

LAND: Summer grazing can put stress on native grasses

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conditions.

It's around this time of year when Ferguson said he meets with ranchers to set grazing schedules and add up fees for the coming season. The BLM uses what are known as animal unit months, or AUMs, to determine its grazing fees. AUMs are measured by the amount of forage animals need for one month, and Ferguson said the limits are very strict.

"You can't authorize more AUMs without (environmental) analysis," he said.

The BLM recently adjusted its fees to \$2.11 per AUM. The Forest Service, which is under the Department of Agriculture as opposed to the Department of the Interior, charges \$1.69 per month per cow-calf pair.

Ranchers must also follow specific conditions laid out in their permits, which might include rotating pastures, maintaining fences and protecting vegetative cover for sensitive species like sage grouse.

"Orderly management of the range is our goal," Ferguson said.

Local control

The problem, according to Mark Mackenzie, is not with local rangeland managers like Ferguson. Rather, it's mismanagement and political pressure up the chain of command.

Mackenzie, who runs 900 head of cattle south of Jordan Valley, is largely dependent on federal AUMs. But with so many layers of new protections, he said local land management is becoming cumbersome. And when a change is needed on the range, he said the agency will likely be taken to court.

"It's all driven by special interest groups," Mackenzie said. "We've let the management of these resources become commandeered by the courts."

Mackenzie figures grazing has fallen by about 40 percent since 1960 in the Vale District. Those losses create an economic ripple in small towns like Jordan Valley — population 180 — that threatens their very existence.

Grazing is also a management tool itself, Mackenzie said. Without grazing, grasses can become overgrown and increase the fuel load for large wildfires —



AP Photo/Rebecca Boone

A sign warns visitors that this portion of the Malheur National Wildlife refuge outside of Burns is closed to the public Friday.

like the Soda Fire that spilled over into Oregon from Idaho last year.

The occupation of the wildlife refuge was unfortunate, Mackenzie said, but the militants' message of local control resonates strongly.

"We need the control of natural resources management back at the local level," he said. "Let local people have a say in what goes on in their communities and counties."

Ferguson did say the BLM is trying to be more proactive with fighting rangeland fires in the West. Oregon, Idaho and Nevada are collaborating on a program creating strategic fuel breaks where firefighters can safely fight fires before they get too big and destructive.

"The whole goal is to reduce the size of these fires," he said.

No flexibility

Andy Bentz, a former Malheur County sheriff and owner of Bentz Solutions in Ontario, agrees the BLM doesn't have enough flexibility to do proper management. He pointed to lawsuits from environmental groups as what's hobbling the agency.

"Yelling at the BLM is like yelling at a fireman when your house is on fire," Bentz said. "They can't make on-the-ground annual changes, because it opens them up to challenges and litigation."

Bentz, whose family has ranches in southeast Oregon since 1916, said there is enough local expertise to manage the lands for multiple use. But when the agency tries to adapt to Mother Nature, adjusting seasons or

stocking rates, Bentz said they face another lawsuit. He blamed the Equal Access to Justice Act, which compensates attorney fees if groups can prove their litigation is justified.

"They have to find a way to get flexibility back into management," Bentz said. "The land continues to deteriorate because the land managers don't have the flexibility to manage it properly."

George Wuerthner, Oregon state director for the Western Watersheds Project, said most environmental groups don't actually have a lot of money to spend on lawsuits, and therefore only the most egregious violations are challenged in court. Just as many others are left ignored, he said.

Wuerthner, who previously worked with the BLM as a botanist in Idaho, said many public lands are negatively impacted by domestic livestock. Water is limited in the desert country of southeast Oregon, yet cattle gravitate toward springs and streams, harming the ecosystem for other animals and fish.

Summer grazing can also put stress on native grasses and allow invasive species like cheat grass to take over, Wuerthner said.

"That's one of the things squeezing ranchers, in fact," he said.

Wuerthner said the BLM actually depends on some of these lawsuits to ensure they are following the laws passed by Congress, and not overly influenced by local pressure.

"They're keeping the agencies honest," he said.

Working together

Closer to home, the Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests have just shy of 2 million acres of rangeland deemed suitable for grazing. Those forests are also in the midst of 15-year updates to their respective land management plans.

