

POLICY BRIEF



Restoring Western Ranching Through Federal Land Grazing Reform

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Summary

Western ranchers depend on responsible grazing on federal lands to sustain livestock production west of the 100th meridian, where arid conditions and the vast federal land estate make access to federal rangeland essential for survival. While producers in the West face the same market, labor, and weather pressures as ranchers across the country, they must also navigate an increasingly burdensome web of federal regulations imposed by agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Over the past several decades, a coordinated environmental agenda has steadily chipped away at federal grazing through regulatory barriers, litigation, and policy shifts that threaten not only ranching families but America's food security and rural communities. Restoring western ranching requires bold reform of federal land management laws and regulations and a renewed commitment to policies that support producers rather than undermine them. This effort should build upon the foundation laid by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry, the USDA Farmer and Rancher Freedom Framework, and the "Advancing Grazing on Forest Service and BLM Lands" memorandum, to protect domestic beef and wool production, strengthen national food security, and ensure that the independent American ranchers, not the government, shape the future of the West.

Problem

Lack of Private Land

Private land suitable for agriculture is extremely limited across much of the American West. The federal government manages roughly 640 million acres, about 28% of the total landmass of the United States, with the vast majority of that land concentrated in Alaska and the 11 contiguous western states. In states such as Nevada and Utah, the federal estate accounts for approximately 81% and 67% of total land, respectively, leaving relatively little land available for private agricultural use. While several federal agencies manage this land,

the two most relevant to livestock grazing are the BLM within the Department of the Interior and the USFS within the Department of Agriculture. At the same time, the West continues to experience rapid urbanization, further shrinking available agricultural land. For example, Utah has lost roughly 20% of its private farmland to development over the past 60 years. When combined with significant state-owned land holdings (such as Utah's 7.3% state land ownership), the amount of land available for private agriculture becomes even more limited. As a result, in Utah, only 19.8% of the state's landmass is available for private agricultural use, compared to approximately 62% in Missouri or 90% in Nebraska. In practical terms, this means that without access to federal lands, agriculture production, particularly livestock production, would be nearly impossible across much of the western United States.

Loss of Available Allotments

Livestock grazing on both BLM and USFS lands is administered through a system of designated grazing allotments, each with defined boundaries and tied to associated private base property. Grazing capacity is measured using Animal Unit Months (AUMs), the standard metric for forage availability and carrying capacity, where one AUM represents approximately 750 pounds of forage, or the amount needed to sustain one cow and calf for one month. The BLM uses the term AUM, while the USFS uses the equivalent term Head Month. Under BLM regulations, a rancher's grazing preference includes the total number of AUMs assigned to an allotment and its base property, including those that are active (available for use) and suspended (temporarily removed from use, theoretically until forage conditions improve). In practice, however, suspended AUMs rarely return to active status. According to the USDA Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry, there are currently about 29,000 vacant federal grazing allotments nationwide, covering roughly 24 million acres, or about 10% of federally administered rangeland. These allotments become vacant for various voluntary and involuntary reasons, but reissuing them represents a major opportunity to rebuild America's cow and sheep herd and revitalize western ranching, particularly for beginning ranchers seeking entry into the industry. In addition to vacant allotments, many allotments have been administratively "closed" as part of efforts to remove grazing from federal lands. However, federal law does not permit the permanent retirement of grazing allotments unless it can be shown that the land is no longer "chiefly valuable for grazing." Further, USFS allotments that have been administratively closed are not precluded from being reopened. Thus, these closed allotments should be reopened and reissued alongside vacant allotments to restore productive use of federal rangelands and strengthen domestic livestock production.

Loss of Animal Unit Months (AUMs)

The decline of livestock grazing on federal lands has occurred largely through the steady reduction and suspension of permitted AUMs rather than the outright closure of grazing allotments. In Utah alone, authorized BLM AUMs fell from about 2.75 million in 1940 to fewer than 675,000 by 2009, and across the West, there has been a net loss of roughly 9.5 million BLM AUMs since 1954, dropping from about 18.2 million to 8.7 million. Additional reductions have occurred through resource management planning, where agencies reduce grazing capacity across entire districts or forests. This steady loss functions like a one-way ratchet that continually restricts grazing. The impact extends beyond individual ranchers: each AUM generates significant economic value, about \$100 annually in local economic activity, with a market value between \$200 and \$500, while ranchers also pay the federal government an annual grazing fee currently set at \$1.35 per AUM, a portion of which comes back to the local region for range improvements. When agencies reduce or eliminate AUMs, ranchers lose productive capacity and asset value, lenders lose loan collateral, and rural communities lose critical economic activity. Compounding these challenges is what the USDA Farmer and Rancher Freedom Framework describes as “agricultural lawfare,” where administrative and legal systems are used to pressure producers through heavy regulation and enforcement. While many agency staff act in good faith, the growing influence of anti-grazing advocacy has increasingly shifted federal policy toward restricting livestock production rather than supporting the ranching communities that help sustain working landscapes and America’s food supply.

