

# Chapter II

## PUBLIC LANDS RANCHING TODAY

*Public land does not belong to the government,  
nor to ranchers,  
nor to any other special interest group*

**M**ore than a century has passed since that first wave of grazing exploitation left the Western environment in shambles. Looking back on those reckless times, most of us believe things are much different now. The great trail drives and bloody range wars ended long ago. We rarely hear of cattle rustlers being shot, much less hanged. The clearest picture most of us have of living livestock these days is the sight of them grazing along rural roadsides.

Many things are indeed much different now.

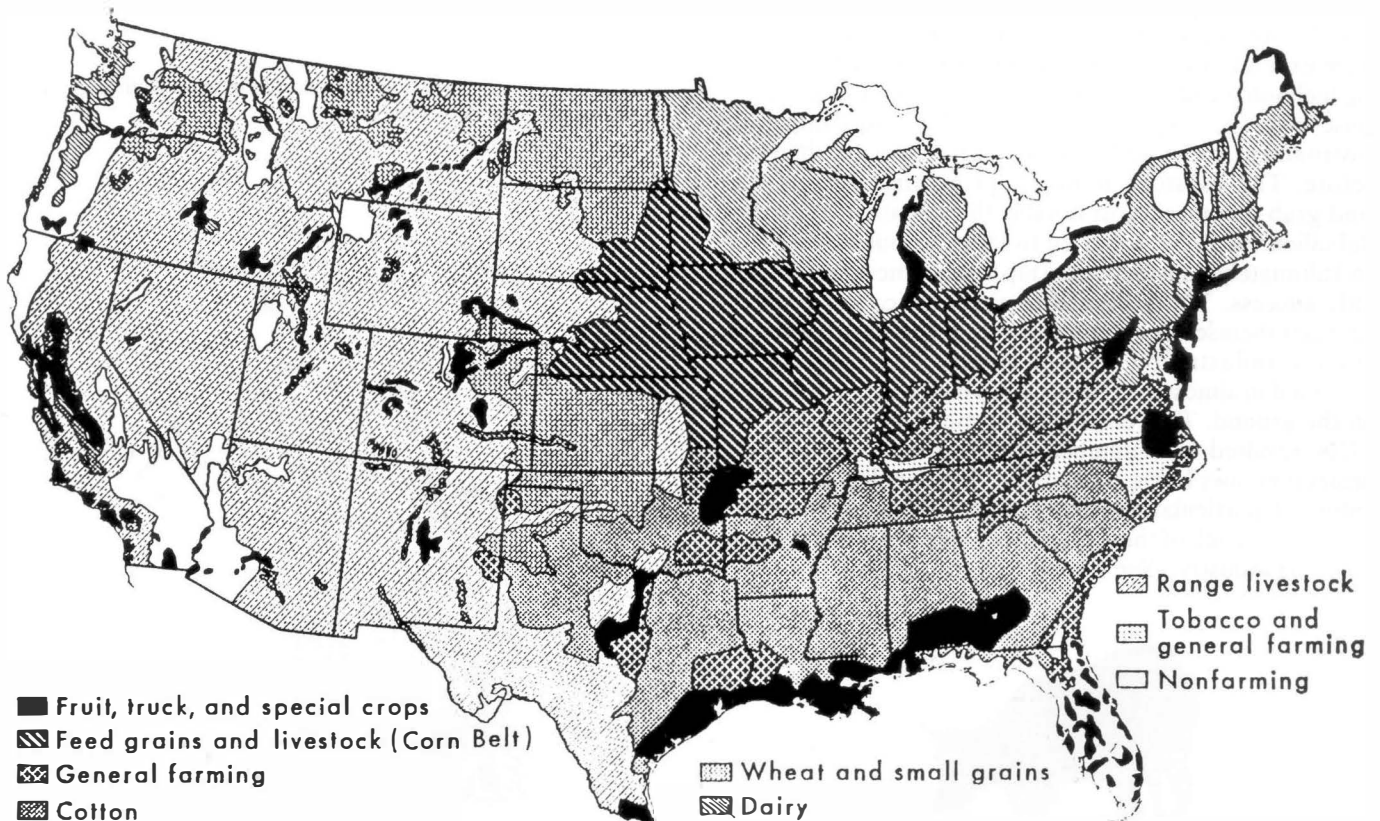
On the other hand, the situation overall has actually changed very little, despite claims to the contrary by the ranching establishment. Though less blatant, stockmen's

power remains similarly overwhelming. They use subtler and more palatable methods to achieve their goals, but retain political and social hegemony over most of the rural West. As the following analysis will show, the range itself is in many respects even more degraded than 100 years ago, as our natural resources continue to be plundered year after year. And, sorry to say, the public is now being swindled more than ever. (The many reasons for our collective misunderstanding of modern ranching are explored throughout this book.)

*The West is literally covered with livestock, from the highest elevation tundra to the driest sagebrush basins. . . . Livestock graze seven out of every ten acres in the West. . . .*

--Florence Williams, "Who's at Home on the Range?" (Williams 1990a)

As it has been for a century, about 70% of the 11 Western states is "open range" managed for livestock ranching (Fer-



Major agricultural land uses in US. Note the overwhelming predominance of "range livestock" throughout the West; the major use of some of the "nonfarming" areas is also ranching. (USDA map)



guson 1983). Basically, that's 7 of every 10 acres behind barbed wire fences with cattle, sheep, and/or other livestock grazing on them on some regular basis. That's roughly 525 million acres, representing more than 2 acres for every person in the United States.

Further, included in the ungrazed 30% of the West are inaccessible areas, dense forests and brushlands, the driest deserts, sand dunes, dry lake beds and salt flats, lava flows



Cattle and sheep are found nearly everywhere in the West.

and cinder cones, extremely rocky areas, cliffs and mountaintops, cities and towns, roads and parking areas, airports, golf courses, your backyard, and every other place that cannot be used for livestock. In other words, in the American West almost every place that can be grazed is

grazed. More than 2/3 of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Idaho is grazed, and if not for farmland and dense forest more than 2/3 of the West Coast states would be grazed too. Livestock graze in most grasslands, forests, brushlands, wetlands, and

