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## SEVEN POPULAR MYTHS ABOUT LIVESTOCK GRAZING ON PUBLIC LANDS

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Public lands in this report are defined as lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in the 11 western states. Lands administered by other federal, state, and local government agencies are excluded. This report focuses on the 11 western states because 96 % of all livestock grazing administered by the BLM and USFS occurs within these states (USDA-FS and USDI-BLM 1986). The BLM and USFS regulate livestock grazing on 161.8 million acres (USDI-BLM 1989) and 44.6 million acres (SRM 1989), respectively, in the West.

## **Summary**

Western public lands are managed to provide the U.S. with sustained production of multiple, renewable natural resources. Products include water, recreation, lumber, firewood, open space, and forage for wild and domestic animals. The continued harvest of domestic livestock forage has become embroiled in controversy, a controversy fueled by misinformation and myth. Future discussions of public land livestock grazing policies should be founded upon facts, including these seven facts about livestock grazing on public lands:

1. Livestock grazing on public lands plays a significant role in U.S. cattle and sheep production.
2. Livestock grazing on public lands makes a significant contribution to the U.S. economy and the western livestock industry.
3. Low public land grazing fees do not influence the number of livestock allowed to graze on public lands.
4. The public land livestock grazing program costs the federal government more than is generated by grazing fees, but even larger "subsidies" exist for other public land management programs, including wildlife and recreation.
5. Federal grazing permittees do not have an economic advantage over non-permittee ranchers.
6. Ecological conditions of public lands are improving in the presence of regulated livestock grazing.
7. Big game populations on public lands are increasing in the presence of regulated livestock grazing.

## **Introduction**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) collectively manage 315.8 million acres within the 11 western states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming (USDI-BLM 1989, USDAFS 1989). By law, these lands are managed to provide sustained production of multiple, renewable natural resources (FLPMA 1976, NFMUA 1982). These resources include water, lumber, recreation, wildlife habitat, and livestock forage. This report concerns current issues surrounding the harvest of livestock forage on western public lands.

In recent years, livestock grazing on public lands has become embroiled in a flaming controversy fueled by misinformation. The purpose of this report is to provide factual, well-documented information to those people—sportsmen, conservationists, students, teachers, legislators, and others—genuinely concerned about public land livestock grazing. Our goal is to aid and promote decision-making based on factual information, rather than on uninformed perceptions or special-interest propaganda. Specifically, we seek to dispel seven popular myths about livestock grazing on public lands.



## **Myth 1: Livestock grazing on public lands plays an insignificant role in U.S. cattle and sheep production.**

**Fact:** In 1988, the 11 western states supported 20% (7.5 million) of the nation's total beef cows and replacement heifers and raised 19% (7.5 million) of the nation's calves (USDA 1989). Because 50% of the beef cows in the 11 western states graze at least part of the year on public lands (Gee 1984), public land livestock grazing supported 10% (3.8 million) of the nation's beef cattle breeding herd. Beef cattle production in several western states depends heavily upon public land forage. For example, 88% of the beef cows in Idaho, 81% in Nevada, 64% in Wyoming, and 63% in Arizona graze at least part of the year on public lands (Gee 1984).

U.S. sheep and wool production is even more dependent than cattle production upon public land forage. In 1988, the 11 western states supported 51% (3.6 million) of the nation's total stock ewes and raised 48% (3.5 million) of the nation's lamb crop (USDA 1989). In 1987 (the most recent year from which data are available), the 11 western states also produced 52% (44.6 million pounds) of the nation's shorn wool. Although the exact percentage of western sheep that graze public lands is not known, 30-40% of the sheep within the 17 western states, which include Texas and the Great Plains, harvest public land forage (Gee and Madsen 1983). Because little public land exists in Texas and the Great Plains, sheep dependency in the 11 western states likely exceeds 40%. Calculations using the conservative 40% dependency figure reveal public land grazing supports 20% (1.8 million) of U.S. stock sheep and produces 21% (17.8 million pounds) of U.S. shorn wool. This is not an insignificant contribution.

Without public land grazing, nearly all of the 2.8 million sheep and 7.5 million cattle that utilize public lands—or 47% of all the beef cattle and stock sheep that graze in the 11 western states—would be eliminated. This is because livestock grazing on public lands is usually wholly integrated with livestock grazing on private lands. Summer ranges in much of the West are commonly located on

