

November 12, 2005

Conservationists petition for increased livestock grazing fee

By N.S. Nokkentved

The federal government has been losing money for years on livestock grazing on public lands, and now six conservation groups, backed up by a new government study, say it's time to raise the fees.

But raising monthly grazing fees to the \$12.26 per animal unit mentioned in the Government Accountability Office report would end the cattle business in this area, said rancher Brent Money of Palmyra.

"When all the costs are figured in, it costs us a lot more than the \$1.79" charged for grazing federal lands, said Money, who is secretary for the 40-member Spanish Fork Grazing Co. LLC.

The Center for Biological Diversity, representing five other environmental and conservation groups, has petitioned the secretaries of the interior and agriculture to change grazing fee regulations to reflect fair market value of government grass.

The request comes after the release of a September report by the GAO that notes livestock grazing fees charged by federal agencies are woefully short of what it costs those agencies to manage their grazing programs.

The federal government manages livestock grazing on 235 million acres of public lands, more than 98 percent of it managed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. In 2004, federal agencies spent more than \$144 million on grazing management, while they took in only about \$21 million in grazing fees.

The shortfall amounts to a \$123 million annual subsidy for the livestock industry, the groups' petition notes.

Though grazing fees vary with some agencies, the Forest Service and the BLM in 2004 charged \$1.43 per "animal unit" per month.

An animal unit is one cow and her calf, one horse or five sheep. Just to break even, the BLM would have to raise grazing fees to \$7.64 per month and the Forest Service to \$12.26, the GAO reports.

The fee was increased to \$1.79 in 2005.

The report also notes that public land grazing fees have declined by 40 percent between 1980 and 2004, while fees on private land rose by 78 percent during that period.

"Cost recovery should be one objective of this federal program, especially in this time of budgetary crisis," said Greta Anderson, botanist and range restoration coordinator for the Tucson-based Center for

Biological Diversity. "The ongoing deficit is essentially a subsidy, and the question is, what are taxpayers getting in return? Impaired watersheds, accelerated erosion, invasive weeds, and degraded habitat for wildlife."

Brent Tanner, executive vice president of the Utah Cattlemen's Association, said the center's push for higher fees is just another attempt to get livestock off the public land. Even if grazing were halted on public lands, the government's management costs wouldn't go away, and grazing is one of the uses that actually includes some cost recovery, he said.

"It's an ongoing, long-term debate about the value of that forage," Tanner said. It's not fair to compare private land fees to public land fees. Ranchers on public lands face more federal regulations and requirements, and they have less control over the land than those using private grazing allotments.

Money's balance sheet for his grazing association shows it costs about \$10 per animal per month, for work such as fence and water system maintenance, in addition to the \$1.79 Forest Service fees, he said. He and other association members also put in work days in proportion to the number of cows they run.

Public land grazing may be cheap, but ranchers also have to share the allotment with other users, including hikers, hunters and motorized recreationists.

Some of those other users leave gates open, make it harder to gather animals in the fall, and sometimes hit a cow with a vehicle or occasionally shoot one.

Association members have to maintain fence and water systems, and they have to hire riders. Money would rather graze his livestock on private land, but there's not enough of it to go around. Most ranchers use their private land to raise winter feed for their herd.

The association runs about 2,100 cows on the Diamond Fork allotment.

The BLM administers about 19 million acres of grazing land in Utah, including more than 80,000 acres in Utah County. And the Uinta National Forest administers grazing leases on 648,861 acres, part of that in Utah County, the GAO reports.

The Center for Biological Diversity, the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Forest Guardians, the Oregon Natural Desert Association, and Western Watersheds Project, together filed a petition to change the grazing regulations.

The groups want to move the federal grazing fees closer to cost recovery and to limit environmental damage from grazing.

"The federal grazing program is a lousy deal for taxpayers, as well as for the nation's sage grouse, bighorn sheep, desert tortoise and Pacific salmon that depend on the same public lands that we are paying ranchers to degrade," said Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. "As long as grazing is permitted on public lands, it's only fair that public lands ranchers pay for the cost of the activity."