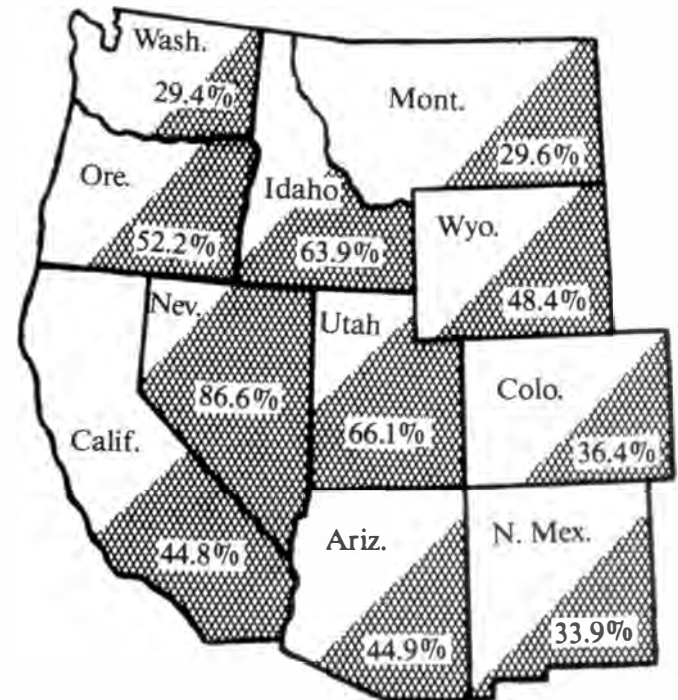


Cattle strip vegetation from between irrigated date palms in Death Valley, CA -- the place with the overall highest summer temperatures and one of the lowest precipitations on Earth.

deserts in the West, on almost any land with enough forage or browse to keep a cow or sheep alive. (Navajo herders even carry small sheep up steep rock walls on their backs, one by one, to reach the grassy tops of mesas.)

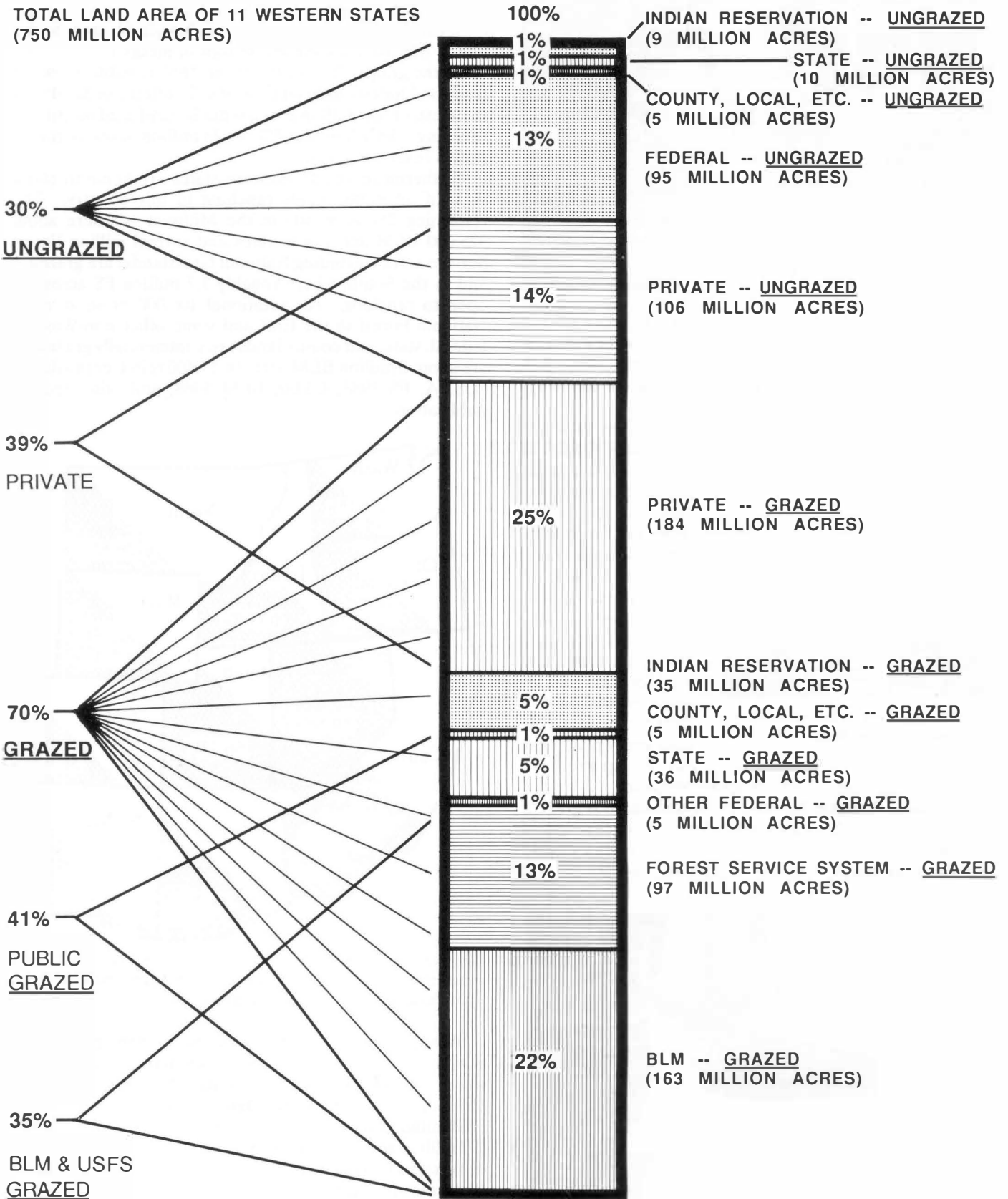
Of the grazed 70% of the West, 58% is publicly owned land used for commercial livestock. In other words, 41% of the West, or 306 million acres, is public land used for private ranching. An additional 5%, or 35 million acres, is grazed Indian reservation land.

Furthermore, the 11 Western states are home to about 98% of all public lands ranching in this country. The remaining 2% is mostly in the Midwest -- where about 325,000 BLM acres in 5 states and several million Forest Service acres (including National Grasslands) are grazed -- and in the South, where roughly 1.7 million FS acres are open to ranching. An additional 100,000 or so acres of National Forest in the East and some other non-Western federal, state, and county lands are commercially grazed, as are about 8 million BLM acres by 17,400 reindeer in Alaska. (USDA, FS 1988; USDI, BLM 1988; and other federal publications)



Proportion of land owned by federal government (does not include state, county, and city land). Roughly 80% of this federal land and 70% of all land in the West is used for livestock.

Two government agencies administer 85% of Western public ranchland -- about 260 million acres, or an area the size of the 14 Eastern seaboard states plus Missouri. Of this 85%, the Bureau of Land Management administers 63% (163 million acres) and the Forest Service administers 37% (97 million acres). Roughly 90% of Western BLM and 70% of Western FS land is managed for ranching. There are 140 BLM resource areas (local divisions) in the West. Each is grazed by privately owned livestock. Likewise, commercial livestock are allowed and encouraged on all of the West's 102 National Forests. National Forests in 24 Eastern states also allow ranching. BLM land accounts for 61% and



### GRAZED AND UNGRAZED LAND IN WEST

(Figures based on federal publications. Percentages may not align due to rounding.)

