

# Chapter XIII

## A FUTURE FOR PUBLIC LANDS RANCHING?

*In as little as 20 years, some people say, public lands ranching will be looked at as a living history exhibit, not a viable economic activity. Maybe that is what it is today, and maybe it's time we treated it as such.*

--Dan Dagget, "Arizona Ranchers Are Ripping Off Wildlife" (Dagget 1990)

Today many people say there is no future in public lands ranching. They see the industry as a bloated relic from the Old West that soon will collapse under its own weight and go the way of whalebone corsets and the steam locomotive. To some, this is wishful thinking; to others, it is the sad fate of a heroic epoch.

As if to reinforce these predictions, many stockmen themselves maintain that even without opposition the industry won't last another 20 years. They complain that they are being driven out of business by the rising cost of ranching supplies, low beef prices (actually now near their *highest* level ever), excessive grazing fees, government interference, "goddamned envarmintlists," taxes, predators, bad weather, high fuel prices, rustlers, vandalism, foreign competition, and more.

These are, of course, the same grievances bemoaned for decades. Most of this self-pity is the same old ploy to maintain subsidies and public sympathy, and to defuse opposition. (Why work to end public lands ranching if it is dying anyway?)

While it is true that some operators have gone out of business in recent years, their former allotments certainly have not gone ungrazed. Indeed, federal statistics show a steady, annual 1%-2% of BLM and Forest Service grazing allotments vacant. (A large percentage of these are high elevation sheep allotments.) Would this be so if public lands ranching were on the verge of collapse? Discounting mounting opposition, several factors indicate that public lands ranching is far from coming to an end.

*On my own leased forest lands, vegetation and soils are far from healthy. When my late husband and I purchased our ranch, the land was sick from overgrazing and USFS mismanagement. To heal the land, we chose to drastically reduce the livestock grazed on forest ranges. The USFS responded by threatening to terminate our permit unless we fully stocked our grazing allotment.*

--Carolyn Lietzman, Carrizozo, New Mexico, *High Country News* (12-7-87)

First, the federal government has always claimed a "legal mandate" to maximize ranching on public grazing allotments. It uses the "multiple use" concept to reinforce this

alleged universal mandate. According to the Forest Service, if a stockman for some reason decides not to graze an allotment for more than 3 years in a row (or if a non-rancher acquires a permit with the purchase of a base property), and even if he pays all the grazing fees but does not use a blade of grass, "The permit will be taken away and given to someone who *will* graze it." All permit holders *must* stock the range with at least the minimum number of livestock called for on their permits. State governments are even more insistent; county and city tax structures also virtually mandate ranching on large undeveloped acreage.

*The U.S. cattle industry is beginning to turn back to raising cattle on range and forage because fattening and finishing cattle primarily on grains is becoming too costly. Thus, to cut production costs, this ecologically unsound industry is going to intensify its impacts on the natural environment.*

--Dr. Michael W. Fox, *Agricide* (Fox 1986)

Second, massive ranching subsidization is institutionalized. Historically, government and private aid has always propped up public lands ranching in proportion to the level of assistance required, making its collapse virtually impossible regardless of its feasibility or malevolent influence.

Third, for more than a century stockmen have dominated the economic, social, and political power structures of the rural West. A rancher's clout traditionally has been based mostly on the land he controls. Thus, public lands ranching is incredibly entrenched in these Western power structures, and is perpetuated by them.

