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Sustainable Cowboys or Welfare Ranchers of the American West?

Report analyzes taxpayer bailout of U.S. public lands ranching [Part II of a series on ranchers]

Posted on February 12, 2015 by Vickery Eckhoff // 30 Comments



Each public lands livestock operator cost taxpayers nearly a quarter of a million dollars in subsidies over the last decade. (AP Photo/Las Vegas Review-Journal, John Locher)

Five hundred million dollars^[1]. That's what 21,000^[2] ranchers who graze their livestock on America's iconic western rangelands are estimated to have cost US taxpayers in 2014 — and every year for the past decade. This averages out to an annual taxpayer subsidy of \$23,809 per rancher — approximately a quarter of a million dollars each since 2005. So why does this small subset, representing just 2.7% of US livestock producers, protest the “welfare rancher” label?

The public lands grazing program is welfare.

That \$23,809 — and it's a lowball figure — is a form of public assistance similar to other welfare programs. The only difference is, it doesn't arrive as a check in the mail. It instead represents a loss covered by taxpayers: the very large difference between what public lands ranchers pay in fees to the US government and what public lands grazing costs taxpayers every year. But it's still a subsidy, as a newly updated economic analysis, ***Costs and Consequences: The Real Price of Livestock Grazing on America's Public Lands***, makes clear. And the recipients aren't low income; a large number are millionaires and some are billionaires and multi-billion dollar corporations. Cattle barons, if you will.

Public lands ranching costs western ecosystems, wildlife and taxpayers.

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“Several federal agencies permit livestock grazing on public lands in the United States, the largest being the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Department of Agriculture’s United States Forest Service (USFS).

The vast majority of livestock grazing on BLM and USFS rangelands occurs in the 11 western states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Rangelands are non-irrigated and generally have vegetation that consists mostly of grasses, herbs and/or shrubs. They are different from pastureland, which may periodically be planted, fertilized, mowed or irrigated.”

So says the report, which was prepared by three economists for the Center for Biological Diversity and published in January 2015, the latest of numerous studies (see list at end of this article) to examine a program Americans know nothing about.

The 44-page fiscal analysis describes a federal program that exploits not just taxpayers but is ruinous to public lands and the wildlife that inhabit it, a viewpoint shared by rangeland science experts and conservation groups, from [Defenders of Wildlife](#) and the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), to [WildEarth Guardians](#), [Western Watersheds Project](#), and many others.

An obvious culprit identified in the report (and its predecessors) is the negligible fee that livestock operators pay to graze a cow and her calf or five sheep for an *entire month* on public lands, otherwise defined as an AUM (animal unit month). In 2014 it was just \$1.35 (priced less than a can of dog food) — a figure that is the lowest fee that can be legally charged.

The \$1.35 figure has barely budged over the past 34 years[3] and is well below the market price to graze on private land (\$21.60). Fees set by other federal agencies and individual states on public property are also significantly higher.

In 2014, BLM and USFS permit holders paid an estimated \$18.5 million in fees to graze 1.14 million livestock “units” on the 229 million acres of federal land used for grazing. But only a fraction (between one-third and one-quarter) of that \$18.5 million actually went into the US Treasury, according to the report. The majority was diverted to range rehabilitation and improvement funds to construct fences for containing livestock, and improving vegetation and forage. In other words, two-thirds to three quarters of the low fees ranchers pay go right back into their pockets, leaving approximately \$7.9 million to help defray total costs...which are, well...enormous.

Indirect costs significantly higher than direct costs.

The study indicates that, in 2014, \$143.6 million was directly appropriated to the grazing program (an amount that’s been consistent over the last 10 years). Some quick math reveals that, on average, public lands ranchers paid just \$376 for what cost taxpayers \$6,838 last year.

But that doesn’t reflect the *indirect costs*: 34 related programs and services enumerated at the back of the report (Appendix A, tables 1-4) that aren’t directly budgeted under grazing by BLM and USFS budgets or that are carried out by other government agencies or at the state and local level. These aren’t figured into the \$143.6 million appropriated for the grazing recipients.

The entries either benefit livestock producers or remediate damage tied to their operations. Multiple programs deal with soil erosion, desertification, and the spread of noxious weeds while others deal with damage to streams, watersheds and riparian areas. Several others address harm to archeological and cultural resources (oftentimes, of indigenous peoples) and

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recreational areas used by the public. Four remedy harm to wildlife. Fire management and control is a big issue, too.