Forest Service land 39% of their combined livestock production. (1987 USDA and USDI publications).

BLM land, being the "land nobody wanted" (or, more properly, the land that was wanted *least*), generally is the least economically valuable land in the West. Most is hot, dry, barren, rocky, and/or steeply sloped. Nonetheless, BLM administers many riparian areas, grasslands, and even forests. The lands administered by the Forest Service are of course mostly forested, but National Forests also include millions of acres of brushlands, shrublands, meadows, grasslands, and even deserts. Thirty percent of National Forest System land in the US is "open" rangeland (USDA, USDI 1979), and a forested area must be extremely thick with "dark timber" to be excluded from livestock grazing.

Publicly owned ranchlands also include many millions of acres of state, county, and even city lands; National Wildlife Refuges (administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service); National Grasslands (FS); military reservations; and even some National Parks, Monuments, Recreation Areas, etc. (National Park Service); along with several million acres administered by several other federal agencies. Roughly half of designated Wilderness Areas (various federal agencies) are likewise grazed by livestock. Administration and management of these lands vary widely (see Chapter IX).

*... the public rangelands exhibit examples of literally all of the recognized land forms ... [they] support all of the natural vegetation types known to the West ...*

*--Fair Market Rental Value of Grazing on Public Lands, FS and BLM (Tittman 1984)*



Is this public land impractical for livestock? Of course, but because edible vegetation grows here, it is used for ranching.



Our BLM lands of the West. Approximately 90% of their area is used for ranching, yet all this land produces only about 1.1% of US cattle and sheep. (USDA map)

The vast bulk of Western BLM and FS land is divided into individual grazing allotments ranging in size from less than 40 acres to well over a million (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). Average state allotment sizes vary from 68,583 acres in arid Nevada to 2217 acres in comparatively well-grassed Montana (USDA, FS 1986; USDI, BLM 1986). Allotment boundaries are usually based on traditional and often obsolete ownership, fence, and grazing patterns; allotment configurations rarely make sense topographically or environmentally.

Livestock operators are issued permits or, on some BLM lands, leases, allowing them to graze cattle, sheep, goats, horses and other equines on certain allotments (USDA, FS 1986; USDI, BLM 1986). Much more than permission to merely graze livestock on an allotment, the grazing permit is essentially a *ranching* permit, allowing each permittee to manage and develop (that is, to *ranch*) that allotment for livestock. Indeed, ranchmen themselves have had perhaps as much impact on the land as their livestock (see Chapter IV). Thus, public lands grazing is a great misnomer, and we refer to the industry as public lands *ranching*.

Average size of BLM and Forest



Our National Forests of the West. Although nearly 70% of their total area is used for livestock ranching, only about 0.7% of US cattle and sheep are produced there. (USDA map)

Service System allotments is about 8500 acres (USGAO 1988). Due to overlapping use, the average size of BLM and FS land allotted per Western grazing permittee is 11,818 acres (various 1987 federal publications). Including state and other government lands simultaneously grazed by permittees, the figure probably is closer to 15,000 (various 1987 federal publications). When a public lands rancher talks about "his" ranch he usually means his private property *and* "his" multi-thousand acre public lands grazing allotment. The public lands portion is usually many times larger than the private; in Arizona, for example, the average ratio is 7 public acres to 1 private acre.

Cattle and sheep have always comprised the vast majority of livestock on public land, with cattle currently accounting for about 8 times more total grazing pressure on Western federal rangeland than sheep (USDA, FS 1987; USDI, BLM 1988). (Nationally, cattle consume about 96% of the estimated total grazed forage [Joyce 1989].) Cattle, primarily grazers (grass and forb eaters), are nearly omnipresent in range and distribution. About 3/4 of public ranchers run cow/calf operations in which the basic "resource" is a herd of brood cows and the principal livestock income is derived from sale of "feeder cattle" (yearling heifers and steers) to commercial feedlots for fattening before slaughter. Most of

the remaining 1/4 run yearling cattle operations -- generally, they buy calves in spring, fatten them through the summer, and sell them in the fall -- or sheep operations. (Williams 1990)

Sheep, which are herbivores (eaters of various types of plants), are in the US West raised mostly in relatively cool, well-watered regions; on public land this usually means in higher elevations during summer. However, sheep are drought-resistant compared to cattle and prefer somewhat different vegetation, so they are found in many locales. Goats are primarily browsers (shrub and tree eaters), but are famous for their ability to eat almost anything organic. Although not nearly as numerous as sheep (there are only 1.6 million goats in the US, mostly in Texas), goats recently have gained popularity as "tools" for eradicating unwanted brush to increase rangeland productivity for cattle and sheep. Semi-domesticated buffalo and buffalo cross-breeds are grazed similarly to cattle in scattered locations, but are relatively few in number. Lastly, equines -- domestic horses, burros, donkeys, and mules -- which are all mainly grazers, are much less common than cattle and sheep; but many ranchers graze

them in smaller numbers on public land for commercial as well as domestic purposes.



Goats can be particularly destructive to the Western range because they will eat almost any vegetative material, including many types of plants that cattle and sheep would not. (Steve Johnson)

The so-called "right" to graze livestock on federal public land is not a right at all, but a revocable *privilege* (Tittman 1984). Ranchers cannot legally own or have exclusive right to any federal land, claim resources thereon (except permitted use of forage and, unfortunately, water rights on some BLM lands), exclude any person from public land, or dictate any visitor's behavior. Stockmen granted the privilege to graze their livestock on the public's land are ostensibly required to pay their fees on time, adhere to all grazing and environmental regulations, mitigate environmental damage, and minimize conflict with other land users (see Chapter IX).

Grazing use is measured in units called Animal Unit Months, or AUMs. An AUM is defined by the federal government as the amount of forage and/or browse required to feed a cow and her calf, a horse, or 5 sheep or goats for a month. The AUM concept is somewhat arbitrary and malleable, so in practice AUMs vary from 600 to 1200 pounds of herbage (leafy plant material of any kind). Most fall between 800 and 1000 pounds, so an AUM averages roughly 900 pounds (USGAO 1988).

