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PRESS ADVISORY

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STUDY FINDS FULL COST OF FEDERAL GRAZING PROGRAM MAY EXCEED \$500 MILLION

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Economists commissioned by the Center for Biological Diversity have released a report entitled "Assessing the Full Cost of the Federal Grazing Program." They document the many subsidies that support grazing on public lands by the 23,600 permittees in the western US. They also document the numerous costs to the public of compensating or mitigating for the damage to public resources, wildlife, watersheds and human health by livestock on public lands.

- The minimum cost to the federal taxpayer of the federal grazing program is \$128 million a year.
- The real full cost is likely to lie in the range of one half to one billion dollars a year.
- Allowing grazing fees be determined by the market would not recoup the full costs of the program.
- There is no accounting system that adequately discloses the numerous indirect costs of the grazing program.

Principal author Karyn Moskowitz, a Rockefeller Fellow at the University of Kentucky observed: "The lack of transparent accounting was the most frustrating thing. It was difficult to get a clear idea of just how much money the government is pumping into the federal grazing program to keep it going."

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Co-author Chuck Romaniello, who works as an agricultural economist for the BLM in Colorado, agreed: “The range management programs of the BLM and Forest Service run at a loss of about \$124 million, after subtracting fee receipts. This however, is just the tip of the iceberg. Numerous programs both in and outside the two agencies also bear costs related to the grazing program. We could find no system that adequately accounts for all of these costs.”

The Center commissioned the study because it was alarmed at earlier reports of massive losses of the grazing program and wanted to get a more objective and updated summary of the cost of the federal program to the public.

“The deeper problem is the ecological cost. Livestock cause massive and widespread damage to watersheds, streams, wildlife and endangered species, because they are virtually everywhere most of the time on public lands. A lot of money is spent trying to correct these problems and we have no full accounting of those costs because the government simply ignores them.” said Kieran Suckling, the Center’s executive director.

George Wuerthner, author of recently released book “Welfare Ranching: the subsidized destruction of the American West” observed that the new report gives further weight to the earlier reports that the cost of the program is between \$500 million and \$1 billion. “Even raising the grazing fee to market levels will not cover the real cost of livestock production on public lands. If we did a full accounting of the ecological costs--soil erosion, extirpation of predators, water pollution, endangered species, spread of weeds, dewatering of rivers for irrigated pasture--the price we pay annually to sustain this 19th century relic would be in the billions of dollars. The pittance paid in grazing fees doesn't even begin to cover these real uncounted costs.”

The Center is part of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign which is promoting legislation that would pay ranchers to give up their permits on public lands. Andy Kerr Campaign director notes that “There could be one last subsidy to end all future subsidies. If we pay the ranchers to let go of their permits we estimate we would recoup the investment in about seven years in terms of avoiding the massive annual costs of the program.”

Asked how the Center intended to use the report, Suckling said “The agencies have known for years that the grazing fee formula is mathematically flawed. The formula keeps the monthly grazing fee at about five times less than the cost to feed a domestic pet for a month. At the very least there has to be some change in the grazing fee. At least the ranchers should be covering the budgeted costs of the program. This report shows they can do this and still pay less for the privilege than they would on the free market.”