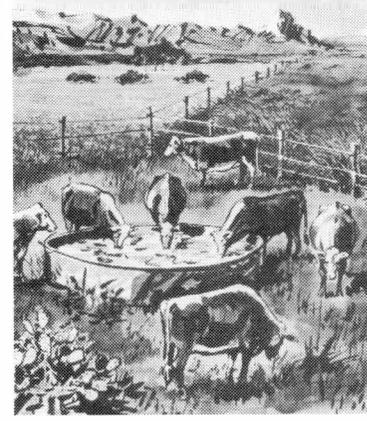
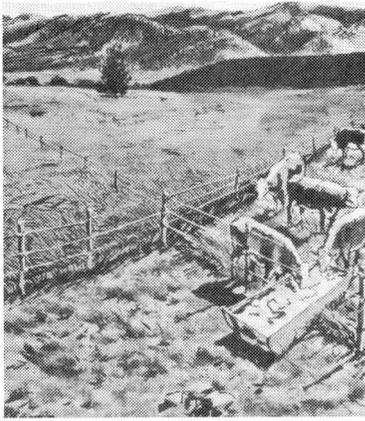
This is not to say that there has been no change in recent decades; obviously there has. Forest Service Range Management Director Robert Williamson has even declared,

*The political clout that the livestock industry used to have is not there anymore. They think it's still there and they've tried to use it. But it doesn't work anymore.*

Williamson probably intended his statement to diffuse opposition. The tiny grazing fees, "advisory" boards, political influence, unfair laws, agency acquiescence, overgrazed range, and more show clearly that stockmen still do carry overwhelming clout. But his statement does reflect change. How far this change is allowed to go remains to be seen.

Fourth, an important Catch-22 preventing significant change is this: Any improvement in range condition resulting from reduced grazing is used by the ranching establishment to justify increased grazing. As soon as the range starts to recover, it is once again stocked up with livestock, thus maintaining that dynamic state of degradation (or each series of grazing years contributing to a cumulate, long-term

A Forest Service depiction of proper, future range management. (USFS)



environmental decline). An area must warrant special administrative protection, or reach Sahara-like conditions, to finally go ungrazed. Even then it usually will again be grazed as soon as it is declared recovered.

For example, Nevada's Toiyabe National Forest (at 4 million acres second in size only to Alaska's Tongass) has been called the nation's most overgrazed national forest, even by Forest Service officials. Plans for modest grazing reductions over the next decade are overshadowed by long-term plans to *increase* livestock numbers once the Forest is judged to be restored.

Similarly, public lands ranching reforms will always be transitory so long as the industry's overall infrastructure remains intact. Dr. Denzel Ferguson, co-author of *Sacred Cows*, writes:

*... We fought a huge battle at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and they reduced grazing to acceptable levels. As soon as we relaxed the pressure, the ranchers moved in and made new demands. Today, I am told that the situation is worse than ever! ... Local land managers live out in these communities and have no protection against pressures to increase grazing. Given these circumstances, as long as grazing is permitted, it will tend to be maximal, abusive, and not in the public interest. ... It is surely an all or none phenomenon. In any event, until the entire conservation community is willing to demand complete removal of livestock from public lands, I see absolutely no solution to the problem.*

On 17 and 18 January 1989, a coalition of public lands ranching advocacy organizations held the first-ever conference devoted solely to exploring ways to squelch growing opposition. In a letter advertising the event to its members, the National Inholders' Association claimed:

*The environmentalists have declared war on our range rights. We're within a few years of being driven off our grazing permit lands.*

Yet, though the threat of being "driven off" "their" public land was a central theme at the conference, few ranchers considered such eviction a serious possibility. Their focus at the conference was how best to combat ranching reductions and restrictions. The scare was designed to generate a stronger defense and garner public sympathy.

On March 16, 1990, a second major conference was held. This one took place at the Denver headquarters of the Society for Range Management (SRM), and included representatives from SRM, the Public Lands Council, ranching interests, and the government land management agencies

themselves. All attendees identified opposition to public lands ranching as the enemy and pledged to work together using various methods, including an expanded and intensified "public education" program. More conferences are planned.