Maura Laverty, range program manager for the two forests, said they have 135 active grazing allotments. She said they have good relationships with their permittees that have helped them come a long way in managing the land responsibly.

"We don't graze like we use to," she said. "We're a lot more conscientious now."

Currently, the forests are working on environmental reviews for each allotment, which they hope to finish by 2025. They must take into account endangered fish on each site, as well as wolves which are becoming increasingly established in the northeast corner of the state.

Karl Jensen, a Pilot Rock rancher, runs about 80 of his 300 head of cattle on the Umatilla forest near Ukiah. He said the biggest challenge he's faced is fencing off his cows away from nearby Five Mile Creek and Sugarbowl Creek, which are home to endangered bull trout and salmon.

Jensen said the Forest Service has been great to work with in both Heppner and Ukiah.

"There's always regulations that come down from higher up," he said. "We're able to work those out and come up with a good management plan."

O'Keefe, president of the cattlemen's association, said good rangeland management must include adequate grazing and a stable supply of forage. Funding and workload remain huge challenges for the BLM, The whole issue has him on edge.

"So far, we're here and ranching. But the potential is there for it to no longer be workable," he said. "If that happens, these communities will be trouble. These fires will be uncontrollable. It's kind of a cumulative effect."

Ferguson said there are areas they'd like to improve, but it's not going to happen overnight.

"It's a slow process," he said. "We do the best we can."

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Presidential contenders fight for minority voters in S.C.

DENMARK, S.C. (AP) — The fight for black voters turned into a tug-of-war over President Barack Obama's legacy Friday as Democratic presidential hopefuls looked for an edge in South Carolina. Republicans, meanwhile, crisscrossed the state in search of a path out of Donald Trump's long shadow.

Hillary Clinton stepped up her hammering of rival Bernie Sanders for what she said are his false claims on Obama's legacy. Prominent black leaders echoed the theme — an effort to use the first African-American president as a wedge between Sanders and black voters.

"He has called the president weak, a disappointment," Clinton said of Sanders at a town hall Friday. "He does not support, the way I do, building on the progress the president has made."

Coming off a bruising rout in New Hampshire, the former secretary of state hopes the first-in-the-south primary will showcase her strength with at least one core segment of the Democratic coalition. A Democrat cannot win the nomination, much less the White House, without significant backing and enthusiasm from black communities.

For Republicans, South Carolina is another chance to emerge as the viable alternative to the billionaire reality-TV star who snatched the race away from the GOP establishment. Although Trump appears to have a solid lead in the polls in the state, the rest of the field is hoping to peel off support from the large and influential evangelical community.

As his rivals hustled through rare snowfall Friday, Trump showed he won't make it easy. He was able to steal the spotlight with a Twitter threat to sue his closest competitor.

"If @TedCruz doesn't clean up his act, stop cheating, & doing negative ads, I have standing to sue him for not being a natural born citizen," Trump wrote.

Another tweet questioned Cruz's faith: "How can Ted Cruz be an evangelical Christian when he lies so much and is so dishonest?"

50 down.
80 to go.
I love you.

Love Notes



Ron,
Your smile makes my day. Your kiss makes my week. Your love makes my life complete. I love you Baby. Stacy

After 50 years I will keep loving you forever. John.

To: ML
Thank you for always being there for me babe.
From: NT

Addison Jones Kosey:
Happy Valentine's Day.
Love Papa, Mega, and Dad.

Jason,
Thanks for getting through 20+ great years with me. Looking forward to many more!
With all my love, Tammi

TO MOM & CHUCK,
LOTS OF LOVE
CARRIE

John Morris,
In you I've found the love of my life and my closest truest friend.
Kelly Chinen

To my Hubby Rick,
Happy Valentine's Day to the man of my dreams. It's been 17 years of ups and downs and our love keeps getting stronger. I love you to infinity and back plus 1.
Your wife Dana

My Dear Sweet Sally,
As the years go along we just get closer together. We are as one now.
Love to you forever.
JHD

Love me,
love my dog!!

LD, my riding buddy and the wind beneath my wings!
I thank God for the gift of your love!
KD