

Testimony
on behalf of the

Public Lands Council



with regard to:

“Restoring Multiple Use to Revitalize America’s Public Lands and Rural Communities”

submitted to the House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Chairman Tom Tiffany
Ranking Member Joe Neguse

submitted by:

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Tuesday, February 11, 2025
Washington, D.C.

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House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the importance of multiple use of our nation's public lands. My name is Tim Canterbury and I serve as President of the Public Lands Council (PLC). Since 1968, PLC has been the only organization in Washington, D.C. dedicated solely to representing the unique perspectives of cattle and sheep producers who hold the 22,000 federal grazing permits.

My family has raised cattle in Howard, Colorado for five generations. My grandchildren are the seventh generation to live and work in this way of life. During the course of the year, my cattle spend time on my private land as well as on federal land grazing allotments. I have held grazing permits since the 1980s and have managed them as an integral part of my operation. I manage these lands and waters, and the wildlife and multiple uses they sustain, as if they were my own. For me, there is no difference in my level of investment between the lands I own and the federal lands grazing allotments for which I hold the permits.

Like me, there are thousands of grazing permittees in the West whose careful stewardship of these landscapes has protected hundreds of millions of acres across the 14 western states where grazing happens on federal lands. Between the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), approximately 250 million acres¹ have grazing as an authorized use in any given year. In addition to the annual grazing fee I pay the agency, I am responsible for maintenance of fences, water troughs, pipelines, culverts, and other infrastructure that benefits not only my livestock, but all other users of those acres. Because of these additional investments, the cost for me to graze public lands is the same as the cost for me to graze my own lands or lease a private pasture. My family and I have also made additional investments in technology, like virtual fence, to add an extra layer of management precision on my allotments. When you factor in this additional outlay, it is actually much more expensive for me to graze on federal lands.

Colorado is home to some of the country's most popular hiking and climbing areas. Two of the most-used trails to access these "fourteeners" run through my allotment. In the height of summer, we have measured more than 1,000 people per day who go through my grazing allotment on these trails. I have adjusted my grazing rotations to reduce the potential for conflict between recreationalists and my livestock and have made other changes to reduce the impact of gates left open, damage to my water tanks, and soil disturbance from tires, tracks, and heavy foot-traffic. When you're a federal lands grazing permittee, these challenges are a normal part of your daily management.

¹ USFS classifies approximately 93 million acres as eligible to be used for grazing; BLM has the potential to authorize grazing on 155 million acres. This figure represents the total number of acres that *may* be grazed in a given year, however the number of acres grazed is often much lower as a result of allotments that are vacant or closed, often due to litigation and inadequate resources to complete NEPA analyses. USFS: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/es/speeches/meeting-challenges-together>
BLM: <https://www.blm.gov/programs/natural-resources/rangelands-and-grazing/livestock-grazing#:~:text=The%20BLM%20manages%20livestock%20grazing.issue%20to%20public%20land%20ranchers.>

Value of Grazing

Despite the inherent complexities, public lands ranchers embrace multiple use as a core part of their operations. While grazing is undoubtedly a *use* of federal lands as an important part of the national beef, lamb, and wool industries, grazing also provides host of co-benefits as a land management *tool*. Grazing protects wildlife habitat, reduces the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and supports local economies. Cattle grazing on federal lands provides \$8.575 billion² in ecosystem services each year, ranging from wildlife-based recreation, forage production, and other economic measures of biodiversity and land use.

The economic benefits of federal lands grazing cannot be overstated. Approximately 63 percent of the Western cattle herd and more than 50 percent of the national sheep herd spend some time on public lands. These livestock operations directly support trucking companies, feed mills, fencing companies, water management systems, veterinarians, and other important rural infrastructure. If access to federal grazing were lost or significantly abridged, the impacts could be catastrophic. Research from the University of Wyoming³ suggests that if grazing were removed from just three states – Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming – the direct and secondary impacts would be catastrophic for the surrounding areas. For these three states, loss of access to federal lands grazing would:

- Decrease cattle sales by 60 percent (in those three states).
- Eliminate more than 40,000 jobs over a 10-year period. This increases to 163,507 over a 40-year period.
- Cause a 65 percent reduction in ranch labor related to cattle production.