Interestingly, while the ranching establishment whimpers about its imminent demise, it has big plans for our public land. Indeed, it has consistently maintained the long-range goal of *greatly increasing* livestock production there. For example, in 1974 the USDA Inter-Agency Work Group on Range Production estimated that red meat production on US rangeland could eventually be *tripled*. In 1979 Forest Service Deputy Chief Thomas C. Nelson projected:

*In summary, when we look to the '80's and beyond, we see a future for rangeland characterized by:*

*--A demand for range grazing that increases half again by the year 2000, and doubles by the year 2030.*

*--An equilibrium of demand and cost on all [public] grazed areas of about 300 million animal unit months [nearly twice current AUM's]. (Klemmedson 1979)*

Also in 1979, Assistant Interior Secretary Guy Martin voiced his projection for BLM at a rangeland symposium: "Target: Double the current annual [public land] forage production to 11.2 million tons per year." Max Lieurance, BLM Division of Rangeland Management Chief, made this claim:

*Vegetation production on the public rangelands managed by the Bureau of Land Management can be at least doubled. Without doubt, similar or even greater opportunities also exist on State and privately owned rangelands.*

Echoing BLM for the private sector at the same symposium, Thadis W. Box, Dean of the Utah State University College of Natural Resources, declared, "I believe that outputs of certain products, such as forage and red meat, can easily be doubled" (USDA, USDI, CEQ 1979).

In 1980, USDA was addressing all ranching factions when, in a major rangeland report entitled *An Assessment of the Forest and Range Land Situation in the United States*, it announced that:

*The ultimate biological potential production from the range has been estimated at 566 million AUM's, more than 2 1/2 times the 1976 supply level of 213 million AUM's. This could be achieved by applying intensive management levels on all of the more than 1 billion acres of range [in the US].*

USDA further projected that the demand for Western range grazing would increase by more than 1/3 by the year



As mentioned, according to a report by the Committee for Idaho's High Desert, all 6 BLM resource areas in southern Idaho have recently released proposed management plans, all of which schedule increases in projected forage allocations to livestock, ranging from 13% to 66%.

*The BLM acknowledges that overgrazing is the leading cause of the deterioration of its rangelands, but on 25% of the overgrazed allotments studied by the General Accounting Office, the BLM, bowing to rancher opposition and political pressure, has not recommended livestock reductions [not that they have on the remaining 75%].*

--Bruce Hamilton, "Unfinished Business," *Sierra* (Sep/Oct 1989)

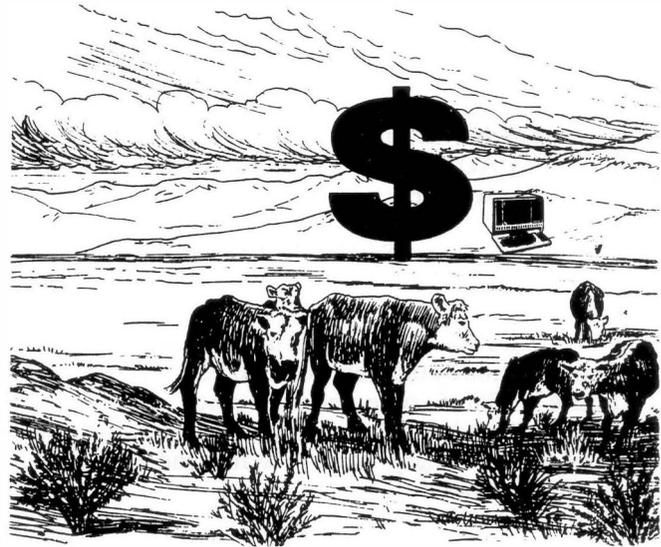
And so it goes on public land throughout the West. But ranchers have yet another ace up the sleeve. Usurping the agencies, they increasingly depict themselves as *managers* of public land, as well as livestock growers, and ranching as an integral and crucial component of public land management. This trend is reflected in the agencies' recent cooperative management efforts and self-imposed reductions in funding for ranching supervision, as well as stockmen's expanded efforts to extend their influence within public land user groups heretofore of little concern.