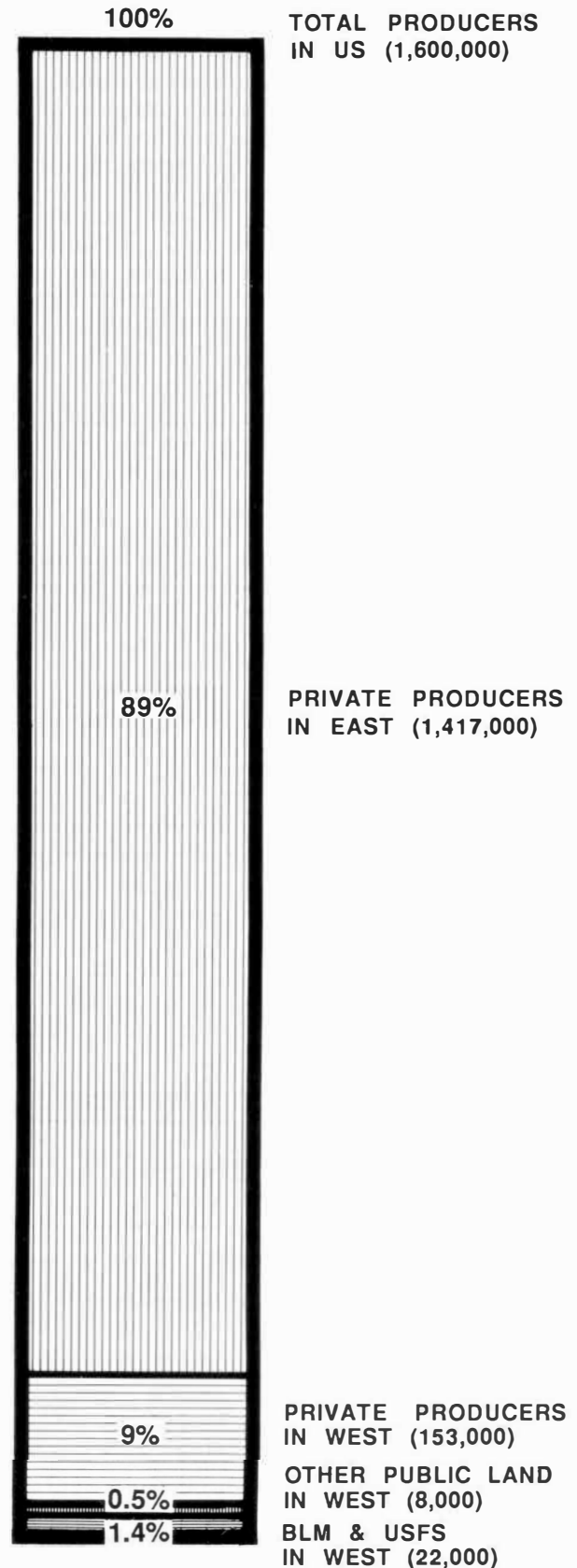
About 30,000 grazing permits and leases are issued on BLM and FS rangeland in the 11 Western states, with permittees paying an annual fee based on the number of AUMs (permitted and alleged to be) used. Some of these permittees graze more than 1 allotment, and 15% graze both BLM and FS lands, so the actual number of permittees grazing BLM and FS land in the 16 Western states is about 23,000. (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986) Thus, in the 11 Western states only about 22,000 permittees graze BLM and Forest Service lands. That is 0.0088% of the US population, or 1 of 11,364 persons in the US, or less than the population of Barstow, California.

Furthermore, according to the Committee on Government Operations of the US Congress, the 23,000 public lands permittees in the 16 Western states (including North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma) represent *less than 2%* of the 1.6 million livestock producers in the United States (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). Extrapolation shows the figure for the 11 Western states to be *1.375%, or closer to 1%*.

Many federal permittees graze livestock not only on BLM and/or FS lands but on other federal, state, and/or local government lands as well. Some hold a half dozen or more leases to various government and private lands. Thus, including *all* public lands there are approximately 30,000 public lands ranchers in the West, comprising *less than 2%* of US cattle and sheep producers. (Various government sources)

Less than 15% of original permits issued by BLM and FS remain with the family to which they were issued (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). The notion that most public lands ranching is done by descendants of the original settlers is another of the numerous powerful myths associated with the grazing industry.

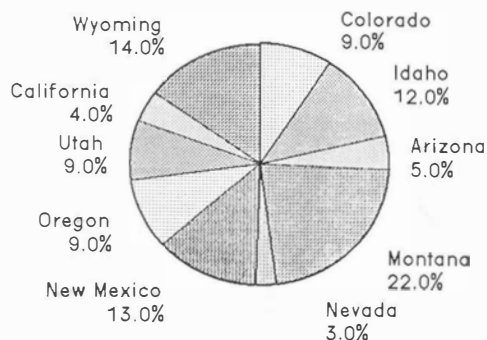
Grazing permits generally are issued for a period of 10 years, and permit holders have first priority for renewal. In practice renewal is virtually automatic. Because of this livestock operators enjoy essentially permanent tenure on allotments and consider permits almost as private property (see Chapter VII).



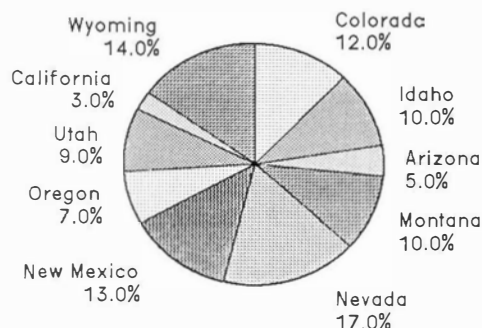
**US LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS**  
(US Government figures)

The Forest Service requires each permittee to own an adjacent or nearby "base property" -- deeded land of a certain minimum acreage (usually 40, 60, or 80 acres) which is used as a base for livestock operations on the grazing allotment (though, as mentioned, the original intent of requiring base properties was chiefly to exclude nomadic herders from the public range). Base property requirements for BLM permittees are somewhat different and vary from area to area; generally, the minimum size required is larger than what FS requires. When a permit is "sold" with a base property, it is returned to the government and nearly always reissued to the new property owner. (Most other land managing agencies require base properties, though the US Fish & Wildlife Service does not.)

Distribution of Permits  
Among BLM State Offices



Distribution of AUMs  
Among BLM State Offices



In some cases stockmen are granted grazing permits based on ownership of water rights on private or public land. In fact, grazing privileges on BLM land can now be granted to a stockman based solely on ownership of water rights to a single spring.

The number of permits varies little mostly because almost all grazable land is already being grazed. If agencies acquire new rangeland, it is apportioned among existing adjacent permittees. If for some reason a permittee decides to abandon a permit (almost unheard of), the agency involved reassigns the permit to an established adjacent or nearby

rancher. The Taylor Grazing Act, Forest Service mandates established at the agency's formation, and subsequent legislation have ensured that the federal permit system maintains the status quo.

