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Land for peace: An end of 'grazing war'?

By Brent Israelsen
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WEST FORK MADISON RIVER, Mont. -- In the Standard Creek drainage of this world-class fishery, two watering troughs are fed by a pipe connected to a spring a few yards away.

The spring is surrounded by a fenced "exclosure" that keeps cows away.

Inside the fence, grasses and other plants grow lush and tall. On the outside, the grass is stubble, the ground mostly barren. "This is state-of-the-art Forest Service grazing management," George Wuerthner, editor of the book *Welfare Ranching*, says mockingly.

Wuerthner is an ecologist for the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign, a new Oregon-based group seeking to remove cattle and sheep from 257 million acres of rangelands administered by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

But unlike previous environmental efforts to crack down on grazing, this one is based on the carrot rather than the stick, says Andy Kerr, the campaign's director.

Under the proposal, the federal government would offer ranchers top dollar to give up their grazing privileges.

Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., is expected soon to file a bill called the "Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act of 2003." The legislation calls for the federal government to offer ranchers \$175 per "animal-unit month" (AUM), a grazing permit measurement that equals the amount of forage needed for one cow and her calf for one month.

Once bought out by the government, the AUMs would be permanently retired, meaning cattle and sheep could never roam that grazing allotment again.

So far, the campaign has been endorsed by the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Western Watersheds Project and Forest Guardians.

Instead of producing a tiny portion of the nation's meat and wool, the public lands would be used for augmenting and recovering wildlife species, improving watersheds and providing additional recreational opportunities for the West's growing population, the proponents say.

The buyout idea is largely the brainchild of Kerr, who gained national prominence last decade during the spotted owl vs. timber industry battles in the Pacific Northwest.

Part provocateur and part policy wonk, 49-year-old Kerr says he realized a few years ago that environmental groups would eventually win their war against grazing. But it would be a war of attrition, in which ranchers would continue to be beaten down by restrictions, lawsuits and depressed beef prices until they were forced into bankruptcy or another line of work.



Kash Winn, a rancher from Ferron who runs cattle on BLM land in the San Rafael Swell, says finding a profit in ranching is becoming nearly impossible. Winn says a proposal that would allow him to sell his grazing permits may be worth considering. (Trent Nelson/The Salt Lake Tribune)

There had to be a faster, more humane way to get ranchers and livestock off the public lands, Kerr said. The idea of a nationwide buyout was the most obvious alternative. But to be successful, Kerr reasoned, it had to offer an attractive rate, one that would allow ranchers to "recapitalize" their livelihood.

The proposed \$175 per AUM figure amounts to a significant premium over current market rates, which range from \$40 to \$130 in Utah, according to Craig Warren, the Logan-based appraiser for Western Agcredit, an agricultural lender.

Paying \$175 per AUM would be akin to the "golden parachute" severance packages in the corporate world.

"We're offering [ranchers] a 'golden saddle,' " quips Kerr.

Across the West, 25,000 ranchers hold about 18 million AUMs. If they all took advantage of the buyout, it would cost the U.S. Treasury about \$3.2 billion. In Utah, ranchers hold about 1.9 million AUMs, worth about \$333 million under the buyout plan.

Kerr argues the buyout would eventually pay for itself.

Currently, the federal grazing program loses \$124 million a year.

If other costs are factored in -- soil loss, predator control, water degradation, endangered species, the dewatering of streams and the spread of weeds -- livestock production on public lands costs taxpayers at least \$500 million a year, according to a study commissioned by the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity and conducted by economists from the University of Kentucky and the BLM.

While ranchers such as Arizona's Herb Bundy almost universally dismiss such statistics as "hogwash," many others have expressed an interest in Kerr's plan, which the campaign announced in April 2002 in a letter to all public-lands grazing permit holders. The campaign plans to send a follow-up letter after Shays' bill is introduced.

In Arizona, where persistent drought has sent many livestock operations over the financial brink, most ranchers appear to support the federal buyout proposal, says Mark Salvo, who runs the campaign's office in Phoenix.

