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Working to protect and restore Western Watersheds

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Obama Administration Refuses to Reform Public-lands Grazing Fee

Tucson, *Ariz.* – After a six year delay, five conservation organizations finally received an answer today from the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture concerning the artificially low fee federal agencies charge for livestock grazing on public lands. Claiming higher priorities, both agencies declined to address the outdated grazing fee formula. The government’s response was prompted by a lawsuit filed by Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, and Oregon Natural Desert Association.

Conservation organizations submitted a petition in 2005, asking the government to address the grazing fee formula and adjust the fee in order to cover the costs of the federal grazing program, which costs taxpayers *at least* \$115 million dollars annually according to a Government Accountability Office report. Conservationists contend that Americans lose even more in compromised wildlife habitat, water quality, scenic views, and native vegetation.

“Today’s long-awaited answer was a huge disappointment,” said Greta Anderson, Arizona Director for Western Watersheds Project. “Year after year, we watch as the government gives a sweetheart deal to public lands ranchers at the expense of taxpayers and the environment. We had hoped the Obama Administration would have done better, but it’s business-as-usual for the western livestock industry.”

“Subsidizing the livestock industry at the cost of species, ecosystems, and taxpayers is plainly bad public land policy,” said Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaigns director with the Center for Biological Diversity, “Today’s choice to continue that policy is both a disappointment and a blight on the Obama administration’s environmental record.”

“Given the massive budget shortfalls our country faces, we can no longer afford to subsidize a small group of ranchers to graze public lands at public expense,” said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians and one of the primary authors of the petition. “As long as grazing is permitted on public lands, it’s only fair that public lands ranchers pay for the cost of their activity.”

Grazing fees have not kept pace with inflation or with comparable grazing leases on state and private land. The 2010 grazing fee was just \$1.35 per cow per month, the fourth year in a row that the fee was set at its lowest legal limit. The 2011 fee will be announced at the end of January.

The groups will be exploring all options including litigation to address the agencies unfortunate decision today to take no action.

A copy of the 2005 fee petition can be found by clicking [here](#).

A copy of the legal complaint against the government can be found [here](#).

A copy of the Department of Agriculture's response can be found [here](#).

A copy of the Department of the Interior's response can be found [here](#).

A copy of the 2005 GAO report can be found by clicking [here](#).

A report assessing the full costs of public-lands livestock grazing can be found [here](#).

Background

[Livestock grazing](#) is one of the most ubiquitous and destructive uses of public land. It is also a contributing factor to the imperilment of numerous threatened and endangered species. Those species include the [desert tortoise](#), [Mexican spotted owl](#), [southwestern willow flycatcher](#), [least Bell's vireo](#), [Mexican gray wolf](#), [Oregon spotted frog](#), [Chiricahua leopard frog](#), and dozens of other species of imperiled [mammals](#), [fish](#), [amphibians](#), and [spring snails](#) that occur on western public land. Public lands livestock grazing is also a primary [factor contributing](#) to unnaturally severe [western wildfires](#), watershed degradation, soil loss, and the spread of invasive plants — as well as annual [greenhouse gas emissions](#) equivalent to that of 705,342 passenger vehicles.

Grazing fees apply to livestock grazing across 258 million acres of western public land administered by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management — 81 percent of the land administered by the two agencies in the 11 western states. There are approximately 23,600 public-lands ranchers, representing about 6 percent of all livestock producers west of the Mississippi River.

The low federal grazing fee contributes to the adverse impacts caused by livestock grazing on public lands for two primary reasons: (1) the below-fair-market-value fee encourages annual grazing on even the most marginal lands and allows for increased grazing on other areas; and (2) since a percentage of the funds collected is required to be used on range mitigation and restoration, the low fee equates to less funds for environmental mitigation and restoration of the impacted lands.

[In its 2005 report, the Government Accountability Office](#) found that the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service grazing receipts fail to recover even 15 percent of administrative costs and are much lower than fees charged by the other federal agencies, states, and private ranchers. The GAO found that the Bureau and Forest Service grazing fee decreased by 40 percent from 1980 to 2004, while grazing fees charged by private ranchers increased by 78 percent for the same period. To recover expenditures, the Bureau and Forest Service would have had to charge \$7.64 and \$12.26 per animal unit month, respectively.

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