Public Lands Ranching: Welfare State in the West

by George Wuerthner

Despite the multiple ecological impacts associated with livestock production on public rangelands, livestock grazing continues on these lands, in part, because of the public perception that ranching is essential to the West's economies.

People are reluctant to criticize, much less terminate an economic activity that they perceive as critical to their own local economic interests. Yet, the overall economic importance of the livestock industry, particularly the part dependent upon public lands, is insignificant to all but the individual rancher. Indeed, even in most rural communities, government, services and transfer payments (retirement, royalties and investments) account for the vast majority of all income sources.

For the West as a whole—which is primarily urban—the dependency on agriculture, particularly ranching, is even less significant. Yet the myth that the West's economic backbone lies in ranching, particularly in rural areas, is perpetuated by the livestock industry to maintain political control, power and subsidies for a small subset of society: the West's welfare ranchers.

Furthermore, the ranchers themselves continuously reinforce this false sense of economic benefit, asserting that they are the backbone of the regional economy. This perception is echoed mindlessly by many publicly supported institutions such as Agricultural Extension Services, universities and public lands managing agencies. Politicians (often ranchers) along with the media and even some environmental organizations are also culpable for this distortion as well, continuously exaggerating the overall economic value of livestock production and thereby helping to maintain the political and economic hegemony enjoyed by the West's welfare ranchers.

While there are hundreds of millions of acres devoted to growing cows, the amount of employment, income and economic activity that results is nearly insignificant. And since this activity is anything but benign, it often occurs at the expense of other western resources such as fisheries, wildlife, watersheds, recreation, scenery, biodiversity and ecological processes—all of which have tremendous economic value well beyond the tiny contribution made by the livestock industry. Indeed, as University of Montana professor of economics Thomas Power argues, in the changing West of today, these quality-of-life resources are the engines driving modern economic activity.

There are several ploys used by livestock advocates to distort the value of public lands ranching to the West's economy. One method used to overstate the importance of public lands to the West's ranching industry is to count the total number of animals that graze on public lands, no matter
Public Lands Ranching:

how short a period of time, rather than the amount of forage contributed by those lands. Thus if a cow grazes on federal lands for even one day, it is counted as a public lands-dependent grazing animal — even though the contribution of public lands forage to the annual production is small.

Often overlooked is the fact that even in the West, a substantial number of livestock (70 percent) are grazed exclusively on private lands most or all of the year. For example, only 10 percent of the forage for livestock in Montana, a state that possesses one of largest cattle industries in the West, is derived from public lands.

Most western ranching operations are not economically viable now and should be more properly be considered “hobby” ranches.

Since economic viability isn’t the reason most ranchers engage in livestock operations, a loss in public lands grazing privileges would not necessarily lead to the widespread abandonment of ranching in the West. Most ranchers engage in livestock production because it is a “lifestyle” choice. As a consequence, the overall number of western livestock operations that would be permanently put out of business by the closure of all federal lands grazing allotments is far less than the total number of western public lands livestock producers or even that subset that grazes on public lands.

Nevertheless, the removal of all livestock from public lands would still have significant positive benefits for western wildlife, fisheries, watersheds, biodiversity and ecological processes.

Furthermore, access to federal public lands is not equally distributed. Indeed, the majority of public lands forage is controlled by a small percentage of the larger landowning permittees. Like most federal subsidies, the larger operations reap significant and proportionately greater advantages.

For example, a 1992 GAO report found that the 500 largest BLM’s permittees controlled 47 percent of all BLM allotment acreage. The top 20 largest permit holders controlled 9.3 percent of all BLM forage or 20.7 million acres of public lands! This includes Idaho billionaire J.R. Simplot whose public lands spread includes more than 2 million acres of rangelands in several western states.

The total federal and state acreage devoted to livestock production is 300 million acres, or an area equal to the acreage of all the eastern seaboard states from Maine to Florida with Missouri thrown in.

According to the 1994 Rangeland Reform EIS, eliminating all livestock use of federal lands would affect only 2.4 percent of the beef cattle inventory in the 17 western states.

To generate continued public acceptance of subsidies and tax benefits enjoyed by agricultural interests, industry proponents typically exaggerate the importance of agriculture’s contribution to western economies through the use of dubious “economic multipliers.” For example, one Utah State University study of the economic contribution of agriculture to Utah included waitresses and waiters among its agriculture-dependent workers because they served food and food was generated by agriculture!

