



## COWS OR CONDOS

### *A False Choice Between Public Lands Ranching and Sprawl*

George Wuerthner

Fear of sprawl and urbanization is a major obstacle to effecting change in public lands ranching policy, but the perceived connection between loss of grazing privileges on public land and loss of private ranchland to development has little basis in fact. The impact of livestock production is also minimized by many people who do not appreciate the geographical scale at which it occurs in the West.

There are effective ways to protect open space and other values on private lands, but maintaining livestock on public lands is not one of them.

I have been giving talks and slideshows about the negative effects of western livestock production for many years. I go through a litany of ecological, economic, and human health costs until members of the audience are awash in facts and statistics as well as dozens of images of cow-trashed landscapes. Often my audiences are very sympathetic to environmental causes and are troubled by what they hear. But inevitably, when I suggest that at least on the public lands, livestock grazing be eliminated, someone will raise an objection. It always goes something like this: “Well, I agree livestock do damage. But if you eliminate grazing on public lands, the ranchers will be forced to subdivide on the private lands. Then we’ll get more houses, condos, and people. Isn’t that far worse than what the cows do?”

The answer, in a word, is no.

First, condos and sprawl, bad as they are, are not worse than ranching. Primarily, this is because “sprawl” and all other urban/suburban and second-home development take up a relatively tiny area of the West, whereas livestock grazing and crop production to support livestock take up immense acreages. Although I do not dispute the damage done to natural systems by sprawl, livestock production also costs a great deal in terms of ecological health and taxpayer dollars.

Second, the notion that protecting ranchers will preserve open space is wrongly premised on the belief that without access to public lands forage, permittees will go out of business and sell their ranches for development. I believe there is compelling evidence to suggest that a very different dynamic from rancher hardship is driving development in the West.

Lawn chairs by pool, Arizona. Many people think subdivision is a greater threat to wildlife habitat than are cows—which on a per acre basis might be so. But the geographic scale of livestock production in the West absolutely dwarfs urbanization and sprawl, so it cannot be simply dismissed as the “lesser of two evils.”

Finally, “cows versus condos” is not only a falsehood, it is an impediment to clear thinking and effective action regarding the problems of habitat conservation and preservation of open space on both public and private lands. So long as land protection advocates focus on a false choice between cows and condos, they ignore proven ways to protect ecological values on private property while they also allow livestock to degrade natural systems. Conservationists must move beyond “cows versus condos” if they are serious about long-term protection of western lands.

#### **The Geography of Sprawl and Agriculture**

The ecological costs of growing livestock are enumerated elsewhere in this book. Here, I focus on the scale of that activity for the simple reason that most people seem to have very little sense of comparison between the physical footprint of cities and subdivisions in the West and that of livestock production.

To help you think about the geography of the West, let’s pretend you are going on an airplane flight. Your journey begins in Denver, say, or Phoenix or Salt Lake City. As your plane waits in the queue for takeoff, you are surrounded by asphalt. Not far off are city streets, buildings, and bustle. When you land, in Sacramento perhaps, or Portland or Los Angeles, it’s the same thing. But if you look out the window while you are flying, that is not what you see hour after hour. If you are fortunate to have a clear day, you see this: mountains, valleys, plains, deserts. Occasional towns, if you happen to be peering out at the moment the jet rushes over them. Now and then, especially if your route is along the Pacific coast, you see the telltale gridwork of urban centers. But the dominant impression—if you judge it fairly, if you bother continually to watch that window between takeoff and landing—is open land, land without human residents, or at most very few. Indeed, once outside of the major urban centers and resort communities, open space is the dominant feature of the West.

Let’s pretend again that you are flying. This time, you are wearing very special eyeglasses. They are designed to recognize and alter the hue of any land that is dedicated to livestock production, much like Landsat photos that shade areas differently according to dominant plant communities. I’ll call these glasses

“livestock lenses.” Let’s say the land looks red wherever it is utilized in some fashion for the raising of livestock. In the West, that’s primarily cattle, a few sheep. So, when you fly over rangelands, public or private, you see red. Over the West, there’s a whole lot of land used as livestock range, so you see lots of red—flying over mountains, over forests, over deserts. But there’s also cropland that is dedicated to raising feed for cattle—hay and alfalfa, primarily. And thus you see valley after valley, extensive flatlands, all red, or nearly so.