Ostensibly, permittees are required to manage livestock operations in accordance with allotment management plans developed by the agencies in consultation with permittees. This results in each permit containing conditions specific to the allotment being grazed, such as maximum and minimum number of livestock, AUMs allotted, period and area of use, entry and exit routes, and so forth. Most public land is grazed during growing seasons, typically spring and/or summer but sometimes fall or even winter, but there are many areas in the warmer regions where it is permitted year-round (see Livestock Management in Chapter IV). The agencies have authority to adjust permit conditions or terminate permits at any time to allow for any number of variables, but they rarely do. Each agency has independent basic guidelines and regulations, but local agency administrators have wide discretion in adjusting permit terms. In practice, ranchers and rancher-staffed "advisory" boards often have more influence over permit conditions than do the agencies (see Chapter IX). (For a good discussion of the intricacies of BLM and FS grazing administration, see Chapters 3 and 4 in Wesley Calef's *Private Grazing and Public Lands*.)

*... the little cattlemen have always fought the big one's battles, have adopted and supported their policies to their own disadvantage and to the great hurt of the West.*

--Bernard DeVoto (DeVoto 1955)

There are small public lands ranchers, but corporate ranchers and large individual operators predominate; 40% of federal grazing is controlled by only 3% of permittees (Ferguson 1983). On BLM land, just 5% of cattlemen, those with herd size over 500, control 58% of all herbage allotted to livestock, and 32% goes to medium-sized operations -- 100-499 animals. Only 10% goes to the small rancher who owns less than 100 cattle (Atwood 1990). Forest Service stockmen with herd size over 500 constitute 12% of permittees and use 41% of AUMs (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). And merely 6% of Western sheepmen own 63% of all sheep (Ferguson 1983). Nonetheless, despite myths and misinformation, most of the 22,000 Western BLM and FS permittees, even most of the so-called "small-timers," are quite well-off financially (see Chapter XI). (On the national scale, nearly 80% of all beef processing is controlled by only 3 agricultural conglomerates: ConAgra Red Meat Company, IBP, Inc., and Excel; many cattle that graze public lands wind up in their feedlots [Zaslowsky 1989]).

[A 1982 US agricultural census] found that Arizona had 3346 farms and ranches that sold cattle. Of these, 97 farms and ranches accounted for \$413 million of the \$502 million in sales . . .

--1-17-86 Phoenix Gazette

At this point, one might reasonably ask what all these facts and figures amount to, food-wise. There are roughly 260 million acres of BLM and Forest Service System "grazing land" in the 11 Western states -- 35% of the land area of

the West -- but how much of this country's livestock is produced there?

**Two percent** by weight, value, or livestock feed (food of any kind) (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). This will surprise most people, for we have always been led to believe otherwise. Ranching on federal land is insignificant to US food supply -- only 1 out of 50 pounds of combined beef and mutton. Alabama alone produces nearly this amount, mostly on pasturage! Iowa produces more than 2 1/2 times as much, mostly with grain feed. (USDA 1987) The US imports more than 4 times as much (US Dept. of Com. 1986).

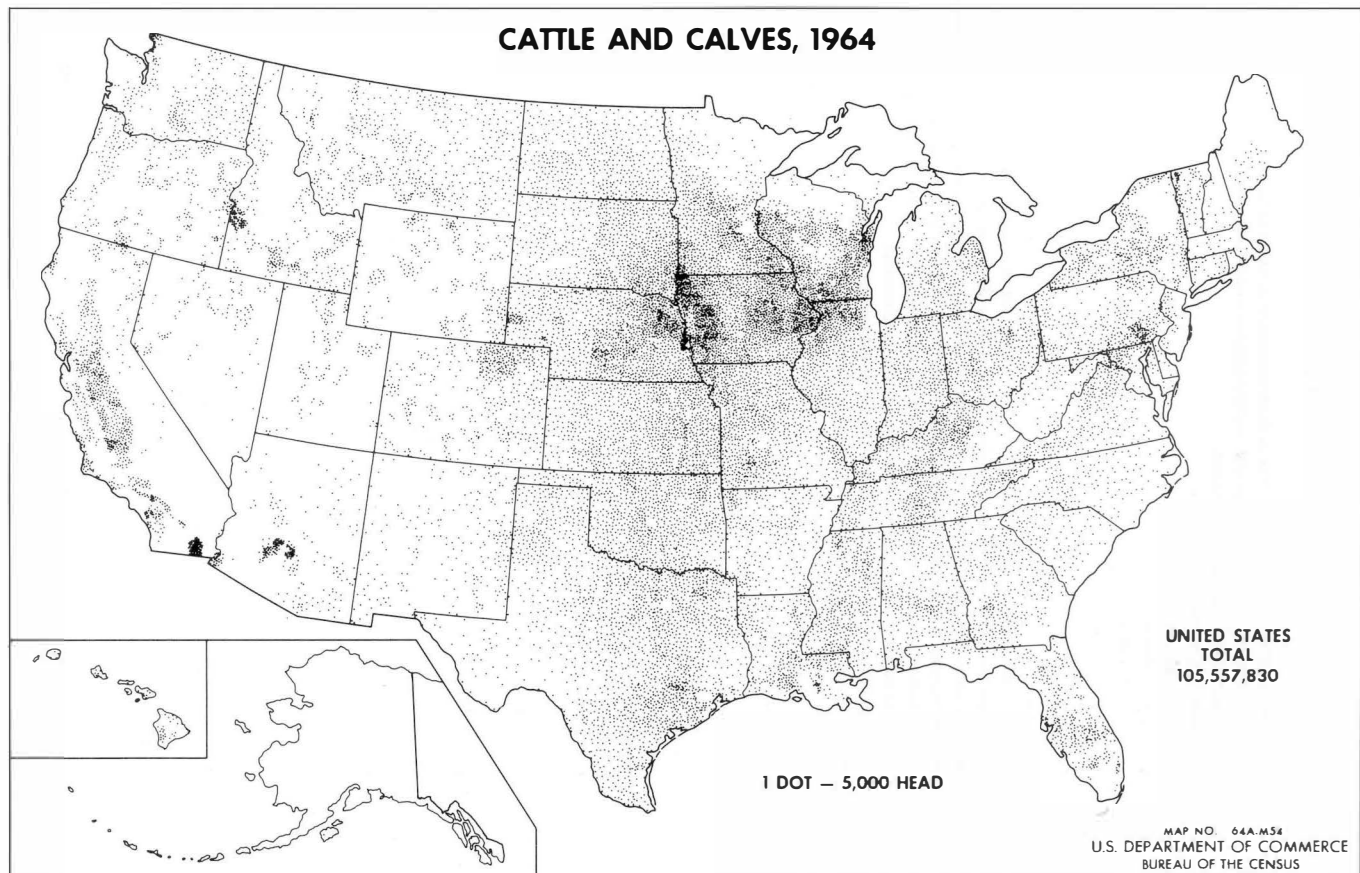
Even if all public lands in the West are considered together, their yield is insignificant. *All* Western public lands -- federal, state, and local together, roughly 306 million acres, or 41% of the West -- produce *less than 3%* of America's combined cattle and sheep feed. Nearly 6 times this amount is raised on the private ranchland that encompasses about 25% of the West. (Government publications)

Only 3% of US cattle feed is supplied by all Western public land. As for sheep, the Western grazing establishment has used deception and fabrication to persuade the American public that Western federal rangeland accounts for 40% or more of US sheep production. For example, USDA's *Livestock Grazing Successes on Public Range* claims, "Fully 50 percent of the Nation's marketable lambs and 20 percent of the calves going to feedlots are raised in the western public land states" (USDA 1989). "In the

western public lands states" is a sneaky way of making it seem that Western livestock production is public, when in fact it is overwhelmingly private. The truth is that all US public lands combined supply only about 15% of US sheep feed, or less than 1/3 of the West's sheep feed. By value and weight US cattle outrank sheep nearly 50 to 1, so sheep are insignificant to US livestock production anyway. (USDA 1987, various government publications) Another misconception is that most US sheep are raised for wool; 78% are raised for their meat (Joyce 1989).