As Power has noted, another common means of exaggerating the role of public lands in western livestock operations is to

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WWP Challenges Grazing in Colorado

Western Watersheds Project has filed an appeal and petition for stay against the Bureau of Land Management to block the renewal of grazing leases on 30 allotments covering 256,000 acres of public lands in Moffat and Routt counties of northwestern Colorado.

The allotments are habitat for sage grouse and listed Colorado River fish species. Darryl Steele, John and Steve Raftopoulos and Rancho Greco hold the grazing permits for the allotments.

The Raftopoulos brothers are among the largest public-lands ranchers in Colorado. One member of the Raftopoulos family, Marianna Raftopoulos, is a Moffat County commissioner along with rancher T. Wright Dickinson, whose BLM permits also came up for renewal this winter.

Many areas of the allotments have been significantly damaged by continued livestock grazing.

The appeal marks the first legal involvement of WWP in the administration of public lands in Colorado. It was filed with Sinapu, a Boulder, Colo.-based conservation group.

BLM Cuts Trout Springs Grazing

Like the ranching economy in the American West, the brim of cowboy-historian Mike Hanley’s vaquero hat looks suspiciously limp.

Hanley’s prophecy about ranchers — “We’re becoming relics” — is knocking at the back door of his Jordan Valley, Ore., spread.

In a “proposed decision” meted out by the Owyhee Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management, livestock grazing on the Trout Springs allotment — 96 percent of which is permitted to Hanley — will be reduced by 44 percent this year and prohibited almost entirely from July 15 to Oct. 1, the season of greatest grazing.

If the BLM decision stands, it will effectively end livestock grazing on the Trout Springs allotment in Owyhee County, Idaho, due to the economic realities of split-season use.

Hanley’s grazing permit was one of 68 privileges issued in 1997 by the BLM in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

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WWP, CIHD Sue Over Mountain Quail

Western Watersheds Project and the Committee for Idaho’s High Desert have sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for its failure to respond to a petition to list a distinct population of the mountain quail in five states in the West.

The lawsuit, filed in federal District Court in Portland, Oregon, charges that the FWS did not meet statutory deadlines under the Endangered Species Act to render a finding on WWP and CIHD’s petition.

The mountain quail is the largest quail in North America and breeds at the highest elevation of any quail populating the continent.

Some 80-90 percent of riparian habitat essential to mountain quail in and interior lands has been lost due to livestock grazing, agriculture and residential development.

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Short on Dollars and Sense

use a very low threshold as the minimum when determining whether a ranching operation is “dependent” upon public lands. For instance, one report produced by New Mexico State University included any ranch that received more than 5 percent of its total forage from public lands as “public lands dependent.”

Another common ploy is to use the gross economic activity associated with livestock production as a measure of its relative importance to a local or regional economy. As any self-employed individual knows, the important measure is net income, not total expenditures.

Eliminating all livestock grazing on public lands would, according to Dept. of Interior’s 1994 Rangeland Reform EIS, result in a total loss of 18,300 jobs in agriculture and related industries across the entire West, or approximately 0.1 percent of total employment in the West. This job loss would be spread across the entire region, and thus would have negligible negative economic effects on any individual state.

Indeed, the more dependent a state’s cattle producers are upon public lands forage, typically the fewer ranchers involved due to aridity. For example, in 1992 the GAO reported that there were only 854 BLM grazing allotments in the entire state of Nevada (some ranchers control more than one allotment, thus even fewer ranch operations are involved) covering an average of more than 56,541 acres.

According to the state of Nevada, the number of people employed in all agriculture totals less than 2,200 people. Some of the larger casinos in Las Vegas often employ more people than all the ranching operations in the entire state. Yet public policy in Nevada, as in the rest of the West, is severely skewed to favor these few ranching-dependent individuals at the expense of the general public and the land.

The GAO conducted an assessment of Southwest BLM lands in 1992. According to this “Hot Deserts” report, the agency found that eliminating livestock grazing on BLM allotments would result in “little economic disadvantage.” The GAO concluded that “local economies are not dependent on public lands ranching.”

Power found that all ranching (both public and private lands) contributes to less than one half of one percent of all income received by Westerners. If all livestock grazing were terminated on public lands, Power has calculated that it would take less than six days of normal income growth and only 11 days of normal job growth to replace all western federal grazing jobs and income.

