



PUBLIC LANDS GRAZING VITAL TO THE RURAL WEST

By Daniel Munch, Economist at AFBF

- The federal government owns over 28% of total land in the United States.
- The percentage of federally owned land in each state varies widely, from 0.3% in Connecticut and Iowa to 71% in Utah and nearly 80% in Nevada.
- Residents of heavily federally owned states that utilize lands for commerce must abide by regulations of federal agencies such as Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Forest Service (FS), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS) and the Department of Defense (DOD)—a challenge much of the rest of the country does not encounter.
- Agencies administer permits that allow ranchers to graze livestock on specified public lands for a fee.
- Ranchers pay approximately \$26 million in grazing fees each year.
- An AUM is the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow and her calf or one horse, or five sheep or goats for a month.
- Licensed businesses can apply for a BLM grazing permit if they buy or control private property, known as a base property, that has been legally recognized as having preference for use of public lands grazing.
- There are approximately 640 million acres of public land—35% of which hosts grazing livestock.
- The loss of grazing permits has a negative economic impact. Economic modeling specific to Idaho, Oregon, and Nevada showed the loss of 5,389 active grazing permits resulted in an average 60% decline in cattle sales, 50% decline in labor income, a 65% decline in personal income (from \$33,940 to \$11,812), per operation, and billions in downstream economic losses.
- Additionally, the tax revenue received on these sales support public safety, education and infrastructure in locations that are often already underserved and don't otherwise receive tax revenue from federally-owned land.
- There is a wide array of indirect economic effects associated with public lands grazing. Notably, ruminants like cattle, sheep and goats utilize forage on otherwise marginal lands to convert low-quality forage into high-quality nutrients humans can consume.

- Many of the cow-calf pairs and yearlings raised in western states spent some time grazing on public lands, meaning those lands contributed to the lifecycle and final marketable value of these animals. Removing the option of public lands would further pressure private lands to produce additional forage and feed, increasing input costs for producers and food costs for consumers.
- Grazing also provides indirect economic benefits by helping preserve regional ecosystems. Properly managed rangelands can increase soil and organic matter, improving soil structure and contributing to increased water storage capacity and filtration, which is important for reducing the severity of drought conditions.
- Grazing ruminants feed off perennial forage, promoting complex root structures that minimize soil erosion and increase carbon sequestration.
- Grazing ruminants help maintain distinctive plant communities necessary to support certain threatened and endangered species.
- General wildlife habitat, open space and recreation opportunities are just a few of the many other benefits retained when land is used for grazing. These benefits are often not present in alternative land uses and are difficult to replace with human-made services.
- Ecosystem services are defined as any positive benefit that wildlife or ecosystems provide to people. Nationally, it was estimated that federal rangelands contribute \$3.7 billion in ecosystem services which translated to \$20.15 per public acre grazed. For comparison, after adjusting for the approximately \$26 million ranchers pay in grazing fees each year, taxpayers support appropriations for rangeland management programs at about 30 cents per acre. Excluding all other benefits of public lands grazing, consumers have a net return of \$19.85 per 30 cents spent to support federal lands grazing.
- Utah has the highest ecosystem service value at \$610 million.
- An often-overlooked benefit of public lands grazing is the land stewardship benefits offered by ranchers, their families, and their employees.
- The federal government employs thousands of conservation scientists, foresters, rangeland management specialists, forest and conservation technicians and others tasked with helping manage and conserve land appropriately.
- Most ranchers do a portion of these tasks free of charge to taxpayers as part of their everyday role as rangeland operators.
- The families who live in rural communities are often drawn by the inherent role they play in stewarding the land, a passion that saves taxpayers billions in rangeland management duties.
- To grasp the extent of this cost, the replacement value of public lands permittee operators, their spouses and two hypothetical workers was calculated. Each ranching operation would, conservatively, cost the government \$206,380 to replace. That's \$3.25 billion annually.
- Cattle, sheep and goat producers across the Western United States have partnered with federal agencies for generations to manage hundreds of millions of acres of land. As a result, consumers across the country have benefited from a

more resilient and economical domestic food supply, countless ecosystem and climate-related gains of ruminant grazing and open lands preservation, and effective and careful management of public lands.

- Public lands grazing is a vital part of the Western economy, and its loss could threaten the livelihoods and traditions of thousands of rural communities.