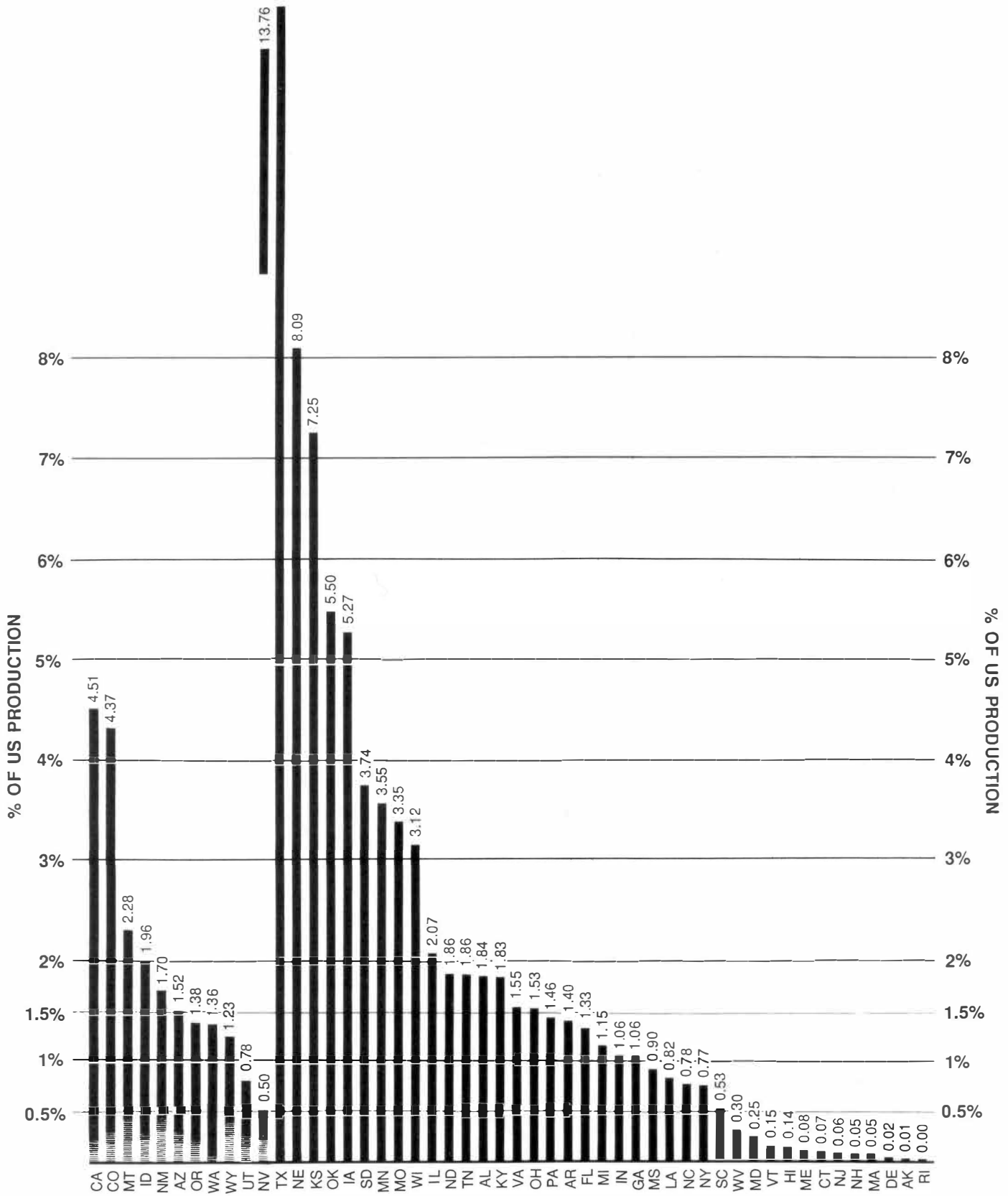
Furthermore, merely 21% of US cattle and sheep feed comes from all the West, public *and* private (USDA, FS 1986; USDI, BLM 1986). Arkansas raises more cattle than Arizona; Wisconsin supports almost 3 times as many cows as Wyoming; and Nebraska's cattle production value is 16.6 times that of Nevada's! (USDA 1987) Private land (including Indian reservations) produces 18% of the West's 21%. Private land includes feedlots, irrigated pasture, and farmland for livestock, which together account for much of this 18%. In addition, a relatively large proportion of the West's livestock is produced on the Great Plains of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico east of the Rockies. In short, *private* land is the true livestock producer in the West and the *East* is the true livestock producer in the US.

Public stockmen counter that while they supply comparatively few livestock, their contribution is vital because their



Note: When comparing this map to the similar historic maps in Chapter I, keep in mind that each dot on this map represents 5000 -- not 2000 -- cattle. In the West, clusters and high densities of dots (and even many single dots) indicate areas of feedlots and irrigated pastures; only a minor portion of Western cattle are produced by open range grazing. Change in cattle distribution and numbers from 1964 to present has been insignificant.





