

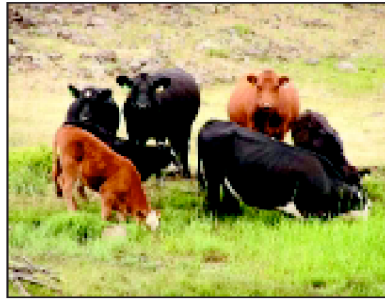
Grazing raises land-use debate

Virginia Gewin

Permit fees recoup only one-sixth of the estimated cost of maintaining public lands used for grazing, according to the US Government Accountability Office (GAO). Ten federal agencies – but predominantly the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service, which manage the bulk of the 235 million acres grazed each year – spent at least \$144 million this past year to manage permits, monitor resources, and construct fences.

Grazing fees were never intended to support the total program cost, but the disparity in numbers leads anti-grazing advocates to question the viability of a “subsidy” when, they claim, less than 5% of the beef on the market comes from these grazing lands. However, both critics and advocates of public-land grazing say the report is incomplete and leaves out secondary ecological costs as well as societal benefits.

“By leaving out the broader public benefits of grazing, such as supporting rural economies, the report sends



Courtesy of E. Ryberg, CBD

Cattle grazing on Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest public land.

a distorted message to the public”, says Jeffrey Eisenberg, Director of Public Lands for the Beef Cattleman’s Association (Washington, DC). He believes that the public have made a commitment to open spaces, which grazing lands provide. Furthermore, ranchers manage 107 million acres of private land that could be subject to fragmentation if grazing was restricted.

Grazing has come under intense scrutiny for contributing to invasive species dispersal and soil erosion. Greta Anderson, range restoration campaign organizer for the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD, Tucson, AZ), called the report “a good first step”. “But”, she says “the

cost of impaired habitat for imperiled species and habitat degradation – things that are hard to quantify – were not included in that total”. When they are included, work conducted by CBD has shown that the cost increases to \$500 million per year. To encourage voluntary conservation measures, the government also allocated over \$1 billion this fiscal year for programs targeting private working lands. For example, the Environmental Quality Improvement Program assists farmers and ranchers in improving the soil, air, and water quality of their lands.

The GAO report findings do not surprise Terry Anderson, Executive Director of Property and Environment Research Center (PERC, Bozeman, MT), who says, “Typically, commodity production on federal lands generates less revenue than costs”, in reference to activities that include grazing and recreation. Coalitions of environmentalists and ranchers are working to find common ground on contentious land-use issues. PERC advocates a market system of transferable grazing permits that allows buyers and sellers to set the price for these public lands. ■

California cracks down on food waste dumping

Mike Faden

For decades, food-processing companies in California’s agriculturally rich Central Valley have dumped vast amounts of wastewater and solids onto the land. Now, however, regulators think the salty waste is causing serious groundwater pollution and are attempting to crack down by tightening enforcement of dumping rules.

The issue has attracted attention partly due to a case involving Hilmar Cheese Company, the world’s largest cheese factory, which produces a million pounds of cheese each day. In October, the company agreed to pay \$3 million to settle charges that it violated waste-disposal and other regulations. If approved by the state regulatory board, the unusual agree-

ment would fund a \$1 million study on correcting salinity problems.

Hilmar is not the only company to come under scrutiny; early this year, staff at the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board announced that 168 food processors – more than half of those with permits to discharge waste onto the land – were suspected or confirmed groundwater polluters. Some processors produce more than a million gallons of wastewater a day, containing nitrates and salts washed off fruits and vegetables.

In the past, the Board often simply trusted processors to adhere to waste-management plans. Now, they are proposing a tougher approach: “We are requiring more information up front to show that a proposed wastewater system will protect water quality, and more monitoring to show that it does”, says Wendy Wyels, an

environmental program manager with the Board. “If monitoring shows groundwater pollution, then we will require system modifications to prevent future pollution as well as cleanup.”

In response, the industry is complaining that it is being singled out for punishment and that regulations have been applied inconsistently. They also point out that spreading waste on the ground can be beneficial because it fertilizes crops and that removal of salt from wastewater is extremely expensive and still requires disposal of the resulting concentrated brine.

In a letter to the state regulators, Hilmar claimed that, ultimately, salt management will require the construction of treatment plants or a pipeline that would transport brine directly into the ocean. ■