Solution

Reopen and Reissue Vacant and Closed Grazing Allotments

Thousands of acres of federal rangeland currently remain unavailable to livestock producers because grazing allotments have been left vacant or administratively closed. To strengthen western ranching and rebuild America’s cowherd, these allotments should be reopened and reissued to producers, particularly young and beginning ranchers seeking entry into the industry. While the USDA Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry calls for the reissuance of vacant allotments, reform efforts should also address allotments that were administratively “closed” in attempts to remove grazing from federal lands. Because federal law does not permit the permanent retirement of BLM grazing allotments unless it can be shown that the land is no longer “chiefly valuable for grazing,” and where USFS allotments that have been administratively closed are not precluded from being reopened, these closed allotments should be reopened and returned to productive use alongside vacant allotments. Restoring access to these federal grazing lands would expand

opportunities for producers, strengthen rural economies, and help ensure the long-term sustainability of American livestock production.

Establish a National “No Net Loss of AUMs” Policy

To stabilize the livestock industry that depends on federal rangelands, federal land management agencies should adopt in regulations a nationwide “No Net Loss of AUMs” policy, modeled after Utah’s policy in its State Resource Management Plan. This approach would require that active AUMs and Head Months (HMs) remain at or above current levels, unless a scientifically justified and temporary reduction is necessary for rangeland health. In such cases, agencies would conduct targeted rangeland evaluations and restore those AUMs to active status as soon as vegetation and range conditions recover. This policy aligns with the Taylor Grazing Act’s core purpose of stabilizing the livestock industry dependent on public lands, recognizing that the decades-long reduction of permitted AUMs has had the opposite effect, destabilizing western ranching and rural economies. A national directive should also require agencies to review current and past resource management plans and permit decisions where AUMs were reduced through administrative action and identify opportunities to restore suspended or historically permitted AUMs where appropriate, helping rebuild grazing capacity and support long-term agricultural production on federal lands.

Protect Ranchers from Regulatory Grazing Losses

To address the growing problem of regulatory and legal pressure on federal land ranchers, policy reforms should ensure that producers are protected when grazing permits, AUMs, or allotments are permanently reduced or eliminated through administrative actions. Rather than allowing agencies to quietly reduce grazing capacity through regulation or litigation, federal policy should impose accountability when grazing is permanently and preference rights are displaced. Existing precedent can be found in the 2015 amendments to the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, which recognize circumstances where compensation or mitigation may be appropriate when grazing is removed. Building on these authorities would help protect ranchers’ investments and the economic value tied to grazing permits while discouraging the use of regulatory pressure to force producers off the land. Importantly, this approach is not about expanding federal spending, but about ensuring fair treatment and stability for producers whose livelihoods depend on access to federal rangelands.

Why Now?

The effort to remove livestock grazing from the western landscape is not new. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, anti-grazing activists rallied around the slogan “Cattle Free by ‘93!” While the slogan may have faded, the goal has not: eliminating livestock grazing from federal lands. What has changed is the movement's intensity and influence. Over the past several decades, accelerated during the Obama and Biden administrations, federal agencies and well-funded activist organizations have increasingly pushed policies that restrict grazing and weaken the western livestock industry. The result is clear: the western grazing herd is now smaller than at any point in modern history, and after decades of regulatory pressure, litigation, and bureaucratic barriers, many multi-generation ranching families are being forced to sell, shut down, or walk away from the land entirely. At the same time, Western states face rapid urban expansion while rural communities that once depended on agriculture are hollowed out or transformed into tourist economies. With limited private land and shrinking access to surrounding federal rangelands, the survival of working ranches is increasingly at risk. Without meaningful federal reform, America risks losing not only a critical piece of its food security and agricultural capacity, but also the heritage, culture, and independent spirit that built the American West.

Conclusion

It is often claimed by critics that America has no unique culture. We strongly disagree. The image of the American cowboy, independent, resilient, and tied to the land, is one of the most recognizable and uniquely American symbols in the world. Yet as federal land grazing continues to decline, this economic, cultural, and historic way of life is steadily being pushed toward extinction in the very region where it was born. The ideas outlined here are meant to help revitalize western ranching on both Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service lands, restoring opportunity for producers and stability for rural communities. These proposals are not intended to be the final word on the challenges facing federal land ranchers, nor do they represent a comprehensive list of every issue confronting the industry. Instead, they are meant to start an important conversation about restoring responsible grazing, strengthening rural communities, and ensuring the future of ranching in the American West. As the saying goes, Rome was not built in a day; it was built brick by brick. By continuing this conversation and building upon the foundation laid by the USDA Beef Plan, the Farmer and Rancher Freedom Framework, and the “Advancing Grazing on Forest Service and BLM Lands” MOU, we can begin the work of protecting this uniquely American way of life for generations to come.