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Million Cattle Graze on Federal Land for Almost Nothing, but the Cost to the Climate Could Be High

Scientists say overgrazing deteriorates rangelands' ability to store climate-warming carbon, while the livestock industry claims feeding animals improve the land.

By [Georgina Gustin](#)

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The hundreds of thousands of cattle dotting the vast sweeps and ranges of the West have become archetypal features of the American landscape, essentially entwined with a story the nation tells itself of cowboys and destiny.

But for decades environmental groups and ecologists have argued that cattle are destroying the West's arid pine and sagebrush-covered rangelands—the very landscape supporting a national mythology—turning thousands of acres into moonscapes. Livestock groups, meanwhile, argue the opposite, saying that cattle are critical for the health of that land.

Now, the long standing conflict is getting amplified as climate change heats up the West and rangelands lose their ability to store heat-trapping carbon, in part because they're being trampled and degraded by livestock, scientists say.

Cattle are well known emitters of methane, through belching and manure. But in the arid and fragile West, they're also destroying an important carbon sink, largely by churning up soil and vegetation, scientists say. This is happening, some research says, in a kind of vicious cycle, where the effects of grazing are heating a landscape that's already becoming hotter and drier.

On Monday, the environmental group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) sent a complaint letter to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, accusing the department's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) of failing to take into account the climate impacts of its commercial grazing program, which covers giant stretches of the West.

"We're in a climate emergency," said Tim Whitehouse, PEER's executive director. "Grazing has been a third rail at BLM. It's a program they don't want to touch. They don't want to address the consequences of overgrazing, or for that matter, understand them."

The group argues that the Interior Department's failure to consider climate impacts could make the agency vulnerable to lawsuits. Groups have [successfully sued](#) the department recently for failing to evaluate climate impacts when granting oil and gas leases. The same could happen with grazing permits, PEER warns. Already, one [such lawsuit](#) is underway.

PEER notes that Haaland established a Departmental Climate Task Force in 2021 and instructed it to develop a strategy to reduce climate pollution and improve climate resiliency on lands managed by the department. The agency's continued reluctance to update its grazing program—the department's largest operation—runs contrary to that strategy, PEER says.

“BLM is on the losing side of the climate equation,” Whitehouse said. “It needs to change the way it manages public lands to consider climate impacts. It’s a very simple request.”

Livestock grazing, mostly by cattle, is the single largest use of publicly owned lands in the West, and nearly all of that grazing is authorized by the BLM and the Interior Department’s Fish and Wildlife Service. The BLM issues 18,000 grazing permits, covering 21,000 allotments across 155 million acres in 13 states—an area the size of California and Oregon combined. Though the department doesn’t release a head count, researchers and advocacy groups say those permits represent about 1.5 million heads of cattle.

“The primary cause of desertification in the arid lands of the West, whether on public or private lands, has been livestock grazing and continues to be so,” said J. Boone Kauffman, a professor in the the department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Sciences at Oregon State University. “It’s irrefutable. Grazing on public lands has resulted in soil carbon loss, and at the same time we’re seeing lower water holding capacity, less root mass to actually exploit the available water, a loss of species—all of these are exacerbated by the impact of climate change. In other words, we’re accelerating the impact of climate change and we’ve shifted these rangelands from net sinks to net sources of greenhouse gas emissions.”

In a [paper published in April](#), Kaufmann and his colleagues found that grazing on public land in the West emits 12.4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent a year —roughly the emissions of 3.3 million passenger vehicles.

Century-Old Program With Rarely Updated Fee

The BLM's commercial grazing program has its roots in laws established a century ago that aimed to rein in the rampant overgrazing of the American West, but also recognized the economic and food production benefits of the livestock business. Congress has tweaked elements of the program over the decades, but one part has remained largely unchanged for nearly 40 years. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed an executive order establishing a minimum grazing fee of \$1.35, paid by ranchers for every "animal unit month." (This unit is based on the estimated forage needed to sustain a cow and her calf, one horse, five sheep or five goats, grazing on public land for a month.)

This statutory minimum fee is still [the current](#) going rate.

"I understand [ranchers] have other expenses, but what they're paying the federal government is less than you'd pay to feed your goldfish," said John Janicek, a Dallas-based attorney [who has written about](#) the impacts of the grazing program on climate change. "The agencies are running these programs at \$100-million-plus deficits, all the while, in my opinion, deteriorating the rangeland."

Critics say this means taxpayers are subsidizing a program that's a bad deal financially and environmentally, and as PEER writes in its letter, is "designed to magnify rather than minimize adverse climates impacts on these rangelands."

Collectively, the thousands of grazing permits granted by the BLM in the West constitute a "major federal action" that, like major infrastructure projects, requires mandatory environmental reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the letter notes.

