

## From 25 Years Ago



# Livestock Grazing on Federal Rangelands – Going, Going, Gone

*From 25 years ago, we revisit this article which ran in the June issue of Rangelands. The author was an associate professor with Utah State University, Logan, at the time.*

**By E. Bruce Godfrey**

Declines in the use of lands administered by various federal agencies by domestic livestock have been documented by several authors. For example, Clawson (1967) reported that the use of National Forest System lands by domestic livestock declined from a high of nearly twenty and one half million AUM's in 1918 to six and one half million in 1956. Clawson also reported that the use of lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) declined from nearly 16 million AUM's in 1944 to less than 15 million in 1964.

Two of the primary reasons for these reductions were due to adjudications and changes in the class of livestock-sheep permits that were generally changed to cattle permits at a ratio greater than five to one.

While the declines that occurred in the past were nearly inevitable, declines since the early 1960s were not expected by many ranchers who had federal grazing permits. While reductions in use have not been large in many areas, the general trend in the use of public lands has continued to decline.

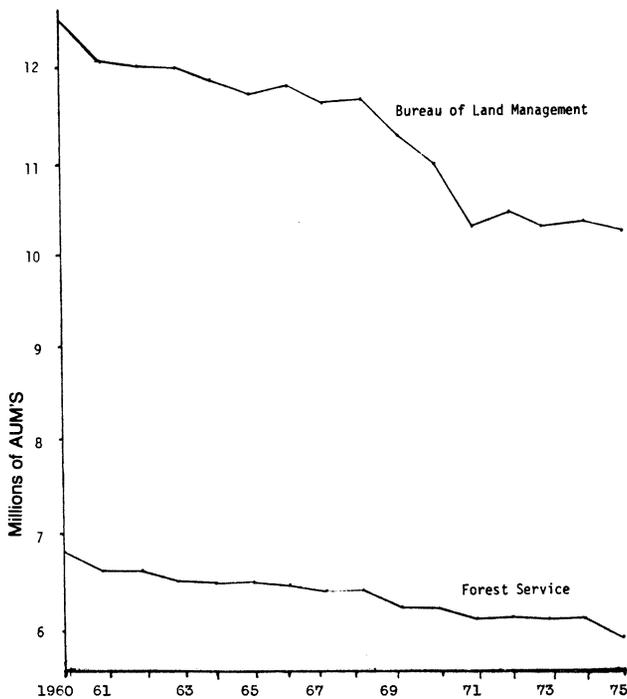
Recently, however, many ranchers who have permits in areas where environmental statements are being written by the BLM are often faced with reductions in excess of 50%. These reductions can generally be interpreted as a second adjudication which could (will?) be faced by ranchers in other areas in the future. As a result, some ranchers have come to question their role as users of America's federal lands. While numerous reasons can be given for this apprehension, the following appear to be some of the major reasons why past and probably future reductions in the use of federal lands by domestic livestock may (will?) occur.

**One of the** major reasons why the role of livestock use on federal lands has been questioned arises from a difference of opinion concerning the importance of federal lands for domestic livestock grazing (Council for Agricultural Science and Technology 1974). For example, one BLM official recently wrote “. . . ranchers in the West who are dependent upon the public land for major portions of grazing for their livestock do not now, and never did have a comparative advantage in producing livestock at less cost than do their counterparts in the Midwest and Southeastern States.” (Fulcher 1977).

While little empirical evidence exists which can be used to support this position, it does reflect an attitude that exists among some members of the federal bureaucracy to the effect that all livestock can (should?) be removed from federal lands with little, if any, impact on the national supply of beef or lamb.

While few, if any, federal employers have a personal grudge against the livestock industry, several changes have occurred within the last decade which make many federal employers less sympathetic towards the use of federal lands by domestic livestock than they once were. First, an increasing number and percentage of students graduating in range and forest management as well as faculty members who teach within the university system come from urban rather than rural backgrounds. As a result many have little, if any, understanding of the problems faced by cattle producers and even fewer have wide field experience.