Power has argued further that it is growth in other industries is “supporting” most ranchers, not ranchers supporting rural communities. Ranchers work at other jobs to supplement what is often a negative net income from ranching operations.

The industry and its supporters continuously assert that the livestock industry is the economic backbone of the region. But contrary to common perception, western communities do not depend upon ranching. Rather, it is ranching that depends on rural communities for the outside income that permits most ranchers to live what is essentially a lifestyle choice.

George Wuerthner is a WWP advisory board member who lives in Eugene, Oregon.

News Briefs

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WWP, Partners Protest BLM Land Use

Eight conservation groups, including Western Watersheds Project, have filed a formal protest with the Bureau of Land Management that challenges a mammoth land management plan released by the agency’s Vale District in Oregon.

The protest charges that the BLM’s Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan fails to account fully for the impacts of livestock grazing; to address the region’s escalating invasive weed crisis; and to protect public resources from a range of threats, including off-road vehicles and water pollution.

The scope of the plan includes some of southeastern Oregon’s most treasured — and vulnerable — landscapes, including the Owyhee Canyonlands.

Less than 2 percent of the area is currently off-limits to cattle grazing, and less than one-half of 1 percent is closed to destructive off-road vehicles.

WWP Sues BLM Over Exotic Plant

Western Watersheds Project, the Oregon Natural Desert Association and the Committee for Idaho’s High Desert have filed a lawsuit in federal District Court in Portland against the Bureau of Land Management to stop a proposal to seed 55 square miles of public lands in Oregon with non-native plant species.

The proposed BLM action, which the agency calls “emergency fire rehabilitation,” would seed non-native plant species on 1,500 acres of public lands burned in the recent Jordan Creek Fire and 33,787 acres of public lands burned in the Jackies Butte Fire. The seeding would consist primarily of crested wheatgrass.

The affected lands border the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River canyon corridor.

Though degraded and fragmented by overgrazing, past and present, the Jackies Butte area features many important natural resource values, including habitat for sage grouse and California bighorn sheep, and winter range for mule deer and pronghorn antelope.

WWP Moves To Protect Bull Trout

Western Watersheds Project and the Committee for Idaho’s High Desert intend to sue the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for violations of the Endangered Species Act in the Jarbidge River watershed in southern Idaho and northern Nevada.

The USFS (Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest) and BLM continue to authorize livestock grazing and other activities in the Jarbidge watershed, which is habitat for threatened bull trout.

One of the activities in question is the Jim Bob pipeline, which takes from 95 percent to 100 percent of the water from Jim Bob Creek, a tributary of the Jarbidge River. The pipeline feeds more than 60 square miles of public lands permitted to ranchers J.R. Simplot and Bert Fracken.

Billionaire Simplot oversees the largest public-lands grazing operation in the United States.

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Biological Treasures of Mount Harrison Live on the Edge

by Miriam Austin

Like a sentry keeping watch over Idaho’s Cassia County, Mount Harrison rises 9,265 feet over the communities of Albion, Burley and Declo. Part of the Albion Division of the Sawtooth National Forest, Mount Harrison habitats are administered by the Burley Ranger District.

The summit of Mount Harrison is visited each year by thousands of recreationalists, from wildflower and wildlife lovers to horseback and hang-gliding enthusiasts. This unique mountain range supports ecosystems ranging from sagebrush steppe to alpine meadows.

The Albion Division is home to snowshoe hares, sage grouse, northern goshawks and other sensitive wildlife. A small cirque lake below Mount Harrison supports the only known occurrence in Idaho of a tiny fairy shrimp. The cirque lake, geologic features and a portion of the summit’s rare plant habitat are included in a Research Natural Area (RNA) proposed in 1982 and legally established by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in 1997. RNAs are intended to “be protected forever for long-term monitoring, research, education and conservation of biological diversity.”

Mount Harrison is known for three rare plant species: Davis’ wavewing, Shasta aster and Castilleja christii or Christ’s Indian paintbrush. A fourth species, vivid green aster, was recently dropped by the Idaho Native Plant Society (INPS) as an invalid taxon.