Most public lands ranching is remote, unknown, and uncontested, such as this sheep and cattle grazing Wyoming's Bighorn National Forest.

*The future productivity of livestock could be increased by the development and implementation of 150 current and potential technologies. These technologies span the entire spectrum of animal production from modifying and controlling the animal's environment to pest and disease control to manipulating and changing the animal's physiology.*

--Linda A. Joyce, *An Analysis of the Range Forage Situation in the United States: 1989-2040* (for USFS) (Joyce 1989)



Public lands ranching is not dying; it is not being phased out; it is not being significantly reduced . . . in the long run it is to be *significantly increased*. The increase will be accomplished primarily with intensified vegetation manipulation, livestock developments, and uniform overgrazing, and by opening up new grazing land with expanded logging and brush clearing.

In *The Shining Future*, through ever-expanding science and technology, America's new-and-improved, modern, progressive range management will blossom. Contemplate excerpts from the contemporary range text *Range Management*:

*During the night, the ranch computer automatically assembles several data bases to obtain current information on availability and prices of fuel, fencing, pump leathers, and vaccines; weather forecasts; and livestock markets. . . . Sensors in ear tags and implanted devices in the livestock are scanned for health, nutritional status, and estrus. . . . Rumen-regulating drugs and genetic engineering to produce more*

*useful rumen microflora will provide increased potential for metabolizing range forage into useful nutrients. . . . The alteration of living cells plus advances in microculture, cell fusion, regeneration of plants from single cells, and embryo recovery and transfer will create new . . . .* (Holechek 1989)

Most public lands ranches already use modern vehicles, equipment, and livestock technology, and many are to some degree computerized. The trend is toward more intensive planning, monitoring, and management, with increasing manipulation of the environment. For example, a recent

development is the "Grazing Land Simulator," a digital computer that monitors rangeland management (financed by the Co-operative State Research Service, Co-operative Extension Service, BLM, FS, SCS, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the National Cattleman's Association). Computerized symbols -- little cows, sheep, tanks, fences, roads, creeks, brush, trees, grass, and such -- appear on the screen, awaiting your command. Yes, now you can plan ecosystem management from the comfort of your own home! Or purchase the portable suitcase model for range use.

*A tag with the code would be implanted in the sheep's hide. Monitoring systems that use satellites to track the location of a tagged sheep to within 15 feet soon will be available . . . . If a sheep wearing a transmitter were killed by a predator, a signal from the transmitter would help in quickly locating the dead sheep and possibly finding the predator . . . .*

--1-22-90 Arizona Republic (Webster 1990)

Yes, the worst may be yet to come. For example, many ranching advocates are already calling for cloud seeding to "augment" natural precipitation (thus stealing it from other areas and perverting atmospheric dynamics). Advanced machinery will transform "worthless" natural landscapes into productive pastures. Formerly "useless" range vegetation will be harvested with special machinery and treated to make it palatable to livestock. Bio-engineering will "improve" livestock, while bio-manipulation will "improve" the range. Livestock of many kinds will be shuttled about the West in futuristic transport vehicles to take fullest advantage of the land. (Already, some Hawaiian stockmen shuttle their cattle between isolated grazing areas with helicopters.) Sophisticated mobile and stationary range sensors will monitor humans, vehicles, livestock, and the environment. Orbiting satellites will pinpoint available forage and browse.

