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Welfare Ranching Continues Out West

Tucson, AZ – On Friday the federal government announced the annual public lands grazing fee for 2009. It is \$1.35 per animal unit month (AUM), the minimum fee allowed under current law and third year in a row that the fee has been so low. The fee, which is charged on most Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service grazing allotments, does not come close to recouping the costs of the federal grazing program.

“The federal grazing program doesn’t pay for itself—not by a long-shot,” said Greta Anderson, Arizona Director for Western Watersheds Project. “It’s effectively a hand-out for a special interest group.”

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2005 that the BLM and Forest Service spends \$132.5 million annually on grazing management, but collects only \$17.5 million in grazing fees, for an annual loss of at least \$115 million to taxpayers.¹ The average grazing fee on equivalent, non-irrigated private lands in the West was \$15.90 per AUM in 2007.²

“Given the massive budget shortfall our country is facing, we can no longer afford to subsidize a small group of ranchers to pursue their preferred lifestyle on public lands at public expense,” said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians.

WildEarth Guardians sent a letter to the new Chief Performance Officer for the Obama Administration last week identifying a host of wasteful federal programs, including the grazing program (www.wildearthguardians.org/library/paper.asp?nMode=2&nLibraryID=706).

The federal grazing fee is determined by a formula established by the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (PRIA). Fees are based on the amount of forage required to sustain one “animal unit” for one month. The fee has failed to keep up with inflation or the cost of administering the program. In fact, the GAO reported in 2005 that the BLM would need to charge \$7.64 per AUM³ to recoup grazing program expenses, and the Forest Service would need to charge \$12.26/AUM.⁴

In 2005 conservation organizations submitted a petition for rulemaking to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of the Interior to update the fee formula to produce fees that cover the costs of the federal grazing program. Under the Administrative Procedures Act, the agencies are supposed to respond within a “reasonable period” of time.

“The Obama Administration needs to respond now to the grazing fee petition to comply with the law,” said Jon Marvel, Executive Director of Western Watersheds Project.

A copy of the 2005 fee petition can be found at www.sagebrushsea.org/mn_grazing_fees.htm.

¹ GAO. 2005. Livestock grazing: federal expenditures and receipts vary, depending on the agency and the purpose of the fee charged. GAO-05-869. Government Accountability Office. Washington, DC: 5-6.

² USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2008. Agricultural Prices, 2007 Summary. USDA-NASS, Agricultural Statistics Board: 234. (July 2008). The average fee per AUM on state lands in eleven western states was \$14.90 in 2007. *Id.*

³ GAO. 2005. Livestock grazing: federal expenditures and receipts vary, depending on the agency and the purpose of the fee charged. GAO-05-869. Government Accountability Office. Washington, DC: 7.

⁴ GAO. 2005. Livestock grazing: federal expenditures and receipts vary, depending on the agency and the purpose of the fee charged. GAO-05-869. Government Accountability Office. Washington, DC: 7.