EPA Overreach

Our industry supports language that prevents the EPA from endangering our nation's food supply and over-burdening our nation's farmers and ranchers. We also support preventing the EPA from unilaterally expanding its authority through guidance documents or rulemakings, and we support maintaining the federal/state partnership in the regulatory process.

Keeping ranchers in business is good policy for conservation of both private and public land. By making well-placed appropriations, your subcommittee can promote greater stability for the livestock industry, a renewed focus on long-term resource management, enhanced agency efficiency, and continuation of the broad public benefits provided by both public and private lands in the West. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.