This work also suggests that while the immediate impact from loss of grazing would be devastating, the secondary economic impacts to the surrounding communities would be three times greater by dollar value.

Permittees manage their livestock to find the highest degree of efficiency for both the productivity of their livestock and the health of the landscape. Many permittees, like my family, have been managing these same lands for decades and provide the kind of continuity of management that protects landscapes from the worst kind of damage. This committee has seen the horrors wrought on the land and on livestock from the increase in catastrophic wildfires over the last decade. While there are many factors that contribute to wildfire risk, grazing is a proven, effective tool to reduce harm. Grazing reduces the risk of wildfire ignition between 45 and 50 percent⁴. When fires do ignite, grazing is a key tool to reduce fire severity by removing the fine fuels that make fires hotter, faster, taller, and more dangerous for firefighters.

Grazing is also key for reducing invasive species; much of the discussion around fire risk and challenges to western biodiversity have centered around invasive annual grasses, like cheatgrass.

² Maher, Anna T, et al. “An Economic Valuation of Federal and Private Grazing Land Ecosystem Services Supported by Beef Cattle Ranching in the United States.” *Translational Animal Science*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 4 May 2021, [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8290490/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8290490/)

³ University of Wyoming Extension. “Economic Impacts of Removing Federal Grazing Used by Cattle Ranches in a Three-State Area (Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming)”. August 2022.

⁴ Starrs, G., Siegel, K., Larson, S., & Butsic, V. (2024). Quantifying large-scale impacts of cattle grazing on annual burn probability in Napa and Sonoma Counties, California. *Ecology and Society*, 29(3). <https://doi.org/10.5751/es-15080-290310>

It is well known that “even small amounts of cheatgrass in an ecosystem can increase fire risk”⁵. For years, critics of federal lands grazing have inaccurately blamed the spread of cheatgrass on grazing when in fact, targeted grazing both removes the grass from the landscape and prevents seeds from spreading. Once the seeds pass through the cow’s digestive tract, the seeds are unable to germinate⁶. In short: grazing reduces cheatgrass, and therefore reduces wildfire risk.

Regulatory Challenges to Multiple Use

Over the last four years, there have been a number of policy changes that have eroded the careful balance of multiple use management, and have threatened grazing’s place on the landscape. In the BLM, policy changes like the ill-conceived “Public Lands rule” upended the agency’s longstanding expectation of balancing multiple uses in a productive way and put an unfair – and illegal – thumb on the scale so that some uses would have greater legal and practical priority than others. As implemented, the rule creates new layers of bureaucracy, making it harder for ranchers to renew permits, expand, and maintain economic viability. The rule also places an outsized focus on the use of restrictive Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) designations that give the BLM the ability to expedite more restrictive land management, promotes increased conflict on the landscape, and increases the BLM’s difficulty in delivering on the agency mission. The repercussions of implementing this rule would adversely impact the national economy.

Other challenges cut across many policy areas; the Biden Administration’s changes to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and approach to land use planning picked winners and losers among multiple uses. Using the updated NEPA authorities, federal agencies elevated internal goals, like solar and wind energy, allotting staff time and funding to projects they deemed “priority” while other uses were deprioritized, delayed, and devalued. Delays ranged from simple requests, like approval of range improvement construction and maintenance, to larger projects like timely post-fire remediation that, when stalled, exacerbate the impact of the fire. Across the board, implementation of the grazing program suffered as the agency focused on “higher priority” issues.

USFS also faces challenges. Updates to the USFS grazing handbook and directives have been languishing before agency leadership for nearly 10 years, and many forests are so severely understaffed that implementation of the grazing program and range management are far removed from the district level. This committee needs to look no further than a comparison of the agency’s budget across the programs; for example, the agency has repeatedly failed to request the full allotment of Range Betterment Fund dollars that are crucial to cooperative monitoring and range improvement projects with permittees, but continues to tell this Committee and stakeholders that they are unable to carry out programmatic work because they lack funds and staff.

