

Sample Op. Ed. on BLM's proposed grazing changes
(This is quite long. It warrants editing and shortening)

America's Western public lands provide a home to some of the most important fish and wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation opportunities in the nation. Numerous other uses, including the grazing of domestic livestock, occur on the 260 million acres of western federal rangelands managed by the Bureau of Land Management ("BLM") and the U.S. Forest Service. In the past, poorly managed livestock grazing on these federal lands allowed overgrazing of native grasses and other plants, destroyed soils, caused erosion, degraded water quality, crippled riparian areas, reduced wildlife and its habitat, ruined recreation, and even damaged archaeological sites.

In 1995, the BLM revised its regulations that govern grazing on the 160 million acres of public lands it manages. BLM's 1994 Rangeland Reform secured the public's ability to participate in federal grazing decisions, and for the first time created a process to set environmental performance standards on BLM rangelands, and a procedure to alter poorly managed grazing when those standards were not met.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration has proposed to roll back BLM's 1995 grazing reforms. The changes will sweep aside efforts over the past decade to improve rangeland conditions and reduce the impacts of abusive grazing on wildlife, watersheds, recreation, and cultural treasures. The proposed rules are especially damaging because they will disenfranchise the public, further entrench destructive livestock grazing, and elevate grazing to the dominant use on many BLM lands.

The proposed changes will exclude the public from participating in grazing decisions, eliminating existing requirements that BLM seek public input before it issues, renews, or modifies a grazing permit. The administration's excuse for locking out the public is that citizens are already consulted when BLM analyzes the environmental impacts of its grazing decisions. But this excuse is deceptive—the BLM knows that grazing environmental assessments, on which they want the public to depend, are notoriously backlogged due to lack of staff and budget, and that many grazing decisions from which the public will be excluded often don't even require environmental analyses.

The proposed changes will also obstruct BLM's ability to remedy abusive grazing. Even after the BLM identifies damaging livestock grazing that is the cause of failing to meet rangeland health standards, the proposed rules will require monitoring and data collection before implementing any needed changes. This new requirement will be imposed even where the abuse is obvious, and even though BLM lacks the budget and staff to keep up with this monitoring.

The grazing reforms adopted in 1995 had finally eliminated this self imposed monitoring catch-22, which had been inserted by former Interior Secretary James Watt. Watt's regulations required BLM to perform years of monitoring and data collection—which it could not afford—before determining whether grazing practices should be

changed. Now the Bush administration wants to reinstitute this untenable monitoring requirement, thus guaranteeing that BLM will be slowed down in trying to determine whether action should be taken to halt or improve unsustainable grazing.

Correcting poorly managed grazing will also be hobbled because the proposed rules will double the one-year time limit BLM has to begin to remedy damaging grazing, and if a remedy requires a 10 percent or greater reduction in grazing, the proposed rules require that the reductions be phased in over five years.

If these changes are allowed to go into effect, the result will be that abusive grazing will be entrenched, cures will be hamstrung, and natural resources, wildlife, and recreation will take a back seat to grazing again dominating BLM lands.

The proposed changes will also make it easier for grazing permit holders to violate environmental laws without fear that their permits could be revoked. While the existing regulations allow BLM to suspend a grazing permit if a rancher violates federal laws (such as using poisonous bait to destroy wildlife, polluting water, destroying archaeological or cultural resources, or violating the Endangered Species Act), the proposed rules only allow BLM to recognize violations of those laws if the violation occurred on the rancher's BLM allotment. If a rancher shoots eagles, poisons wolves, or destroys archaeological resources anywhere else, BLM will be prohibited from taking any action on the rancher's grazing permit. The lesson this will teach is that environmental criminals are free to continue grazing on federal lands, as long as their crimes were committed "away from home."

Don't let wildlife, recreation and other public land values suffer as a result of the proposed rules. Tell the administration that regulations aimed at helping ranchers should not come at the expense of our nation's precious wild places. Submit your comments on these proposed grazing changes to the BLM by March 2. The proposed rules, an accompanying draft environmental impact statement, and instructions for commenting can be found at: <http://www.blm.gov/grazing/>.