

## Power of the belt buckle

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Cows and factory farms were the topic of several panels at the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference in March.

The conference, held at the University of Oregon's School of Law in Eugene each year, attracts environmental lawyers and activists from around the country.

Suing land managers has been one of the only tools environmentalists have at their disposal when it comes to reining in livestock grazing. But even when attorneys think they have a good case, it can be tough to get a win.

"Grazing is so ingrained – the Marlboro man, the Western mantra," Rule said. "It's a way of life, and we're trying to take away this historic way of life from these ranchers who have been grazing these lands for 100 or 200 years. So grazing litigation is really hard."

Many attorneys and environmental watchdogs say they are mystified by how susceptible lawmakers are to the nostalgia that surrounds the idea of the iconic Western cowboy.

For one, getting legislation passed in Salem to regulate the agricultural sector is never an easy battle – and the legislative session ending this month was no exception. Environmental groups watched bill after hard-fought bill die in committee amid strong opposition from the farm lobby.

"When you go to the Capitol and see lots of cowboy hats and belt buckles, you can bet it's going to be a bad day for wildlife, water and public lands," said Rob Klavin, Oregon Wild's Northeast Oregon Field Coordinator.

Klavin has spent years fighting to protect wolves, a species once eradicated from Oregon, largely by the cattle industry.

A USDA agency, Wildlife Services, routinely kills predators that threaten livestock on the taxpayer's dime. The government also reimburses ranchers for livestock killed by wolves.

While there are laws in place meant to protect public lands from overgrazing and to keep cows out of sensitive habitats, during interviews for this story, Street Roots was told repeatedly that regulators are too close to the people they regulate to be truly effective.

"Most of the people that work in that ranger district live in that community," Rule said. "It's hard to say, 'I'm going to screw you by cutting your permit by 50 cows because I'm supposed to be protecting those species – sorry about that Fred, but

I'll see you at the basketball game tomorrow night."

We spoke with a former BLM employee who agreed to speak with us on condition of anonymity, as this person still does contract work with the agency.

"Jordan" is familiar with BLM rangeland management practices across the Northwest.

"A lot of those (BLM) range people," Jordan said, "sometimes they're from the city and sometimes they're from rural areas – but they have an almost religious zealotry to try to promote cattle grazing."

"Some of the range conservationists have spoken up, and they just get in trouble for reporting abuse because the ranchers are the wealthy property owners, and they apply pressure to the managers through indirect means," Jordan said. "I know a wildlife biologist that was in the field and happened upon some cows in the wrong place and reported it. He ends up getting two weeks' suspension without pay because the manager didn't think he was prioritizing his work the way he was supposed to or something like that. It's absurd. When you see that happen, you send a message: Don't bring this up."

**\$62.4 MILLION**

federal livestock subsidies paid in Oregon between 1995 and 2014

**1-2**

years of age a beef cow is typically slaughtered

**15-20**

years for a cow's average life expectancy

## There's got to be a better way

Street Roots visited two farms where the cows appeared healthy and happy, the land was cared for, and riparian areas were effectively fenced off.



PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

At Verdant Hills Farm near McMinnville, Rich and Michael Butler go above and beyond organic.

On hot days, they position a water mister out in the pasture by their herd to keep the cattle cool and hire a

licensed slaughterer to come out to their farm so they don't have to subject their cows to travel, which can induce a lot of stress.

Both the Butlers and Jon Bansen, owner of Double J Jerseys, an organic dairy, practice intensive rotational grazing, which builds up the complexity of the soil and helps sequester carbon dioxide.

On the downside, while their herds' quality of life is better than grain-fed cows kept in confinement, their cows are emitting three times the methane because they're grass fed.

Whereas conventional practice is to spray a cow with pesticides to kill flies, at the

Butler's cattle ranch, chickens follow the cows, eating fly larvae. At Bansen's dairy, swallows eat the insects, and the cows walk through a fly vacuum on their way to being milked twice a day.

"The first thing a cow does when you spray her with pesticides is she licks herself," Bansen said. "Now you have that in the system – another reason for organic."

He started his career as a conventional dairy operator – just like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him.

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