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## Taxpayers pay grazing costs, report says

By Paul Rogers

KNIGHT RIDDER

American taxpayers lost \$123 million last year on programs that allow cattle and other livestock to graze on millions of acres of public land in California and 16 other western states, according to a study.

That report, released last week, was prepared by the Government Accountability Office, the nonpartisan research arm of Congress. It found the two main agencies that allow grazing, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, have decreased grazing fees 40 percent since 1980 -- while fees charged to graze livestock on private lands have increased 78 percent.

The results back up a nine-month investigation published by Knight Ridder in 1999.

That package of stories found a similar loss to the federal treasury -- \$94 million in 1998 -- and revealed that corporations and millionaires, including Budweiser, the Hewlett family and media mogul Ted Turner were among the beneficiaries of subsidized grazing deals.

In some instances, their cattle damaged streams, meadows, endangered species and other public resources.

"This deficit is a subsidy," said Greta Anderson, a botanist with the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group in Tucson with offices in San Francisco. "Livestock operations on public land are costing us a lot of money. The question is, what are we getting in return?"

Environmentalists and free-market activists who have tried to convince Congress to increase grazing fees have had no luck.

John Wayne is a powerful opponent. Lawmakers rarely want to take actions that are perceived as hurting cowboys, the icons of the American West, even though the 23,000 people and corporations who hold permits to graze cattle and sheep in the West make up just 2 percent of America's livestock producers. Most ranchers operate on private ranches or farms in the Great Plains, the Midwest and the East.

Ranching industry officials said Monday that grazing on public lands has benefits beyond dollars and cents: contributing to rural economies, patrolling remote areas and preserving the culture of the West, they say.

"You have men and women who have worked these lands for generations," said Jeff Eisenberg, a spokesman for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Also, said Eisenberg, if ranches lose public land permits, they might have to sell their adjacent private land, which could increase sprawl.

"I don't think anyone is interested in shutting down national parks because they don't pay for themselves," he said. "Like many government programs, this is something that has been supported for a very long time."

The report found that livestock graze on 235 million acres of federally owned land in the West -- an area equal to California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho combined. Of that, 98 percent is owned by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. In 2004, those two agencies spent \$132.5 million to run their grazing programs, and collected \$17.5 million in rent, for a net loss of \$115 million.

Most grazing in California on national forests occurs in the Sierra foothills. On BLM lands, it occurs mostly in San Bernardino, Kern, Fresno and San Benito counties.

Eight other agencies, including the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Army and Navy, also allow grazing. Altogether, the government spent \$144 million last year and collected \$21 million.

Permit holders were charged \$1.43 per "animal unit month" last year on BLM and Forest Service lands. An animal unit month is the

amount of grass a cow and her calf, or five sheep eat in a month. The fees are set using a 1966 formula set into law by President Reagan by executive order in 1986. It accounts for beef prices and ranchers' ability to pay.

Fees to rent private grazing lands in western states average nine times higher -- \$13.30 -- according to the GAO report. Similarly, fees to use state-owned land range higher, from an average of \$8 in Arizona to \$23 in Nebraska.

Environmental groups are pushing legislation to allow ranchers to be voluntarily bought out by the federal government. The new report is sure to add pressure, particularly given federal deficits.

"I'm sure that almost every member of Congress can think of a more productive way to spend \$100 million per year," said Andy Kerr, director of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign, a coalition of environmental groups.