

PUBLIC LANDS: Obama admin denies petition to raise grazing fees

By Phil Taylor,
E&ENews reporter

The Obama administration yesterday rejected a proposal to raise grazing fees on public lands, a decision that suggests ranchers will continue to be charged below-market prices to graze cattle on federal rangelands.

The Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service in separate letters yesterday to environmental groups said other priorities prevent them from pursuing new rules to revise the current grazing fee.

Both agencies also said they disagreed with the groups' legal arguments in a 2005 petition challenging the legality of the current fee structure.

Joel Holtrop, deputy chief of the National Forest System, said the agency is pursuing separate rulemakings to revise its forest planning rule and respond to Colorado's roadless proposal, each of which have drained agency resources.

Moreover, roughly 4,000 grazing allotments on Forest Service property are in need of environmental analyses that will help determine the best management

of rangeland resources, Holtrop said in the letter.

"This major effort will require focused agency range management technical expertise and funding and is not expected to be completed for several years," he said.

A recent order from a U.S. District Court in Montana also requires the Forest Service to prepare an environmental impact statement in order to continue applying aerial chemical fire retardants to fight wildfires, Holtrop said.

"Given these and other significant agency priorities, I am reluctant to burden the agency's limited resources by initiating an additional major rulemaking endeavor at the present time," he said.

BLM Director Bob Abbey in his letter to the groups said his agency was working to implement proposed orders aimed at reducing the venting of natural gas, revising coal management regulations, updating standards for oil and gas measurement and securing oil and gas production facilities.

"These initiatives represent major undertakings for the BLM and involve significant investments of limited agency resources and staff time," Abbey wrote.

Abbey added that he had discussed the fee

structure with “numerous” lawmakers on Capitol Hill and that none of them had requested a change to the grazing fees.

Unwelcome news for enviros

The government’s response was prompted by a lawsuit filed last summer by the Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians, Great Old Broads for Wilderness and Oregon Natural Desert Association seeking to raise grazing fees and require agencies to re-evaluate the effects of grazing on public lands.

Ranchers currently pay the federal government \$1.35 a month to graze one cow and her calf -- several times lower than the cost of grazing on private lands.

The federal government’s grazing program cost taxpayers \$115 million in fiscal 2004, according to a Government Accountability Office report. The report also found that BLM’s and Forest Service’s fees decreased by 40 percent from 1980 to 2004, while grazing fees charged by private ranchers increased by 78 percent for the same period.

Conservationists also contend that grazing damages wildlife habitats, water quality, scenic views and native vegetation.

“Subsidizing the livestock industry at the cost of species, ecosystems and taxpayers is plainly bad public-lands policy,” said Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaigns director for CBD. “Today’s choice to continue that policy is both a disappointment and a blight on the Obama administration’s environmental record.”

The GAO report found that if the purpose of the grazing fee were to recover expenditures, BLM and the Forest Service would have to charge \$7.64 and \$12.26 per “animal unit month,” several times higher than the current \$1.35.

“Given the massive budget shortfalls our country faces, 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. “As long as grazing is permitted on public lands, it’s only fair that public lands ranchers pay for the cost of their activity.”

The groups said they will consider additional litigation in response to the agencies’ decision not to increase the fees.

The groups recently reached a “tentative settlement” with the Interior and Agriculture departments that awaits final approval by Justice Department officials, according to the filing in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (E&ENews PM, Jan. 5).