And then, these very special livestock lenses have a mechanism for detecting the degree to which water is also used for livestock. Rivers that are partially diverted for irrigation, to grow cattle feed, are pink. From so high up in a jet, you probably cannot see all the tiny rivulets and streams threading, crimson, vermilion, across the landscape. But they are there—some impounded or diverted for irrigation, many more serving as watering troughs for grazing animals, and also as conduits for manure and soils eroded by pounding hooves.

By the time your plane descends and you pull off the livestock lenses, you have seen a landscape dominated by one color—and one use. For that is what the West—especially the arid West—is today: a geography dominated by livestock use.

Indeed, livestock production dominates the entire country, not just the West. The land area utilized for livestock production—including rangelands, pasture, and the production of forage crops (corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and so forth)—occupies 65 to 75 percent of the total U.S. acreage, excluding Alaska, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics.<sup>1</sup> Four crops account for approximately 80 percent of all acreage planted per year in this country: hay, corn, soybeans, and wheat. All but wheat are grown primarily to feed livestock.<sup>2</sup>

In comparison (and again, not counting Alaska), the amount of land taken up by sprawl and development is slightly more than 4 percent.<sup>3</sup> In the West, urban and suburban landscapes, including fairly low density subdivisions, occupy an even smaller fraction of land than in the country as a whole. Sprawl, though a serious and usually permanent blight where it occurs, is not the major ecological threat to the natural systems of the West for the very reason that it is—despite the connotation of the term—confined to a limited area. (I readily acknowledge that cities are drawing resources from a huge area, and their *ecological* footprint is great—but that is a different debate than the matter of sprawl eating up the western landscape. Per capita resource use is an issue of lifestyle for *all* Americans, urban and rural.)

The latest Geographical Analysis Program reported that less than 4.5 percent of California—the most heavily populated western state—is urbanized, and that figure includes all highways, malls, subdivisions, and industrial parks.<sup>4</sup> Most of the human population is concentrated in a few large metropolitan centers, such as San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento. Agriculture is far more pervasive, affecting about 70 percent of the state, by a conservative estimate. This includes croplands, as well as pasture and rangeland. The majority of this land is dedicated to livestock production. Very little grows crops directly consumed by people. For example, about 1.5 percent of California’s land area is used to grow vegetables.<sup>5</sup> And from this relatively small amount of land comes about half of all the vegetables grown in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In Montana, forty-five of fifty-six counties, or 87 percent of the state’s land area, have a population density below six persons per square mile, which meets the current census definition of “frontier.” Not only this, but twenty-four counties, or 43 percent of the state’s land area, meet the 1890 census definition of “frontier,” or less than two people per square mile.<sup>7</sup> Yet despite the fact that most of the state is nearly uninhabited by people, numerous native species in Montana are imperiled or significantly reduced in numbers, primarily because of agriculture—which in Montana usually means livestock production. These species include bison, wolf, grizzly bear, swift fox, black-footed ferret, Columbia sharptail grouse, and sage grouse. What is particularly disturbing about this list is that all these species were once widespread and abundant in Montana. None of the aforementioned animals have specialized habitat requirements. It is clear that “open space” is not the same as good-quality wildlife habitat.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, it is the pervasiveness of livestock impacts, and the huge geographical scale at which livestock production occurs, that makes them a far greater threat to the native plant and animal species of the West than sprawl. This is not to minimize the serious consequences of sprawl and development where they are occurring. Still, it should be recognized that this development is relatively concentrated and occupies a small proportion of the western landscape.

