

(February 2, 2003)



Selling the purple sage

Our stand: Grazing rights buyout is fair proposal for ranchers

To many, the very suggestion that cattle be barred permanently from running the Arizona range is heresy. Cattle ranching is to Arizona what auto manufacturing is to Detroit or wine to Napa Valley. The products define who we are and the perspectives we value.

But is it heresy if the cattle ranchers themselves support the idea?

Is it heresy if ranchers, rocked by four years of drought, by endless and growing environmental pressures and by competition with other uses for the public land they lease, seek an honorable end to their tradition?

A group of ranchers is seeking congressional approval of a voluntary plan to buy out the grazing leases of ranchers. They are supported, not surprisingly, by a raft of environmental and conservation groups.

As proposed, Arizona ranchers would be offered a brief window of opportunity, perhaps a year, to accept a one-time buyout of their federal permits. By one estimate, perhaps a quarter of Arizona's 925 ranchers would accept the offer, which would pay them about \$93 million from the federal Treasury.

In theory, of course, Congress simply could pass a law ending grazing rights on federal land, a resolution to the debate that would cost taxpayers nothing. Environmentalists have sought just such a resolution for years.

But for ranchers who have plied their trade for generations, that would constitute an extraordinary punishment. Although the law does not recognize any market value of a grazing permit, banks and other lending institutions long have figured those permits into their decisions to finance ranching operations.

The ranchers backing this proposal want to see it pass because many of them are going broke. It would be a terrible cruelty to punish them more.

Current grazing-rights retirement practices simply try to fool existing law. Conservation groups now are allowed to acquire leases themselves, a convoluted method of grazing-land retirement that often requires them to run a minimum number of livestock. It's a haphazard resolution to a complex land-use issue, and it doesn't guarantee that the permits will not eventually end up back in the hands of a full-time rancher.

No, if we are to conclude that cattle ranching in parts of Arizona has run its course, fairness dictates the ranchers who have invested generations to the industry be compensated. This proposal would do that fairly.

It offers ranchers \$175 for each "animal unit month" they control, averaged over the past 10 years. A typical rancher who had run 100 head of cattle yearlong would receive an estimated \$210,000 to permanently retire his federal grazing rights. It's a fair deal. Not a king's ransom, but enough to help redirect the rancher to some other line of work.

As a group, ranchers vociferously oppose the proposal. They see in it the sunset of a noble enterprise. But if a quarter of their own already are in thrall to the plan, that strongly suggests the plan has merit.

Led by longtime Arizona rancher John Whitney IV, the coalition of ranchers and Greens is planning a trip to Washington, D.C., to present the idea to the House Natural Resources Committee.

It's a good, reasonable and fair proposal that they bring.