Two controversial programs directly remove and kill wildlife that threaten livestock at taxpayer expense. USDA Wildlife Services spends \$8 million^[4] to kill millions of native predators every year, courtesy of an unknowing public. The BLM's Wild Horses and Burros program also removes thousands of federally protected horses and burros each year from designated wild horse habitat so that, during the ongoing drought, more water and forage are available for ranchers on public assistance. The cost of that program tops \$80 million a year. That's \$380 per rancher to kill predators (wolves, coyotes, bear, cougars, bobcats and eagles) and ten times that much (\$3,809) to get rid of wild horses and burros.

Add in the USDA's livestock assistance program, under which payments are made directly to ranchers due to natural disasters, like droughts. And don't forget all the various agencies indirectly involved with federal grazing issues and consequences: The US Army Corps of Engineers, the EPA, the USDA, and Dept. of Justice. What does it equal? Special interest welfare estimated between \$500 million and \$1 billion a year.

Here's where the cattlemen's claim to be great stewards of public grassland and forest preserve gets exposed — just like their disavowal of receiving welfare payments.

States the Western Watersheds Project,

“Public lands ranching is the most widespread commercial use of public lands in the United States. Ranching is one of the primary causes of native species endangerment in the American West; it is also the most significant cause of non-point source water pollution and desertification.

Public lands ranching significantly contributes to climate change by emissions of the global warming gases nitrous oxide and methane; it causes loss of soil carbon reserves by causing erosion and by substantially reducing the landscape's potential to sequester carbon.”

Almost a year ago, Cliven Bundy ripped into low-income Americans for collecting government subsidies at the same time that he was stiffing the government of \$1 million in back grazing fees. Since then, only a handful of articles have called out the rest of his public-lands ranching brethren for the hand-outs they receive. The mainstream media acts as though all that welfare ranching stuff disappeared with Bundy's armed rebellion.

The time is here for journalists to inform the public about the federal grazing program. For too long, they've let the 2.7% of US livestock producers run away with the “sustainable” cowboy narrative — leaving the public, public lands, and wildlife paying the price.

This is Part II of an ongoing series on ranchers in the media.

Coming next: Part III: ***Bad Ranchers, Bad Cows***

Read Part I: ***The Media Adores Ranchers. Here's Why They Shouldn't.***

RECOMMENDED READING:

Studies and Reports:

Costs and Consequences: The Real Price of Livestock Grazing on America's Public

Lands, (Jan. 2015) by Christine Glaser, Karyn Moskowitz and Chuck Romaniello for the Center for Biological Diversity

Grazing Fees: Overview and Issues (June 2012) by Carol Hardy Vincent, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy for the Congressional Research Service (Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress)

Trampling the Public Trust (Jan. 2010) by Debra L. Donohue for the Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review

Fiscal Costs of Federal Public Lands Livestock Grazing (2005) Wild Earth Guardians

Taking Stock of Public Lands Grazing: An Economic Analysis by Thomas M. Power, Ph.D., Chair of the Economics Department at the University of Montana

Livestock Grazing: Federal Expenditures and Receipts Vary Depending on the Agency and the Purpose of the Fee Charged (Sept. 2005) Government Accountability Office (GAO)

Assessing the Full Cost of the Federal Grazing Program (Oct. 2002) by Karyn Moskowitz and Chuck Romaniello for the Center for Biological Diversity

Welfare Ranching: The Subsidized Destruction of the American West Edited by George Wuerthner and Mollie Matteson

Articles:

Big Cattle, Big Gulp (Feb. 4, 2015) by Christopher Ketcham for *The New Republic*

Federal Grazing Program in Bundy Dispute Rips-Off Taxpayers, Wild Horses (April 25, 2014) by Vickery Eckhoff for *Forbes*

Grazing Improvement Act Will Fleece Taxpayers While Harming Environment (Dec. 3, 2013) by James McWilliams for *Forbes*

On Wyoming's Range, Water Is Scarce but Welfare Is Plenty (July 9, 2012) by Andrew Cohen for *The Atlantic*

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *Fiscal Costs of Public Lands Livestock Grazing*, WildEarth Guardians, 2005; http://www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/factsheet_Grazing_Fiscal_Costs.pdf; Moskowitz, K. and C. Romaniello.2002. *Assessing the Full Cost of the Federal Grazing Program*. Center for Biological Diversity. Tucson, Az. The estimated cost of the deferral grazing program at \$500 million is consistent with estimates developed by other experts, Karl Hess (former special advisor on policy to the Assistant Secretary for Program, Policy, and Budget of the Department of the Interior) and Johanna Wald (senior attorney and Land Program Director, Natural Resources Defense Council) estimated the annual cost of the federal grazing program to be approximately \$500 million. Hess, K. and and J.H. Wald. 1995. Grazing reform: here's the answer. *High Country News* 27 (18). The *Economic* magazine has also reported the annual cost of the federal grazing program to be \$460 million. *Subsidized Cow Chow*. *The Economist* (Mar. 7, 2002): 9.

