The Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released on October 31, 2005 found that public lands ranching benefits a select few at a loss to taxpayers of at least $123 million annually (www.gao.gov/new.items/d05869.pdf). Overall, ten federal agencies spent $144 million dollars to manage public lands’ ranching programs, and only recovered $21 million of the cost through the collection of grazing fees. This de facto subsidy should be considered in terms of economic and ecological expense to the taxpayers, and the question remains: What is the American public getting in return for such a large commitment of fiscal and natural resources?

Numerous government programs are subsidized by taxpayer dollars, but in the case of public lands grazing, only a select few benefit from this largesse.

- Of 989,460 livestock producers in the U.S., only 23,000 ranchers have public lands permits. This is less 2 percent of all livestock producers in the country.

BLM and Forest Service grazing fees are far below fees charged on comparable private rangeland, on state trust lands throughout the west, and even on other federal lands such as those managed by the National Park Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

- The report shows that the current grazing fee is set below fair-market value. In 2004, most public lands ranchers paid $1.43 per month for each cow-calf pair (a.k.a. animal unit month, or AUM), compared to ranchers on comparable private lands who paid an average of $13.30;
- Most states in the west charge a higher fee to graze on state trust lands than the fee charged by federal agencies. State agencies up to $80 per AUM; and
- The grazing fee decreased by 40 percent between 1980 and 2004 on BLM and FS lands, while fees charged by private ranchers increased by 78 percent over the same period.

The current grazing fee is insufficient to recover costs.

- The current fee fails to recover even one-sixth of the costs of ranching on federal lands;
- There was a $115 million dollar shortfall in grazing program managed by the BLM and Forest Service in 2004; and
- If the grazing fee were to recover costs for these two agencies, the BLM would have to charge $7.64 per AUM and the Forest Service would have had to charge up to $12.26 per AUM.

The American public also pays for public lands ranching in ways that were not quantified in the GAO report. There are numerous ecological costs of this land use including degraded riparian areas, impaired water and air quality, soil erosion and nutrient loss, and changes in vegetation composition and structure. Nearly one-quarter of all Endangered species in the southwest are threatened by livestock grazing, which diminishes habitat and heightens forage competition. Cattle also knock over, trample, and deface cultural and archeological resources. The National Environmental Policy Act is essential for ensuring that these impacts are identified and mitigated during the permitting process.