But PEER and other critics of the program say the Interior Department is failing to conduct these reviews or, when it does do them, is ignoring the climate impacts when renewing a grazing permit. In these assessments, the department often cites its inability to conduct an adequate analysis of the climate impacts.

“It is currently beyond the scope of existing science to identify a specific source of greenhouse gas emissions or sequestration and designate it as the cause of specific climate or resource impacts at a specific location,” one such assessment said.

In March PEER released an updated [database and map](#) of the BLM’s grazing permits, based on data the group obtained from public records requests. The data show that more than half of BLM-managed land failed the agency’s own standards for land health and indicate that grazing is a significant cause of degradation on nearly three-quarters of that land. The data also show that the agency has not yet evaluated more than one quarter of its grazing land, or 41 million acres.

“You have whole high-desert regions in the Rockies where most of the allotments are failing or haven’t been assessed and that’s going to create serious climate impacts,” Whitehouse said, noting that the data the group presented was BLM’s own.

Also in March, another group that’s highly critical of BLM’s grazing management, the Western Watersheds Project, issued an analysis saying that BLM had failed to conduct any on-site environmental analysis of more than half of the grazing permits it authorized.

Industry Says Cattle Improve Rangeland Health

The cattle industry strongly disputes these numbers and points to research showing that cattle are important components of healthy rangeland.

“They make that claim with creative and dishonest use of BLM data,” said Kaitylynn Glover, executive director of the Public Lands Council, a group representing 22,000 ranchers who hold grazing permits.

Glover, who is also the executive director of natural resources at the cattle industry’s largest lobby group, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), said the environmental groups are using datasets that don’t paint an accurate picture of rangeland conditions and are cherry-picking data to support their claims.

One problem, she explained, is that environmental analyses are done based on a single point in an allotment and may not reflect an accurate picture across the broader acreage. Glover said that the BLM’s determination that land fails the agency’s own standards for its health does not make a “causal link” to grazing, but encompasses other causes of land destruction, including development and roads.

“There’s a wealth of research that demonstrates the critical role of grazing in rangeland health,” Glover said. “We’re not saying that grazing is appropriate at every level in every ecosystem at every point in the year. But there is an immense value to grazing that can’t be replaced with any other kind of treatment.”

Glover said that grazing cattle is one of the best ways to limit the increasing wildfire risk in the West because the action of hooves in the soil helps destroy the tinder-dry vegetation that acts as fuel on millions of acres. The U.S. Department of

Agriculture has [also said that](#) strategic grazing can remove fire-prone grasses.

These benefits of cattle grazing in the fire-prone Western are being touted by the Public Lands Council and the NCBA, via a jointly supported [website, grazingpreventswildfires.com](#).

The industry's argument that grazing cattle clears wildfire fuel runs counter to much scientific research that argues the overgrazing makes wildfires worse. That's largely because trampling damages soils, causing erosion and allowing more fire-prone invasive grasses to flourish. And forests that were once kept thin by ground fires fueled by native grasses can grow more dense and flammable when their understories are grazed bare.

The livestock industry groups reject any suggestion that climate impacts should be incorporated into environmental reviews of grazing permits, saying that accounting for greenhouse gas emissions from grazing doesn't adequately capture the environmental health of rangelands.

"It's a fallacy to limit the climate conversation to methane or carbon," Glover said. "It has to encompass all these different things that impact the natural resource health of these landscapes."

The Interior Department did not respond to questions from Inside Climate News.

Critics accuse the Interior Department of capitulating to the cattle industry at the expense of rangeland health for much of its history. Just over a decade ago, for example, PEER found that the BLM was pressured by the industry into removing

grazing impacts from a sweeping ecological assessment of the West.

Some critics point out the inherent conflict in an agency that is tasked with both authorizing grazing and assessing its environmental impacts.

“Yes, they do an environmental analysis, but it’s usually insufficient and designed just to rubber stamp the permits,” said George Wuerthner, an ecologist and co-author of *Welfare Ranching: The Subsidized Destruction of the American West*. “The decisions about grazing on public lands are made by the BLM or the Forest Service’s range conservationists. Their job is to give grazing permits. If there’s no cattle, there’s no job, so there’s a perverse incentive to accommodate grazing.”

With the all-government effort needed to tackle the climate challenge, ecologists, climate scientists and critics of federal grazing programs are becoming increasingly focused on ensuring that climate impacts are scrutinized. Some point out that, contrary to the public’s imagining of cattle in the West, they were never supposed to be there in the first place.

“I approach this, and I always have, as a pure ecologist,” said Chris Bugbee, a wildlife conservationist with the advocacy group, the Center for Biological Diversity. “There’s no place for cows in these western ecosystems. It never was a good idea to open up millions of acres to grazing. And especially now, with drought and climate change advancing, it’s a really, really bad idea.”