

NATIONAL PUBLIC LANDS GRAZING CAMPAIGN

Why Conservationists should Support Buying Out Federal Grazing Permits

Initially, every conservationist and taxpayer may have some reservations about paying grazing permittees and lessees to retire federal grazing permits and leases (including the staff and steering committee for the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign!) Why should taxpayers pay for something that they already own? While NPLGC and our partner groups continue to pursue traditional strategies of litigation, species listings, administrative reform, and education to remove livestock from public lands, we also support voluntary grazing permit buyout as a new tool to resolve grazing conflicts. Upon thorough review of the concept and the few available case studies, the Campaign and our supporters realized that permit buyout is ecologically imperative, economically efficient, fiscally prudent, socially responsible, and a politically pragmatic way to quickly and permanently remove domestic livestock from public lands. Conservationists wary of permit buyout usually have the following objections. We list them and offer our responses.

1. Public lands grazing is a privilege, not a right. The federal government can withdraw it anytime--why pay for grazing permits and leases?

While federal land management agencies can reduce or eliminate grazing — and, in fact, are under a legal obligation to do so in case of ecosystem damage — they very rarely do. Where agencies have withdrawn grazing privileges, it is usually due to expensive litigation by conservation groups, a permittee/lessee who refuses to pay his grazing fee (usually the permit/lease is simply reissued to another rancher), or where the agency manager knows that the permittee's/lessee's bottom line will not be harmed by the action (often because a third party has agreed to compensate a permittee/lessee to retire their permit/lease). In some cases, land managers have proposed grazing reductions for ecological reasons, but have had their plans nixed by agency directors under Congressional pressure.

2. Taxpayers should not have to pay permittees not prevent damage to public lands.

Unfortunately, taxpayers are already paying permittees/lessees, through subsidized grazing fees and other assistance programs, to degrade their public lands. The federal public lands grazing program costs \$500 million annually. Permit buyout is an inexpensive and efficient way to rid these landscapes of abusive domestic livestock grazing. Moreover, it's just money. Is it more important to preserve the federal public lands or the federal treasury? Choosing is not necessary in this case, because permit retirement does both most effectively.

3. It is morally repugnant to reward resource abuse on public lands by paying to retire permits/leases.

Perpetual federal grazing subsidies are rewarding resource abuse. Permit buyout is a one-time payoff to permanently end destructive livestock grazing. The principled stance of refusing to pay grazing permittees and lessees to stop damaging lands, waters and wildlife must be balanced against the practical need to end the abuse of our environment. And, while a long and glorious, principled fight to end public lands livestock grazing through litigation and attrition may succeed in the end, many species, ecosystems and watersheds already on the brink could not tolerate further livestock grazing over the time required to win on principle alone.