

Letters from the West (blog)

Low federal grazing fees lie at heart of calls for reform

Submitted by Rocky Barker on Thu, 02/07/2008 - 9:35am.

The federal government made its annual announcement of the fee it will charge ranchers for 2008 to graze livestock on their land. Western Watersheds Project, Jon Marvel's group, quickly heralded the low numbers that are among its strongest case in its quest to drive livestock off of 235 million acres of public lands.

The fee is set at \$1.35 per animal unit month, the amount of grass it takes to feed a cow and her calf for a month. That fee, which results from a complicated formula negotiated in the Public Rangeland Improvement Act of 1978, compares to a fee of \$2.36 per AUM in 1980. That 40 percent drop compares with a 78 percent increase in grazing fees on private lands, WWP reports. The fee brings in revenues that fall short of the costs of administering grazing by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service by \$115 million, according to a 2005 Government Accountability Office report.

For the BLM and the Forest Service to recover costs of administering the program, BLM and the Forest Service would have had to charge \$7.64 and \$12.26 per AUM, WWP said.

Ranchers rightfully argue that the administration costs include the costs of dealing with lawsuits and rangeland protection programs for endangered species and clean water. Marvel counters that those costs come from problems caused by grazing.

When I speak to college students about public land issues this issue often comes up. They share Marvel's view that the low grazing fee is a subsidy for ranchers.

Ranchers have always disputed the issue and really hate the perception that they are subsidized. Grazing on public lands is often more expensive and certainly more complicated than grazing on private land. The rules are strict and any time they can expect WWP to come in and file lawsuits that cause them stress and money.

The last time this issue got a good Congressional airing was in the early 1990s. Western senators like Republican Larry Craig successfully staved off efforts to raise the fee using the power of the filibuster.

The state's grazing program charges a little more but also runs at a deficit, which presents ranchers in Idaho with a similar threat. It's just a matter of time when the issue goes national again and ranchers will have to fight for their livelihoods again.

Ranchers argue that across much of the millions of acres they graze they are the only people out there monitoring what's going on. They report everything from range fires to illegal off-road trails to poaching and vandalism.

Their challenge is that none of these efforts are officially recognized nor parts of a larger system with clear benefits and accountability. Some reformers have suggested that over time ranchers grazing contracts are rewritten to give them clear responsibilities for monitoring range

conditions, wildlife and other activities. In return they would get credits so that whatever subsidy the program has actually returns benefits to the public.

These stewardship contracts would play neither to Marvel's agenda nor to the cattlemen necessarily. Ranchers would still run cattle on federal lands but depend as much for revenues on how many sage grouse, lush riparian areas and native sagebrush they leave and produce.

Whether Congress is ready for such a dramatic reform, let alone ranchers or the environmental community, is questionable at this point. But as the fight over grazing fees returns the pressure for change will only grow.