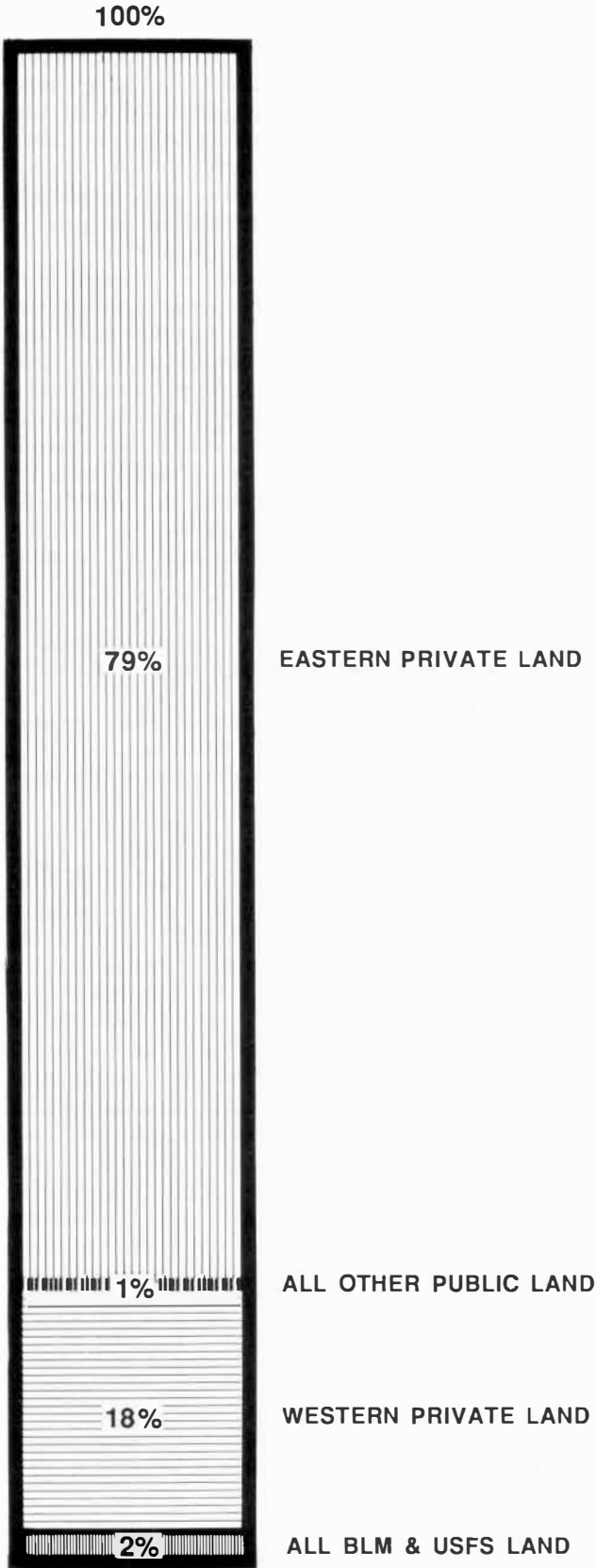
11 WESTERN STATES

39 OTHER STATES

PRIVATE LAND -- ■  
 OTHER PUBLIC LAND -- ▨  
 BLM & FOREST SERVICE -- ▩

### US CATTLE AND SHEEP PRODUCTION

(Based on 1987 government figures)



**US LIVESTOCK FEED PRODUCTION**

(Figures based on federal publications)

livestock are the "solar factories" that harvest this country's "forage resource" that would otherwise be "wasted." The Department of the Interior itself discredits their claim in its "Information Bulletin No.89- 93," stating that only 7% of US forage consumed by cattle and sheep comes from federal land (Atwood 1990).

*The loss of the valuable renewable forage resource from public lands is, in effect, a loss to the entire nation. It is a loss our nation need not, indeed cannot, afford . . .*

--From a joint statement by the Western states Farm Bureaus, Cattlemen Associations, and Wool Growers Associations

*If the object is to grow more feed for cattle, study after study shows the same investment (in range development money) in the Piedmont states -- or just about anywhere else it rains -- would have a much higher payoff than spending it in the arid West. . . .*

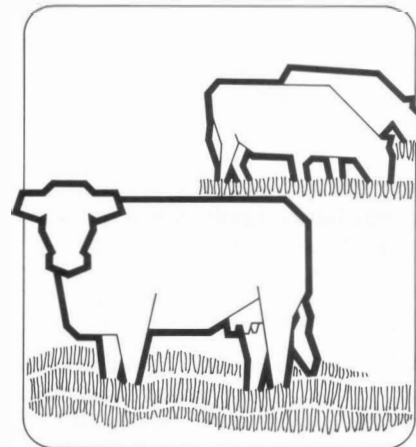
*A Mississippi black in overalls isn't as photogenic as a cowboy with his pony, but he's sure a hell of a lot more efficient at raising beef.*

--William Broly, "The Sagebrush Rebels"

*To get a better perspective on range livestock production, consider the average amount of grazing land needed per cow:*

- in Iowa . . . . . 1 acre/year**
- in Alabama . . . . . 3 acres/year**
- in the Eastern United States . . . . . 5 acres/year**
- in Colorado . . . . . 20 acres/year**
- on Western BLM & FS land . . . . . 185 acres/year**
- on Nevada BLM & FS land . . . . . 230 acres/year**

(based on 1987 USDA and USDI publications)



A cow grazing on Western BLM and FS range requires an average of 50 times more land than one grazing in the East, while generally causing much more ecological damage and public expense. According to BLM itself, an average

of 165 Western BLM acres are needed to feed a cow for a year, varying from 73 acres in Montana to 262 acres in Nevada (USGAO 1988). Therefore, even on the more live-stock-productive BLM land it takes about 20 times more land to support a cow than in the East.

While supplying only 2% of US livestock feed, Western federal land supplies only 9% of total AUMs of rangeland livestock grazing nationwide (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). Thus, the notion that public lands are the backbone of American open range grazing is another myth.

Despite being much larger overall than private land, BLM and FS land supplies only 11% of total Western livestock feed, ranging from 1.5% in New Mexico to 0.1% in Washington. These federal lands supply an average of 17% of each Western state's overall livestock feed, varying from 2% in Washington (the 26th ranking livestock state in the US) to 53% in Nevada (the 38th ranking livestock state). (Federal publications)

All Western federal, state, county, and city lands combined supply only about 18% of Western livestock feed requirements. This is primarily because public land is less productive than private and generally too arid, rugged, inaccessible, etc. for practical livestock grazing. The remaining 82% of Western livestock feed comes from the more productive private rangeland, pasture, and farmland used for livestock crops. (Government publications)

*A cow can graze for about 3 1/2 months on the amount of forage produced in a month on an average grazing acre in Alabama, compared to only little more than a day on a month's production of forage on the average acre in Nevada, generally with much less environmental damage and public expense.*



Because they are less livestock-productive than private lands, most public lands supply only a fraction of the total livestock food used by their permittees. The average BLM grazing season is only 4 1/2 months per year (USDA, FS 1986; USDI, BLM 1986), while according to the Forest Service, "In the West, NFS ranges supply an average of 25 percent of the permittee's annual requirements for livestock feed." (Figures for most other public ranchland are similar.) Accounting for the relative difference in BLM and FS livestock production, this means that federal land supplies about 1/3 of public lands ranchers' annual livestock feed requirements, that an average permittee's livestock are on federal land only about 4 months per year. Further, while some of these permittees hold permits to graze other government lands as well, many do not graze all or even most of their livestock on public land, so the discrepancy is

probably even greater. In short, public lands are little more than a *supplementary food source* for most "public lands" ranchers.

