

Lawsuit aims to protect tax payers from dirt cheap livestock subsidies

By Jean Williams
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Livestock grazing dates back to the civil war, when ranchers let their herds roam and forage for food, without thought for managing the land.

The Taylor Grazing Act was passed by congress in 1934. This act helped regulate rancher's use of grazing land and allowed fees to be collected for grazing livestock on public lands. The fees were designated to be used by individual grazing districts for land and range improvements.

The Taylor Grazing Act was a solution to a growing problem, but that was 76 years ago.

Currently, environmentalists have been waging a battle to increase grazing fees that only cover a fraction of today's administrative costs.

On Thursday, attorney's Marc Fink of the Center for Biological Diversity and Matt Kenna of Durango, Colorado, filed a lawsuit to compel the Department of Interior and agriculture to respond to a 2005 rulemaking petition that sought to increase livestock grazing fees across 258 million acres of federal public land.

Thursday's lawsuit was filed on behalf of the following environmental organizations:

Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project,

WildEarth Guardians, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, and Oregon Natural Desert Association.

"The federal grazing program is as fiscally irresponsible as it is ecologically harmful," said Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaigns director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "In responding to our petition, the government must now choose between correcting and continuing the subsidized destruction of America's public land."

The current grazing fee does not recover even the administrative costs of operating the program, leaving U.S. taxpayers to pay the difference. The fee also falls short of paying for the environmental problems this land use causes, and instead enables high levels of livestock grazing that harm ecosystems, degrade watersheds, and cause species decline.

In 2010, the government charges just \$1.35 per month to graze one cow

and calf on public lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, which is the lowest possible rate under the current fee formula.

"Given the massive budget shortfall our country is facing, we can no longer afford to subsidize a small group of ranchers to graze public lands at public expense," said Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians.

Although the Administrative Procedures Act requires the government to respond to rulemaking petitions, the Departments of Interior and Agriculture have not responded to plaintiff's 2005 petition. Thursday's lawsuit seeks that response.

"Our public lands are worth far more than cheap forage for private livestock operations," said Great Anderson, Arizona director of the Western Watersheds Project. "The agencies should take this opportunity to set an

appropriate value for livestock use of these lands, which provide habitat for plants and animals, clean our air and water, and provide recreational opportunities for millions of Americans."

Furthermore, in cases of over-grazing the damage can include increased soil erosion, poor water quality, riparian damage along streams, and loss of biodiversity.



Sheep grazing on public land in Utah. GNU Q#247

Livestock grazing is one of the most destructive uses of federal public land. It has imperiled numerous species of plants and animals, which are already threatened and endangered. Those species include the desert tortoise, Mexican spotted owl, Mexican gray

wolf, and dozens of other imperiled mammals, fish, reptiles, fish, native plants, insects, and amphibians.

Livestock grazing is also a primary factor contributing to unnaturally severe western wildfires and greenhouse gases equivalent to that

of 705,342 passenger vehicles.

The Cattlemen's Association and Farm Bureau are powerful organizations that have a history of opposing any increased regulation that rocks the status quo for ranchers or policies to regulate greenhouse gases.