### Demand Drives Development

Now, even if one is inclined to disagree with my assertion that livestock production is a disaster for the West’s native species and ecosystems, that doesn’t mean ranching can preserve open space. Even if you think livestock are ecologically benign, supporting ranchers does not safeguard ecosystem values. That’s because ranching does not and cannot prevent subdivisions. The problem is complex, but one has only to realize that most western cities sit on land that was once ranched, farmed, or grazed to see that the mere presence of agricultural land did not stop urbanization in the past. And it is not stopping it now.

The growth of subdivisions and sprawl is driven by demand, not the mere availability of land. In fact, sheer population growth accounts to a significant degree for the expanding boundaries of most western cities. A study reviewing census data since 1970 shows that per capita land consumption, or the average area of land physically occupied by people, is actually declining in many western cities.<sup>9</sup> And at the regional level, sprawl in California, the Southwest, and the mountain West is overwhelmingly due to population growth; very little is due to increases in per capita land consumption.<sup>10</sup> Net in-migration, the major reason for population growth in the West as a whole, is fueled by a number of factors, including availability of employment and amenities. Most sprawl is occurring near existing large cities, where jobs, good schools, transportation centers, and diverse cultural offerings are located.<sup>11</sup>

Recreation-related development (“condos”) is another type of sprawl occurring in the more rural areas of the West. It is a phenomenon of highly scenic areas with superlative opportunities for activities such as skiing, fishing, boating, and other outdoor pursuits.<sup>12</sup> Again, however, the growth of select recreation/resort/retirement sites in the West probably cannot be separated from population pressures overall and accompanying declines in urban quality of life. Whether one looks at spreading cities or burgeoning “hot spots,” the fact is

that without addressing the demand for land created by increasing numbers of people in general, any effort to prevent sprawl is ultimately doomed to failure.

It is easy to see why the simple availability of land is not the driving force behind sprawl when you look at places that are *not* experiencing population growth. You do not find much threat of subdivision in the middle of North Dakota or eastern Montana—places where tens of millions of acres are for sale. Why not? Because marginal agricultural economics plus mere availability of private land does not add up to sprawl. A landowner may greatly desire a sale to developers, but he or she will not get it unless there is already demand for land. Very few people want to live in North Dakota except the people already there. No demand, no sprawl.

Low demand has several effects. First, it keeps land prices low. Low land price means that another rancher or farmer can afford to purchase the land of a neighbor and pay off the mortgage running cows on it. When land prices rise—as they have done in some of the more scenic parts of the West—it becomes next to impossible to get into ranching, or to expand one’s existing operations. The rising cost of getting into ranching is aggravated by declining profitability of livestock production.<sup>13</sup> Only wealthy “hobby” ranchers can afford to purchase ranches.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, many ranchers think of their ranches as retirement nest eggs and have every intention of eventually selling their properties for development. One study in Utah found that 43 percent of public lands ranchers approaching retirement age stated a desire to sell their land to developers.<sup>15</sup>

High land prices (that is, high demand for real estate) in an area can hurt the ability of ranchers to pass their land on to the next generation, even when that is their wish.<sup>16</sup> In addition, many children of ranching families are simply not interested in taking over the business.<sup>17</sup> There are many factors driving this trend, including better economic opportunities outside agriculture. The high price of land, where this is the case, not only makes selling to developers more attractive to present owners, it becomes one more reason children can’t or won’t continue to run the ranch. If there are several children in a family, deciding who gets to keep a ranch potentially worth millions of dollars becomes a thorny issue. For many, the easiest solution is to sell it and split the profits among all heirs.

In the past, low land prices permitted western producers to compete with more productive agricultural regions through an economy of scale. Western lands generally support fewer animals per acre than more equable climes, but ranchers could easily buy and own thousands of acres or acquire vast tracts of public lands, compensating somewhat for low productivity by maintaining large holdings. Rising land values have undercut the viability of this option. Ranchers can no longer expand their land holdings and pay off the mortgage with a low-value product, such as beef.<sup>18</sup> Yet the minimum herd size, hence land base, needed to operate an economically sustainable operation continues to rise, further undercutting the long-term stability of the western livestock industry.

