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New Grazing Rules for Public Lands Cut Non-Ranchers Out

WASHINGTON, DC, June 21, 2005 (ENS) - New Bureau of Land Management (BLM) regulations released last week give new rights to the livestock industry on the 160 million acres of public land leased by ranchers and make it harder for the average citizen to participate in on the ground decisionmaking, two conservation groups say.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Forest Guardians say the revisions will no longer require the BLM to consult with the public on designating and adjusting allotment boundaries, renewing and issuing grazing permits and leases, modifying permits or leases, or issuing temporary permits or leases.

"This means that citizens will no longer be informed or have opportunity to participate in the management of our public lands," the groups said.

The agency said the regulations were changed for the purpose of "improving BLM's working relationships with ranchers."

"The Bush administration is making it clear that they want to take the 'public' out of public lands," said Billy Stern with Forest Guardians.

BLM Director Kathleen Clarke said, "This environmental impact study shows that grazing management under the new regulations will produce long-term rangeland health benefits. These benefits include increased vegetation along stream banks, which will reduce soil erosion and provide more habitats for wildlife."

Under the new regulations, she noted, the BLM's grazing management decisions will be based on better information about rangeland conditions.

"That sounds wonderful," said Stern. "However, only one of more than a dozen changes to the regulation has any potential benefit to streams and wildlife, while the rest move forward the administration's agenda of privatizing public lands and limiting public involvement."

The regulations give the livestock industry title to future structures, such as fences, wells and pipelines built at government expense for the benefit of the industry. This means compensation would be required if the lease or permit was revoked.

The new rules remove the requirement for the BLM to seek ownership of the water rights associated with federal land, when they become available under state law. The livestock industry argues that ranchers have a right to graze on any land near their water rights, even if they do not own the land.

The regulations expand the definition of "grazing preference" linking it to a specific amount of forage, rather than a specific area or "allotment." This means with any decrease in forage due to drought, weed invasion or generally declining conditions, livestock would be given preference to forage over wildlife or wild horses.

The regulations modify the definition of “interested public” in a way that would exclude newcomers to an area from participating in livestock grazing decisions, since they would have had no chance to comment of previous decisions, and burdens the rest of the public by requiring continuing involvement to maintain “interested public” status even if they are only interested in specific decisions.

Public involvement is removed from biological assessments and evaluations done for wildlife, even if they could have contributed new scientific documentation or evidence. This leaves such studies to be written “in house” and reviewed and revised only by government officials who may or may not have wildlife or ecological expertise.

The new rules allow livestock grazing permit holders who have violated BLM laws and regulation on one allotment to continue to hold other permits, leaving these areas vulnerable to further violations and ecological damage.

“These new regs are an unethical political scam from Interior Dept. political appointees in Washington DC,” said Daniel Patterson, ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity who formerly worked with the BLM.

“BLM is trying to reverse years of progress on rangeland restoration to serve a handful of cowmen at great cost to the public-interest,” said Patterson. “Wildlife, water quality, hunting, and fishing on public lands will suffer great harm if the Bush BLM has its way.”