*A multi-video system that provides immediately useful narrow-band black and white imagery within the visible to near-infrared light (0.40- to 1.10um waveband) region of the electromagnetic spectrum was evaluated as a remote sensing tool to assess several rangeland ground conditions . . . .*

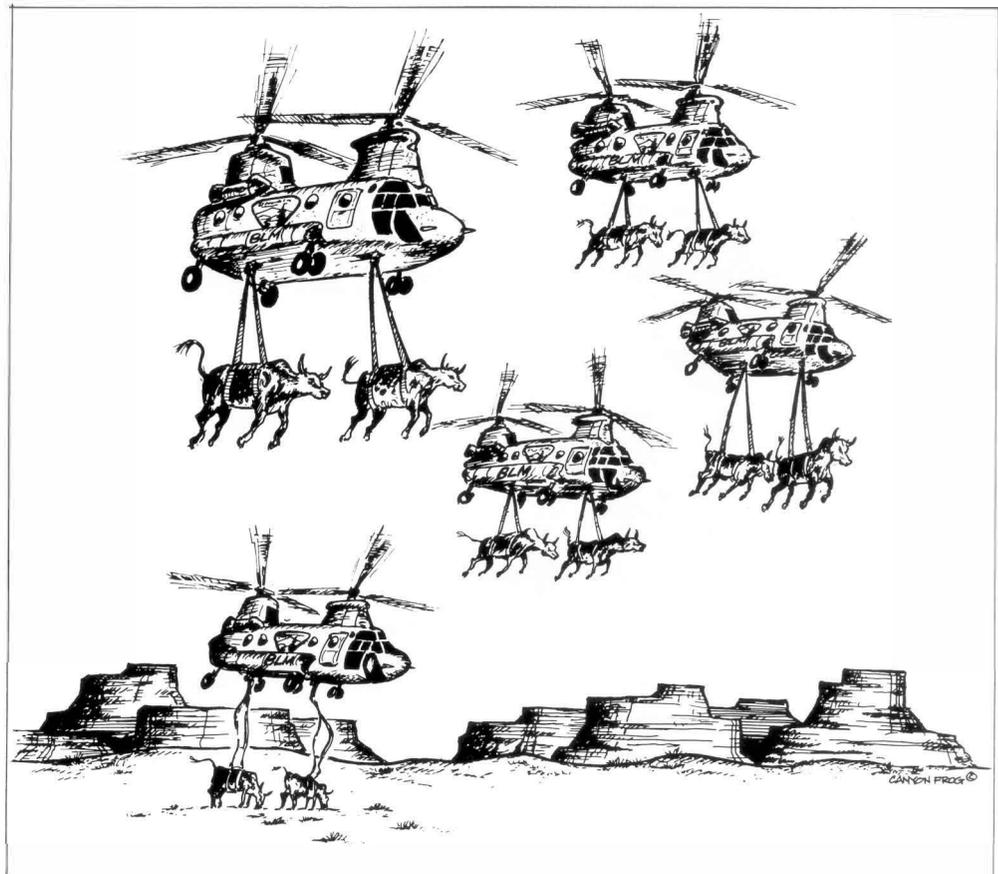
--J.H. Everitt and P.R. Nixon, "Video Imagery: A New Remote Sensing Tool for Range Management"

In sum, there is little reason to think that public lands ranching is waning. Degradation of the range will grow with the scientific and technological ability to manipulate the range. In the future, stockmen will continue to dominate the rural West. Ranching will remain the highest priority on most Western range under the pretense of multiple use. Profits will continue to be mined from an increasingly degraded environment, even if it takes twice as many range "improvements" or acres per cow or sheep. Ever more complex and costly range management systems will continue to artificially counteract ranching's inherent destructiveness and up production statistics -- to make it seem that range condition is improving. Taxpayers will continue to foot the bill. . . .

. . . . unless we do something about it. The next chapter explores the possibilities.

*The next great environmental issue is going to be grazing and the desertification of public land.*

--Larry Tuttle, Director, The Wilderness Society, Oregon office



(Roger Candee)

## IF PUBLIC LANDS RANCHING WAS ENDED . . .

--Only about 30,000  
of 1.6 million (2% of) US  
livestock producers would be affected.

--The American public  
would save billions of dollars.

--The rural West  
would largely be freed from public  
lands ranchers' social and political injustice.

--The American West  
would experience one of the  
Earth's greatest environmental restorations.