In an informal survey of grazing permit holders in Arizona -- conducted by the Whitney family's Circle Bar Ranch in Fountain Hills, Ariz. -- 152 of 228 respondents said they favored the buyout plan. The state's largest newspaper, The Arizona Republic, has thrown its editorial support behind the proposal. Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., is drafting legislation similar to Shays' that would apply only to ranchers on public lands in Arizona.

Bundy, who runs cattle on the Arizona Strip south of the Utah border, says he opposes any buyout proposal, mainly because of its potential detriment to rural communities.

"But I have a brother [Ethan Bundy] who has a permit inside the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument and he doesn't think it's such a bad idea."

Some Utah ranchers also are champing at the bit.

"I've talked to several guys on this, and I'd say about 60 percent are in favor of it," says Ferron rancher Kash Winn, who runs cattle on BLM land in the San Rafael Swell and on Forest Service land on the Wasatch Plateau.

Ranching associations, however, are a different story. The Arizona Cattle Growers Association is against the proposal. Representatives of the Utah Farm Bureau and the Utah Cattlemen's Association say their groups probably would oppose the idea too, although no formal vote has been taken.

Both Utah groups have taken positions in the past generally opposing retirement of grazing permits. Ranching advocates' principal argument is that retiring public-land grazing permits will harm rural economies.

"Most of our small ranching communities are dependent on ranching," says Brent Tanner, Utah Cattlemen's executive vice president.

Kerr acknowledges some communities would be hurt, but he argues they would fare better under a buyout now than if the ranchers simply went out of business a decade or two from now.

Winn seems to agree more with Kerr.

"It would hurt some rural communities, no doubt, because ranchers would leave for other places. But I

don't think it will have any major effects [on rural Utah]. I don't think personally it will have as much impact as people think."

If Winn were to sell the 2,100 AUMs he holds, he would receive \$367,500 under the Voluntary Grazing Permit Buyout Act.

"That would get me out of debt," says Winn. "I've already purchased some private property, and that's the direction I'm heading."

Winn calls the proposed grazing buyout plan a win-win situation because many public-land ranchers need a way out from under debt and the increasingly costly burden of environmental restrictions, which are not likely to ease.

"It would be the cheapest end to a lot of problems, in a lot of cases. But it's got to be totally voluntary," Winn says.

One potential benefit to society may be an increase in wildlife, both for the hunting and nonhunting public to enjoy. Wyoming state biologists have estimated that one cow eats enough forage to support 6.9 bighorn sheep, 10.8 antelope, 7.8 deer or 2.1 elk.

The Gallatin Wildlife Association, a sportsmen's group in southwestern Montana, supports the buyout, says Glenn Hockett, the group's president. Hockett expects his parent organization, the Montana Wildlife Federation, will follow suit.

Barry Reiswing, manager of the National Elk Refuge adjacent to Grand Teton National Park, also favors the proposal, saying it will solve many problems in wildlife sensitive areas.

Although this is the first time anyone has proposed the federal government be the financier, buyouts are not a new concept.

In recent years, environmental groups have become increasingly active in raising money to purchase grazing permits, which then have been "retired" by the BLM or Forest Service.

The largest of those occurred in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah, where the Grand Canyon Trust spent \$600,000 to end or drastically reduce grazing on 350,000 acres.

And last month, a consortium of conservation groups spent \$250,000 to buy out an 87,000-acre Forest Service grazing allotment bordering Grand Teton, where livestock conflicts with bears, wolves and other wildlife are legion.

There is one major risk, however, to those types of buyouts: Current federal statutes do not guarantee that retirements will be permanent.

The Grand Canyon Trust recently encountered resistance from the Bush administration over grazing retirements. The trust, which had initially balked at supporting Kerr's proposal, is reconsidering its position, says Bill Hedden, the group's Moab representative who negotiated the Grand Staircase-Escalante deal.

"We now believe that something along the lines of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign may be the answer."