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Lawsuit Targets Harmful Public Lands Livestock Subsidy

WASHINGTON — Today the Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, and Oregon Natural Desert Association sued the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to compel them to respond to a 2005 rulemaking petition that seeks to increase the fee for livestock grazing across 258 million acres of federal public land.

“The federal grazing program is as fiscally irresponsible as it is ecologically harmful,” said Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaigns director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “In responding to our petition, the government must now choose between correcting and continuing the subsidized destruction of America’s public land.”

The current grazing fee does not recover even the administrative costs of operating the program, leaving U.S. taxpayers to pay the difference. The fee also falls short of paying for the environmental problems this land use causes, and instead enables high levels of livestock grazing that harm ecosystems, degrade watersheds, and cause species decline. In 2010, the government charges just \$1.35 per month to graze one cow and calf on public lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, which is the lowest possible rate under the current fee formula.

"Given the massive budget shortfall our country is facing, 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.

Although the Administrative Procedures Act requires the government to respond to rulemaking petitions, the Departments of Interior and Agriculture have not responded to plaintiff’s 2005 petition. Today’s lawsuit seeks that response.

“Our public lands are worth far more than cheap forage for private livestock operations,” said Greta Anderson, Arizona director of the Western Watersheds Project. “The agencies should take this opportunity to set an appropriate value for livestock use of these lands, which provide habitat for plants and animals, clean our air and water, and provide recreational opportunities for millions of Americans.”

The conservation organizations are represented by attorney Marc Fink of the Center for Biological Diversity and attorney Matt Kenna of Durango, Colorado.

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