Changing Environmental Paradigms Reflected in Public Land Policy
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I. Introduction

Government policy toward cattle and sheep grazing on BLM and National Forest Service land has undergone many transitions. Most recently policy reforms are beginning to reflect the changing national paradigm in environmental values. This paper will present a history of grazing policy in the United States and then examine two recent examples of the National Forest Service adopting environmentally oriented grazing policies. First, the policy shift proposed by Debra Donahue (1999) in The Western Range Revisited: Removing Livestock from Public Lands to Conserve Native Biodiversity is considered in light of the Templeton and Whitney grazing allotment closures. Second, the possible shift to buffalo grazing allotments on some public lands is considered in light of the Big Corral Draw and Indian Creek grazing allotments and Dan O’Brien’s book Buffalo for the Broken Heart: Restoring Life to a Black Hills Ranch (2001).

II. Public Lands Grazing Policy

When public lands were first grazed in the 1870s and 80s, there was little government management. In the late 1800s, the lack of supervision of use, no grazing fees and regulation caused ranges to be overstocked and overgrazed. The 1934 Taylor Grazing Act (TGA) was the first federal legislation regulating grazing on public lands and crucial to decreasing overgrazing and soil decline. The TGA set up a permit and fee system with grazing districts to manage the rangelands.

The 1960s and 1970s policies reflected a shift toward recreation and environmentalism with the Wilderness Act (1964), Federal Land Policy and Management Act (1976), and the Public Rangelands Improvement Act (1978). The declaration that public lands would remain under federal control to preserve national interests halted western state pressure for the land. An emphasis was placed on wildlife habitat, soil, watershed, and plant communities and fee money was designated for range improvement and management.

The 1994 Rangeland Reform attempted to increase grazing fees above 1.86/AUM to help pay for administration costs but failed because of western resistance. Rangeland Reform changed Grazing Advisory Boards to Resource Advisory Councils to equalize invested interests and promote multiple uses (Donahue, 2001).

III. Templeton and Whitney Allotment Closures

The Templeton and Whitney grazing allotments are located in Tulare County, CA in the Golden Trout Wilderness Area. This area of the Sierra Nevada Mountains has been grazed since the late 1800s. The Templeton and Whitney allotments were subject to environmental assessment in 1999 to address grazing related impacts to soil productivity, stream channels, riparian habitats, meadows, and springs, Golden Trout, and other sensitive indicator wildlife and plant species.

In summary, implementation of [allotment closure] will best meet direction to promote healthy watersheds within a sustainable ecosystem, allow California Golden Trout habitat to recover to the desired condition most rapidly, and best respond to the needs of the recreational users of the area. (District Ranger for Inyo National Forest, 2001)

In light of Donahue’s proposal to eliminate grazing on many public lands to preserve biodiversity, there are a few set backs evident in these two allotments closures. First, the forest service did not eliminate the two grazing allotments, instead postponing their use to a further time. Second, the Deputy Regional Forester overturned the section of the district ranger’s decision calling for recovery of the watershed, habitat and wildlife before grazing would begin again.

IV. Bison on Big Corral Draw and Indian Creek Allotments

Author and rancher Dan O’Brien became interested in buffalo ranching because of a desire to create a healthier, sustainable ranch. O’Brien’s goal was to provide a habitat that the grazers and wild animals could exist in together. He took steps while running cattle to rotate them often to preserve grasses and cover. However this was difficult because cattle move little while grazing, often eating grasses to the ground, and are dependent on water, degrading stream quality. By switching to buffalo on the Broken Heart Ranch, O’Brien improved the habitat. Buffalo are constantly on the move, rotating themselves, evolved with the prairie plants, and can go for long periods without drinking from a stream (O’Brien, 2001).

Recently, Dan O’Brien got a forest service lease for two allotments, the Big Corral Draw and Indian Creek. Because of buffalo’s ability to survive prairie winters without humans, the buffalo herd will graze on the Forest Service land during the winter and initially cattle will graze on the allotments during the summer. Hopefully, the buffalo will graze beyond land utilized by the cattle. The transition to buffalo allotments will require heavy-duty fencing around the perimeter of the allotments raising questions of cost, ability of wildlife to move through the area, and recreational use. These forest service allotments represent an innovative attempt to improve the habitat on public lands while still using them in a productive manner. It was be interesting to see how public land issues develop and change around this new grazing possibility.

V. Conclusions

These two cases of National Forest Service policy indicate that range managers are attempting to solve tough problems related to the continued degradation of public lands. These cases indicate continued opposition to new policies and that decisions reflecting environmental goals are being made on a very small scale.

VI. References