An increasing problem for the livestock industry is simply the higher cost of doing business. For generations, ranchers have externalized many of their operational expenses—primarily to the environment and also to taxpayers, who subsidize ranching in a myriad of ways. Whether one is talking about below-market-value grazing fees on public lands, taxpayer-subsidized

irrigation projects, or the numerous environmental costs that the land and society must bear, ranchers have lowered production expenditures because the rest of us have carried the true debt for them. Now, as the American citizenry wakes up to the losses—ecological and economic—ranchers are being asked more and more to pay the full costs. Given the financially marginal nature of most western livestock operations, this can only hasten the demise of ranching in the West.

All of these difficulties are exacerbated by globalization of the market. Increasingly, the price ranchers get for their cows is determined by the world market, not regional or even national economic forces. Yet, production costs are local. Cheaper beef can be grown elsewhere—either because in other, moister, milder regions, the costs are inherently less, or because in other parts of the world, labor and land are less expensive. There is very little the rancher can do to alter these distant situations.

### The False Dichotomy of Condos or Cows

The final problem is the false dichotomy of condos or cows. In truth, over much of the West the current economic choice is cows, or . . . well, there aren’t a lot of other options. Some ranchers sell out to other ranchers—increasingly, the new owners are corporations, or distant millionaires.<sup>19</sup> Other ranchers turn to game farming or other pursuits that are dubious from both ecological and public interest perspectives. In some places, the unfolding reality is cows *and* condos: livestock grazing continues on rangelands, while the limited wildlife habitat that did exist on private lands shrinks still more.

Critics of eliminating livestock on public lands erroneously assume that the only way of forestalling private land subdivision is by keeping ranchers going, by whatever means possible. Yet, this is wrong-headed for two reasons. First, as I’ve explained above, the economic forces at play are both complex and powerful. For the most part, there is little ranchers or ranching proponents can do to influence beef prices, nor are they going to stop the public cry for cleaner water, restored species, intact ecosystems, and the like. And unless laws are passed to halt newcomers forcibly at state or county borders, it will be very difficult to put a lid on demand for real estate in places either picturesque—like Paradise Valley, Montana—or booming with opportunity—like Silicon Valley, California. Where land prices rise high enough—in other words, where the demand is great enough—most ranchers are tempted to cash in, if not this year or next, then a decade hence. Relying on the good will and endurance of ranchers is not a good strategy for ensuring long-term land protection.

Furthermore, despite the either/or dynamic implied by the “condos or cows” mantra, there is not a direct relationship between loss of public lands grazing privileges and subsequent sale of private ranchland. Surveys among livestock producers have shown that lifestyle and independence are the prime motivations for remaining in ranching.<sup>20</sup> If access to public lands forage is reduced, many ranchers will seek to stay in the business by modifying their operations: buying more private land, reducing herd size to fit existing private land holdings, and obtaining outside employment to bolster family income.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps one of the most unfortunate consequences of the “condos or cows” mentality is the lack of initiative among a variety of conservation groups and open-space advocates in taking up truly effective private land conservation

strategies. There are examples from around the country of approaches to open-space protection that don't depend on the acceptance of continued degradation of both public and private lands. I briefly describe a few below. However, there are probably many more creative solutions that could be imagined and implemented, if only we could get away from the paralyzing fear that without cows, our only option is houses and concrete.

**ZONING AND PLANNING.** Zoning and planning are fighting words in much of the West, but if you care about protecting both social and ecological values, zoning and planning really work. Oregon has a statewide zoning system that limits all new development within designated urban growth boundaries. This automatically protects open space outside of the urban regions. It also has the effect of keeping agricultural land prices low, since these are unavailable for residential development. In the Willamette Valley, home to 70 percent of Oregon's population, including the cities of Salem, Eugene, and Portland, 95 percent of the land area is in agricultural production (with plenty of ecological impacts as a result), timber production, or other rural land uses.

**LAND ACQUISITION.** Many ranchers don't like the land acquisition option too well, either. But the public can decide to make funds available for willing sellers of land that hold important wildlife, scenic, or recreational values. Or private organizations, like land trusts, may purchase significant properties and either donate them to the government or keep them as private preserves. Of course, if cows remain on the purchased lands, I would argue that much of the ecological benefit of the acquisition is lost.

**DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS.** Development rights can be purchased or traded. In the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, for instance, landowners can "sell" their development rights to developers in urban areas. The urban developers can then apply to city governments to build higher-density housing than is normally permitted. The law allows them to mitigate, in essence, for the high density in the city by preserving open space in the barrens. In either the case of land acquisition or acquisition of development rights, protection against sprawl is far more secure than with a policy of hoping ranchers will act against their economic self-interest, even as the market pressures on them increase. And remember, although outright purchase and acquisition of development rights can be expensive, development is not a threat over most of the West. We don't have to buy all the private ranchland to afford reasonable protection against condos or subdivisions. Many properties will remain open space, no matter what conservationists do or don't do.

Those who suggest we don't have the money to buy up critical lands forget that we currently bestow billions of dollars on the agricultural industry in the form of subsidies and direct payments. In the fall of 1999, for example, Congress granted an emergency \$8.7 billion relief package on top of the \$26 billion it was already doling out that year to agriculture. Of this, tobacco growers alone received \$340 million to make up for a decline in tobacco sales—the result of antismoking campaigns (for which taxpayers have also paid, to a large extent). To give some perspective, \$340 million is more than was spent in 1999 on *all* federal land acquisitions, in all fifty states. There is plenty of money in the federal budget, if the political will can be mustered to prioritize permanent protection of habitat and open space. Political will for such investments is undermined by those advocating ranching as a mechanism to protect and preserve open space and wildlife habitats.

Americans are clearly willing to fund land acquisition if they believe no other alternatives are viable. Florida—not known as a particularly liberal, or "green," bastion—has spent more than \$450 million a year on land acquisition programs since 1991.<sup>22</sup> In a state that has seen more development pressure than most of the West will see for the next several centuries, Floridians realized that the only effective way to ensure open space would be preserved was to buy it. They have reiterated their commitment to this strategy by voting several times in favor of land protection bond measures.

We must get beyond the misleading and destructive belief in "condos or cows." While thousands of acres go under the bulldozer because of a misplaced faith in ranching as a land protection strategy, hundreds of millions of acres continue to be pounded under the hooves of cattle. While the search goes on for "win/win" solutions between stock growers and conservationists, what is more likely to happen is the "lose/lose" reality of unguided, uncontrolled development in the beauty spots and hot markets of the West, and unabated abuse of the lands and waters that belong to all the people—the public lands—and ultimately, to all the wild creatures that inhabit them.

What would a West without cows be like? Endless subdivisions and cities? Hardly. It would be just this: millions of acres, rich with newly invigorated native grasses; robust with sagebrush and other shrubs no longer bulldozed or chained to make way for cattle feed; swept by growing herds of elk, wild sheep, pronghorn antelope, and bison; vibrant with the energy of predators large and small—from wolves to black-footed ferrets, from grizzlies to swift fox, kestrel, and burrowing owl. The West, without cows, would be thousands of miles of clear streams running deep, filling up with fat native fishes, welcoming back along their margins flocks of raucous songbirds, and a slow, quiet tide of lesser-known beasts: reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates of all kinds. Relieved of livestock, the West would see the reappearance of the great cottonwood galleries, the regreening of lowland meadows, the regained curvature and grace of flat valley rivers. This, and much more, would be the West without cows.

Next time you fly over it, imagine a West like that.

Farm fields stretch across the Gallatin Valley near Bozeman, Montana, one of the fastest-growing areas of the West. Urbanization and rural sprawl are certainly cause for concern. Yet, as can be seen in this aerial view, agriculture takes up vastly more acreage than sprawl and subdivisions. Consequently, agriculture has tremendous impacts on biodiversity and land health. Agriculture has converted habitat to monocultures of exotic species and has led to fragmentation of the valley's natural landscapes. Livestock production is the dominant type of agriculture in the West (rangelands and crops fed to livestock). By comparison, food consumed directly by people requires relatively little land and water.