This general lack of understanding is often compounded by the fact that some schools no longer require students majoring in forest or range manage-



*Millions AUM's of authorized or permitted use by domestic livestock on BLM administered lands and on National Forest System lands in the eleven Western States, 1960–1975. Sources: Public Land Statistics, Annual Grazing reports.*

ment to take a summer session or field oriented classes that force students to view conditions as they exist “on the ground.” Furthermore, many non range majors can qualify as a “range conservationist” with a minimum number of biological/botany classes.

Many of these students do not take classes in livestock production. As a result, many range conservationists that are placed on the federal register are primarily concerned with the impact of management actions, such as grazing systems, on plant composition and cover with little, if any, consideration of their impact on livestock production. In fact, the primary goal of many ecologically oriented managers seems to be to get an area in “excellent” condition – i.e. climax composition – when one of several alternative seral stages may be more productive.

**This general attitude** was perhaps most clearly articulated by the late Francis Colbert (1977) when he indicated that range was not synonymous with grazing by domestic livestock and that range was a “kind of land, not a land use.” This general philosophical attitude has also become part and parcel of

the curriculum of most “range schools.” These schools and their associated faculty often emphasize the importance of the plant and soil sciences with little, if any, emphasis on animal science – one of the historic disciplines of range management.

This general attitude would not be pervasive, however, if the agencies had not implemented the planning systems that are currently popular. Under this system a “rangeman” is expected to plan for range, which does not necessarily mean livestock grazing. Under this system the livestock industry may no longer have an advocate for their use. In fact, many ranchers contend that no one fights for their use on planning teams – a situation which varies significantly from team members which represent wildlife, recreation, or wilderness interests.

As a result, many planning teams are made up of “wilderness beasts,” “wildlife beasts,” “recreation beasts,” and even “anthropological beasts” that commonly have personal as well as professional interests in the use they plan for, while the “range” man often becomes a “forage beast” with little, if any, interest in domestic livestock production.

The allocations that often result from these planning team efforts are not without some justification, however. Most land administrators are faced with increasing demands by other user groups for priority. Most multiple use allocations do, however, represent reductions in livestock, timber, or minerals in favor of some recreation or preservation oriented interest group such as hunters, wilderness advocates, wild horse interests, or rock hounds. Three of the most important reasons why these demands have grown rapidly during the last decade is due to increased leisure time, disposable income, and free use of public lands by these interest groups.

Not all reductions in the use of federal range lands by domestic livestock can be laid on the steps of federal administrators, however. In some cases, it has become uneconomic – the fee and non-fee costs are greater than the benefits obtained to graze federal lands. This is perhaps particularly true of sheep, as vacant sheep allotments exist in many forests in the West.

Furthermore, some areas have received heavy use over time as a result of common use and trespass problems which have reduced the capacity of the area. In addition, some ranchers have found it profitable to subdivide the home ranch and sell smaller

units to hobby ranchers, who do not depend on livestock production for a living.

**Should the recent and historic declines** in the use of federal range lands by domestic livestock continue, however, several implications arise that may not be expected by many members of the Society for Range Management. First, with decreased emphasis on livestock production, federal agencies will be hard pressed to justify increasing their staff of range conservationists in the eyes of most budget analysts as well as members of Congress. Thus, the current high demand for range graduates may be a bubble that is about to burst.

Second, expenditures designed to improve rangelands will become increasingly under fire if justified only by statements such as "it's good for the land" or "it will improve the conditions of the area." Budget analysts will require hard facts concerning what these expenditures are actually buying.

Third, reductions in grazing on federal lands, with increasing demands for livestock products, will place new and increased burdens on private lands. As a result public efforts that help private land owners (e.g. Soil Conservation Service, Extension Service) will probably yield returns that are greater than returns that could be expected from the expenditure of funds by federal land management agencies.

In short, reductions in the use of federal lands by domestic livestock may be one case of "strangling one goose that lays golden eggs" if viewed from the perspective of the federal agencies. However, as in most cases, someone generally gains in these situations. In this case, ranchers grazing on private lands and agencies that are oriented toward the private sector will probably gain, while ranchers having federal grazing permits and federal agencies lose. From some people's view this change will be "good" from both sides of the fence.

### References

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