[2] *Costs and Consequences: the Real Price of Livestock Grazing on America's Public Lands*, p. 6: "In 2013, the BLM issued 15,739 permits to livestock operators and there were 5,711 livestock operators who had permits to graze in the national forest system. The numbers of USFS and BLM permits and livestock permit holders are not directly additive, but due to a number of livestock operators who have permits from both agencies and/or more than one grazing permit per agency, the total number of livestock operators is likely to be fewer than 21,540. This compares to the approximately 800,000 ranchers and cattle producers in the United

States. (Statistic Brain, 2012). The number of operators benefitting from the USFS and BLM grazing program in the West is therefore less than 2.7 percent of the nation's total livestock operators.

[3] The fee for 2015 was raised to \$1.69 per AUM. According to Christine Glaser, one of the analysis' three authors, "This miniscule increase does not change the basic message that the PRIA fee percentage of private fees has been decreasing pretty dramatically since 1981, and also between 2002 and 2013. See Table 10 in the report."

[4] *Fiscal Costs of Public Lands Livestock Grazing*, WildEarth Guardians, 2005;
http://www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/factsheet_Grazing_Fiscal_Costs.pdf



Center for Biological Diversity

Federal Grazing Program

grazing

livestock

public lands ranching

ranchers

ranching

welfare rancher



About Vickery Eckhoff (9 Articles)

Co-founder and Executive Editor Vickery is a New York City-based writer whose investigation of wild horse politics and the underground horsemeat trade has produced six radio interviews, a book proposal and more than two dozen articles on Forbes.com, the Huffington Post, Newsweek/The Daily Beast and Alternet. As part of her research, Vickery has interviewed Dr. Temple Grandin, local and state legislators, horsemeat-loving chefs, slaughter plant owners, kill buyers, ranchers and officials at the USDA, Bureau of Land Management and other government agencies. She has been a guest speaker at four equine conferences on the topic of correcting disinformation about horse slaughter and animals in the media.

Contact:

Website

25 Comments on Sustainable Cowboys or Welfare Ranchers of the American West?



Teresa Wagner // February 12, 2015 at 5:35 pm // Reply

Thank you for all the details. It is depressing but important to know.



scott // February 12, 2015 at 5:47 pm // Reply

Regarding Cliven Bundy, Fox News likes that he steals welfare from taxpayers because it thinks it makes for lower meat prices:

"When you graze your cattle there, you keep the price of meat down for the American consumer,' [Sean] Hannity said."

<http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/04/sean-hannity-inflames-brewing-range-war-between-feds-militia-over-nv-cattle-roundup/>

Of course one rancher cannot possibly affect the price. It just fattens his own profit. Not that lower prices would justify it anyway.



GAYLA STAHL // March 6, 2015 at 6:36 pm // Reply

Why did they pick on one farmer, Mr. Bundy, I think they need to apologize.



Vickery Eckhoff // March 6, 2015 at 6:49 pm // Reply

Cliven Bundy, owed (and prob still owes) more than \$1 million in back grazing fees, and his family and supporters pointed weapons at federal agents. I don't think anyone needs to apologize to him.



Trish Pauley // February 12, 2015 at 5:49 pm // Reply

It is so wrong, unfair and many other words I would like to say that American Taxpayers are forced to pay for the abuse and suffering of these Historical wild herds. The cattlemen and mining operations have very deep pockets and are lining those of congress, senate and higher to use the public lands that belong to every American to not only destroy them but to kill out our National Treasures. The wild herds have bloodlines that go back to the same bloodlines of the horses that not only helped build our country but they also carried our soldiers to battle. The saddest part is my grandchildren will not be able to enjoy seeing the beauty of these herds in the wild or the visit the beauty of these lands once the mining operations are finish stripping the National resources from them. I as a USAF veteran, American taxpayer and animal lover believed the when the Constitution says "Government for the People" was true. Now I know it is now "Government is for the Greedy".



Lisa Norman // February 12, 2015 at 8:28 pm // Reply

Excellent article – the American public does need to know this exploitation of OUR PUBLIC LANDS is causing desertification (as GAO Reports have stated for decades) and extinction of native species that have key roles to play in these arid rangelands. Wild horses for instance disperse seeds replenishing what they consume, they also consume dry brush thereby reducing wildfire fuel. They can not fill their niche at ridiculously low populations and continue to be eradicated by the agency mandated to protect them, BLM. BLM is funded by taxpayers but serves special interests plundering our public lands.



James Olson // February 12, 2015 at 11:05 pm // Reply

Taxpayers should not have to prop up livestock producers who cannot make it on their own. Time to bring an end to welfare ranching.



