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Obama Administration Refuses to Reform Public Lands Grazing Fee

Tucson, AZ – Following a five 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 Claiming higher priorities, both departments declined to address the outdated grazing fee formula.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 expenses of the federal grazing program, which costs taxpayers *at least* \$120 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 government's decision today to take no action.

A copy of the 2005 fee petition is available at www.sagebrushsea.org/mn_grazing_fees.htm.

A copy of the legal complaint against the government is available at www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/public_lands/grazing/pdfs/complaint-grazing-fee.pdf.

A copy of the Department of Agriculture's response is available at www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Grazing_Fee_Petition_Ag_Response.pdf.

A copy of the Department of the Interior's response is available at www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Grazing_Fee_Petition_DOI_Response.pdf.

A copy of the 2005 Government Accountability Office report is available at www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/subsidies.htm.

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