Over time, land management has become more restrictive, not less. There are fewer cattle and sheep on the landscape now than 30 years ago, and millions more acres are in restrictive land designations. National monument designations, wilderness areas, and ACECs have restricted

⁵ Bradley, B. A., Curtis, C. A., Fusco, E. J., Abatzoglou, J. T., Balch, J. K., Dadashi, S., & Tuanmu, M. (2017b). Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) distribution in the intermountain Western United States and its relationship to fire frequency, seasonality, and ignitions. *Biological Invasions*, 20(6), 1493–1506. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10530-017-1641-8>

⁶ Holton, G., Franco, A.M., Richardson, W., Stringham, T., Fonseca, M. (2024). Evaluating the effects of ruminal incubation and abomasal enzymatic digestion on the germination potential of *Bromus tectorum*. *Rangelands*, 46(4), 132-136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rala.2024.05.001>

grazing in historically managed areas leading to overgrown vegetation and increased wildfire risk. Federal overreach in land designations bypasses local stakeholders, ignoring the needs of rural communities. Each time the pendulum of power shifts in our democracy our nation's public lands ranchers are left bracing for potential designations that could hurt their economic viability and render the land without the proper management necessary.

Generally, regulatory burdens are the cause of the greatest uncertainty for ranchers. Ranchers must navigate extensive federal permitting processes to graze on public lands, facing delays and inconsistencies. Delayed permit renewals and uncertain staffing allocations discourage investment in land improvements like water infrastructure and rotational grazing systems, and overlapping regulations from agencies like the BLM, USFS, and Fish & Wildlife Service create inefficiencies and added costs.

Opportunities for Congressional Action

Congress has a great deal of opportunity to improve multiple use management for grazing and all other multiple-use management. While the list is not exhaustive, I offer the following suggestions for immediate action:

- Direct agencies to increase the use of targeted grazing to reduce wildfire risk. We appreciate the committee's recent action on *Fix Our Forests Act*, and urge widespread congressional support. This committee must make clear to USFS and BLM that targeted grazing to reduce fuels must not occur only within the bounds of grazing allotments; grazing is already reducing fuels in those allotments. The real need is outside allotments, where fuels are untreated and pose a risk to all uses around them.
- Direct targeted resources to environmental analysis and permitting for rangeland monitoring and grazing allotments. Both USFS and BLM have long lists of outstanding NEPA analyses that should be updated to facilitate the improved management. Congress should direct the agencies to stand up targeted teams to work through these lists expeditiously.
- Reform statutes that has repeatedly been abused to the detriment of the landscape. PLC has a long history of supporting modernizations of the Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act implementation, National Environmental Policy Act, and the Equal Access to Justice Act. Congress must provide clear direction to the agencies about future use to prevent further misuse.
- Conform expectations for traditional and alternative sources to avoid or minimize impacts to livestock grazing. Livestock producers have become increasingly concerned that alternative energy sources, like solar, will have irreversible impacts to livestock grazing since installations on federal land require conversion of multiple-use land to a single use. This committee should establish a clear expectation that any new installation should avoid existing grazing allotments.

Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide a review of the last several years and offer suggestions about how to build a stronger future for our public lands. The long-held multiple-use doctrine ensures that federal lands remain productive and accessible to all. Ranching provides ecological and economic benefits that ensure those lands are not just accessible, but healthy, resilient, and attractive to all other uses.

My family has managed the lands we utilize since 1879. Our commitment to these lands is baked into our way of life. The knowledge that is handed down from generation to generation offers deep historical and ecological knowledge of the working landscape. Congress and federal agencies must recognize public lands ranching as an essential part of the multiple-use framework and ensure these lands are able to be both important parts of our country's history, and of our future. Together, I'm hopeful we'll ensure grazing is still an instrumental part of the west in another 150 years.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.