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## FOREST SERVICE

# Greens push grazing reform, say cows destroy fragile lands

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A dispute over cattle grazing on national forest land in New Mexico and Arizona is rekindling a debate about whether cows do more harm than good on grassland that's home to imperiled wildlife.

The latest battle is between the Forest Service and the Western Watersheds Project, which sued the agency to stop the Stateline Range grazing project, consisting of 271,665 acres in the Apache-Sitgreaves and Gila national forests.

"They're pretty much turning a blind eye to the effects of livestock grazing," said Cyndi Tuell, the Western Watersheds Project's Arizona/New Mexico director. "They're not taking seriously how badly cattle damage the land."

The watersheds group and Wilderness Watch filed suit Jan. 14 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona during the final days of the Trump administration. They complained that the project would cover designated roadless and wilderness areas that are supposed to be free of development and would include 2.9 miles of pipeline to transport water in the Blue Range Primitive Area, which is "generally managed as wilderness."

The area is home to endangered Mexican gray wolves, which the federal government has been reintroducing to the region, the plaintiffs said in the lawsuit filed by the Western Environmental Law Center. Other endangered species potentially affected include the Southwestern willow flycatcher, the Gila chub and the loach minnow, the groups said.

Between the two national forests, the Forest Service plan allows for grazing of several thousand cattle, as well as a far smaller number of horses. In its record of decision authorizing the 14 allotments last November, the Forest Service said the plan is consistent with mixed uses of national forest system lands and includes various measures for protecting the land while allowing livestock to graze in certain areas.

Some locations within the project will remain closed to grazing, the Forest Service said. They include areas around the San Francisco River, although the environmental group the Center for Biological Diversity told the agency that the assertion disregards actual conditions on the ground.

In an environmental assessment required for the project, the Forest Service disputed charges that endangered species would be put at risk.

"This alternative is not likely to jeopardize the Mexican gray wolf and would either have no effect or it may affect but is not likely to adversely affect, modify, or destroy other listed threatened or endangered species or their habitat," the agency said.

In addition, the agency said, "Livestock grazing activities will continue to contribute to the social, economic, and cultural diversity and the stability of the adjacent rural communities." While the project isn't likely to have a measurable effect on climate change, the Forest Service said, rotational grazing and other management practices for the grassland would increase the ability to adapt and respond to climate change.

The project's development coincided with Trump administration moves to encourage grazing on federal land. Last year, then-Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue directed Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen to make grazing permits easier to obtain and to promote the practice.

"The Forest Service will recognize grazing on national grasslands as essential for their management and streamline range improvements and the permit renewal process to reduce burdens and improve customer service for America's grazers," the Agriculture Department said at the time ([Greenwire](#), June 18, 2020).

Forest Service officials are also updating the management directives for grazing on land the agency oversees. The proposals — the first major update in 30 years — include tweaks to provisions allowing permits to be handed down to children or grandchildren, and a new section on conservation easements and agricultural land trusts.

The agency is taking public comment on those proposed changes until April 17, following a [request](#) by Sens. John Hoeven and Kevin Cramer, North Dakota Republicans, to extend an earlier comment period.

Advocates for ranchers argue grazing is beneficial for the land as well as for the cattle and beef industry. The Western Governors' Association told the Forest Service it supports changes to simplify the grazing permit process.

"Western Governors encourage federal and state land managers to identify opportunities to improve flexibility and integration of grazing management and targeted grazing as tools to achieve restoration and land management goals such as hazardous fuels reduction and invasive grasses mitigation," the group said in a comment letter.

Grazing permits typically last a decade, and they renew automatically upon expiration. For years, government watchdog groups have complained that Congress allows ranchers to pay the Forest Service a small fraction of what they would to a private landowner for grazing access.

The rate for 2021 is \$1.35 per head month, or one cow and her calf for a month. The rate is unchanged from last year's, set by a formula established by Congress in the 1978 Public Rangelands Improvement Act.

In the New Mexico and Arizona case, the Forest Service seems to be taking a business-as-usual approach to grazing permits despite wildlife conflicts and stretched water resources that cattle grazing could exacerbate, said Kelly Nokes, a lawyer with the Western Environmental Law Center.

"We're trying to get the Forest Service away from status quo allotments," Nokes said, adding the new Biden administration might bring a fresh approach. "We're really hoping to get the Forest Service to start thinking more critically about grazing permits."

In their complaint, the groups outlined numerous potential threats from grazing.

"Direct effects from livestock grazing to the landscape include trampling of native vegetation," they said.  
"Direct effects from livestock grazing include the spread of invasive weed species."

Other effects include reducing forage and habitat for native wildlife, they said. The Forest Service maintains fences to keep cattle away from waterways or other places they don't belong, but "they always get out of their allotment," said Tuell of the Western Watersheds Project.

Tuell said the ultimate solution in the Southwest ought to be an end to grazing on federal land, especially given the region's struggle with drought — a condition that's been especially bad for the past year or so. The government could buy out permit holders, she said.

"Cows could be raised elsewhere, or not at all," Tuell said.

Hoeven remains a steadfast supporter of grazing on forest system land, Kami Capener, his spokeswoman, told E&E News.

"Farmers and ranchers are critical to the successful management of our grasslands," Hoeven said in a statement. "Thanks to the latest science and research, we know that properly-managed livestock grazing results in significant soil health and conservation benefits. Grazing allotments have been a fundamental piece of the U.S. Forest Service National Grasslands System since its inception, and I have strongly supported ranchers' rights to graze on these lands."