Grandma Gregg // February 13, 2015 at 2:01 pm // Reply

What can be done to address the problems associated with public lands livestock grazing?
There is a simple answer: end it. Get the cows and sheep off, let the wild creatures reclaim their native habitat, and send the ranchers a bill for the cost of restoration.
<http://www.publiclandsranching.org/book.htm>



Janet Dunnington // February 14, 2015 at 8:59 pm // Reply

our wild horses and burros need to remain free and wild. These horrific and terrifying roundups are unnecessary and cruel. It is the cattle that need to be reduced.



Carolyn Ellertson // February 14, 2015 at 11:54 pm // Reply

The BLM is getting very close to having a rebellion on it's hands!! ARE YOU LISTENING BLM???

The American taxpayer is damned sick and tired of dishonest, on the take, self serving, special interest sustaining, politicians and departments who pay us no mind until it's election time again. WE HAVE HAD IT!! You are basically pawns for the self serving life stock ranchers on OUR land. We did not authorize what you are doing, despite what you think, and we will keep on until changes are made.. and you lose your jobs in the process.. Graft and corruption has consumed you!! Don't let the door hit you on the way out..



Adam Barber // February 17, 2015 at 12:42 pm // Reply

This article, though not terribly surprising, is both disturbing and important. Unfortunately, it is a very small tip of a very large iceberg of externalities big AG would rather stay below the surface. Hopefully, articles such of this will shed more light on the issues. Realistically, we are a long way from seeing any real change.



Shane Destry // February 17, 2015 at 8:30 pm // Reply

Thank you Vickery Eckhoff for as always getting to the nitty gritty of \$ costs to the taxpayers for subsidizing welfare cattlemen destroying our public lands and driving our wildlife into extinction. Although other forms of welfare corporations like Haliburton or Pfizer get more attention in the media, those among the welfare cattlemen deserve to have the spotlight shown upon them as you do so well. For in the darkness in which they operate unknown to the public they are bringing about the turning of our Western lands into Wasteland and the extinction of our wild horses, wolves and other species who are about to vanish forever – collateral damage in the war waged on Mother Earth by corporate greed.



Christine Calderon // February 18, 2015 at 9:27 pm // Reply

perhaps some welfare ranchers will meet up with some of the illegals who marijuana farm on public land and a huge battle will wipe out both sides. There's cartel in them woods too. Why bother smuggling it when they can just grow it here. The BLM is on the take and not just from those ranchers... Those welfare farmers need to buy some land already and work it.



Janet Curtis // February 24, 2015 at 7:32 am // Reply

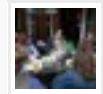
pls copy and paste this so we can have readable material to hand out on thursday..there will be tons of people in and outside the nugget..we cant get their attention with just shirts or signs. not many going, but the general public and others need to see this stuff. most are pro blm and fall for their lies. we need to make more advocates right now!! pls my printer is broken and i cant send pictures i dont know how or obama would get all the graphic photos we have to see.

ty



Janelle Ghorso // February 28, 2015 at 2:34 pm // Reply

The time is way overdue to expose these thieves. They are destroying what is cherished by Americans and are dictating what lives and dies on public lands, while the BLM and USFS caters to their every whim. Thank you Vickery Eckhoff for another well written and informative article.



Craig Downer // March 1, 2015 at 7:29 pm // Reply

Thanks for bringing the greater truth to light! This is such an ignored issue and so much of this travesty of justice occurs because of the abject complacency of people. It's high time to wake up and change our lifestyle, before this whole marvelous life-supporting ecosystem comes crashing down around up. I particularly detest how the wonderful returned North American native wild horses are being scapegoated and blamed by the public lands livestock industry, the big game hunting establishment, etc. This is so devilishly wrong and must be countered. Thanks for the breath of fresh air for the living planet Earth, all you great researchers and writers who still care. Now to translate this into much needed reform. This remains our challenge, everyone's.



sharon aldredge // March 2, 2015 at 12:18 pm // Reply

article posted by our ex Governor Schweitzer. About half way through you will see information about the Koch Bros and their dealings in Montana. I had no idea. Welfare ranchers for sure.



sharon aldredge // March 2, 2015 at 12:19 pm // Reply

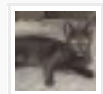
I'm not sure the website posted on above note.

<http://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/opinion/guest-opinions/2015/02/19/schweitzer-blasts-group-medicare-stance/23684267/>



Debra weber // June 12, 2015 at 10:24 pm // Reply

Keep it coming.



Bonnie wagner // July 21, 2015 at 12:06 am // Reply

This is just mind boggling??? B.S., politics, probably illegal!!!

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