Public lands ranchers counter that public lands are vital as this supplementary food source and for calving grounds. What this actually means is that these ranchers have become habituated to using public land for these purposes. If they readjusted management, probably most of their ranching operations could survive without public lands. Obviously, reductions in overall livestock numbers would also have to be made, which is their main, underlying concern.

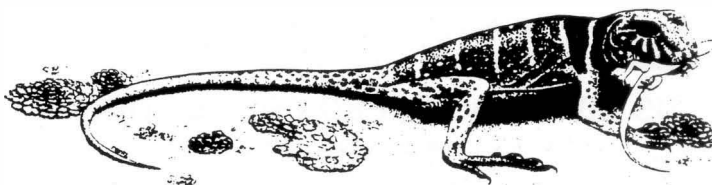
Why supplemental feed could not be obtained from private sources, livestock calved on private pasture and rangeland, or livestock numbers reduced remains unanswered. After all, a hungry stock animal eats whatever is available and cares not whether it is on public or private land. A cow can drop its calf anywhere, and the two can survive as well on private land as on public land (usually better). Depending on who you believe, only between 3% and 7% of all US calves are born on public land anyway. By public lands ranchers' logic, we could say that 100% of beef cattle are supported by this nation's highway system, since all of them spend at least some time there.

*Without public lands grazing... 47% of all the beef cattle and sheep stock that graze the 11 Western states would be eliminated.*

--Jeffrey C. Mosley, et. al. *Seven Popular MYTHS About Livestock Grazing on Public Lands* (Mosley 1990)

Though some public grazing proponents warn that the Western livestock industry would collapse without use of public lands, an untainted assessment proves this not only unfounded but ridiculous (see Chapter XI). The Committee on Government Operations of the US Congress states that public lands permittees "account for only 7% of the 386,000 producers in the 16 western states" (Com. on Govt. Oper. 1986). Only 16% of the livestock producers in the 11 Western

states use public land, and, as explained above and elsewhere, of those who do relatively few are wholly or even primarily dependent upon it (USDA, FS 1986; USDI, BLM 1986). Even the highest figures provided by prominent spokespersons for the public lands grazing establishment itself claim that no more than 10% of US cattle ever touch public land (again, this for an average of only about 4 months each year) (Mosley 1990). Extrapolation from government figures suggests that the figure is closer to 7%.



*The Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, and Arizona State Land Department all have range specialists who are deeply involved in working with ranchers on improving and monitoring the condition of the lands, including much of the deeded range land. These bureaus will confirm that by and large the ranges are in very good condition.*

--Southern Arizona public lands rancher G.E. Monzingo, in a Benson, AZ newspaper



*Eighty-two percent* of beef production in the Western United States is attributable to *private* land, mostly irrigated pastures (12 million acres) and feedlots, with a smaller amount produced by the 184 million acres of private range that encompass 25% of the West. The West's 306 million ranched public acres account for only 18% of the region's livestock. Hundreds of thousands of acres of public land would be needed to feed the cattle in the feedlot scene above.



*In spite of more than forty years of federal administration, the condition of the public domain has remained virtually unchanged, judging from figures published under the auspices of the [BLM] itself. In 1936, 84% of the western rangelands were producing less than half of their potential forage; in 1954, 69% of the federal range was in fair condition or worse, and by 1974 this percentage had increased to 83%.*

--Thomas R. Vale, "The Sagebrush Landscape" (Vale 1980)

Westerners are accustomed to the ubiquitous sight of barbed wire fences lining the roads in rural areas. Have we become so complacent about these fenced scenes that we fail to consider the land behind those fences?

In 1975 the BLM admitted that its own extensive survey data showed only 17% of its rangeland in good or excellent condition, 50% in fair, and 33% in poor or very poor condition (presented in *Range Condition Report* to the Senate Appropriations Committee, still the most current large-scale survey data available). Altogether, 83% was in unsatisfactory condition -- essentially producing at *less than 50%* of its potential. The report concluded that although range conditions had improved in some respects since the early years of grazing, "public rangelands will continue to deteriorate. Projections indicate that in 25 years productive capacity could decrease as much as 25%." In other words, the overall condition of BLM rangeland was still deteriorating; the main "improvement" was that the rate of deterioration had been slowed (see Chapter XI). After this report came out, both BLM officials and the General Accounting Office criticized the data for *understating* the poor and deteriorating state of public range. (Ferguson 1983)

Forest Service range condition figures at the time were nearly as bad: 24% "good," 44% "fair," 26% "poor," and 6% in "very poor" condition (USDA, USDI 1979). And though comprehensive state land range condition studies are rare, it is widely acknowledged that conditions on state rangelands are generally worse.

Despite misleading claims by the ranching establishment, the

situation clearly has not changed much since the surveys of the 1970s. For example, a 1985 report prepared by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) titled *Our Ailing Rangelands: Condition Report -- 1985* concludes that recent data from environmental impact statements prepared by BLM under court order show that of Western BLM land for which data was available (about 80%), more than 71% (84 million acres) is in "unsatisfactory" condition -- meaning it is producing (producing basically for livestock) at less than 40% of its present (as opposed to pre-livestock) biological potential. (NWF 1985) A follow-up 1989 report prepared by NWF and NRDC entitled *Our Ailing Public Lands: Still Ailing* states that, "the data that are available do not reveal any significant improvement in range health since [1985]," and that "conditions are unlikely to improve" (NWF 1989). In the late 1980s, BLM itself stated that in areas of 5"-20" of precipitation (the vast bulk of BLM land) it may take 300 years, even under optimum ranching management, for livestock-damaged range to approximate original environmental health, summarizing that range managers "must be patient."

On a national scale, even John Block, Secretary of Agriculture during the Reagan administration, stated that at least 60% of all US rangeland is "overgrazed" (Akers 1983). Coming from people within the ranching establishment, few estimates are unbiased, nor do they take into account important and often obscure environmental factors; in truth, nearly all Western rangeland is being significantly damaged by livestock and/or their owners. Thus, "grazing" and "overgrazing" may be used almost synonymously in reference to Western livestock ranching.

This chapter summarizes the logistics of contemporary public lands ranching. But it doesn't explain what is happening to the land. The next 2 chapters attempt that. Ranching's environmental impacts can be separated into 2 groups -- those caused by the livestock themselves and those caused by range development by livestock owners and their government and private assistants. First, the livestock . . .

*I have a small herd of cows, but I had to buy my land.  
I feel that the public lands should be for nature and wildlife.  
If I plan to keep any of my land in a natural state,  
I have to keep the cows out.*  
--Bob Bertin, Houston, Texas,  
personal correspondence