Davis’ wavewing is known only to Mount Harrison and adjacent Cache Peak and is considered by INPS to be a global priority 3 species. Shasta aster is a review species of possible conservation concern. Christ’s Indian paintbrush has been a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) candidate species, a species for which there is sufficient information on biological vulnerability and threats to support listing proposals.

Collected by John Christ in 1950 and recognized as a new species in 1973, C. christii has a yellow- to coral-hued inflorescence. This rare paintbrush covers approximately 200 acres near the summit of Mount Harrison and is the only known population in the world.

C. christii was petitioned for listing in 1999 and again in 2001 by Western Watersheds Project members Don and Linda Oman and Jim and Betty Prunty. The 2001 petition was filed due to continued grazing threats and failures of the USFS and FWS to carry out promised protective strategies. In a letter to the petitioners dated Jan. 3, 2000, FWS indicated it would work with the USFS to “identify and reduce threats to C. christii, including livestock grazing, off-road vehicle use and trampling.” Unfortunately, neither FWS nor USFS have carried through with protective actions in regard to livestock grazing.

The 1995 conservation strategy for C. christii indicated that “livestock grazing closure at the summit” would be continued. Yet livestock were found grazing within the C. christii and were reported to FWS numerous times in 1999. The agency and USFS agreed to keep livestock out of the C. christii in 2000 by use of temporary electric fences.

WWP members and others monitored the rare plant populations throughout the season. Cattle did not access the plants in 2000, and Sawtooth National Forest promised FWS that the summit would be permanently fenced prior to the 2001 grazing season. Despite vigorous public complaints by WWP members and the efforts of one USFS botanist, fencing was not adequately installed or maintained prior to turnout and livestock were observed within the RNA as well as in rare plant habitats and closed recreation portions of the summit throughout the 2001 grazing season.

When Forest Magazine traveled to Mount Harrison for a story on C. christii, livestock were again found and documented within the closed summit region.

It is apparent that the Sawtooth National Forest, FWS and livestock permittees refuse to take rare plant issues seriously.

While off-road impacts represent the human activity with the highest potential for immediate destruction of rare plants or their habitat, the insidious and cumulative impacts of livestock disturbance within the RNA and rare plant communities have been allowed to continue. Many livestock trails are now present within the RNA, the cirque lake has been repeatedly drained of water by livestock and filled with animal wastes, and C. christii and other rare plant species have been grazed and trampled.

In addition to off-road vehicle use and livestock grazing, the high-elevation, rare-plant habitats are now being invaded by smooth brome and other seeded cultivars planted as rehab following the USFS-approved paving of the road to the summit through C. Christii habitat. (It is estimated that 20 or more acres of C. christii were lost during construction activities.) Subjection of the rare plant habitats to continued soil disturbance may well accelerate the spread of these non-native species.

Without increased public concern and action, the rare plant values of Mount Harrison will continue to decline in the face of recreational and livestock trampling, off-road vehicle impacts and exotic weed invasions. As these impacts continue to occur within C. christii habitat, we face the possibility of losing one of Idaho’s — and indeed the world’s — rare biological treasures.

Miriam Austin is a WWP field monitor and resource specialist.
Watershed Restoration Requires Beaver Restoration

by Louise Wagenknecht

I live just outside Leadore, Idaho, a stone’s throw from the lower reach of Timber Creek, once a tributary of the Lemhi River. The tall old cottonwoods along its banks stand grey and dead. Only a few smaller trees and sprouts manage to eke out a living from the water that is allowed to flow downstream between the end of the irrigation season in mid-November and the last pulse of high water in June.

That is little enough, since Timber Creek’s water is diverted onto agricultural fields as soon as the thaw comes and long before the growing season starts.

This land is a high-elevation desert. Only 8 or 9 inches of precipitation per year fall on the valley of the Lemhi River in a “wet” year. Yet the snow on the high mountains on either side of the river has for many millions of years sent sediment pouring into the streams to be flushed out of the river system. And for many millennia, much of that sediment was trapped and held within the Lemhi River’s watershed by the actions of a large, industrious rodent driven by instinct to build dams of mud and sticks and to live protected in lodges built in the resulting reservoirs.

Beaver made the riparian areas of the Lemhi River. Whatever soil now exists in the floodplain is their doing, the result of the siltation of successive generations of ponds on side channels and their slow change from pond to swamp to meadow or cottonwood grove. But beaver no longer build dams on the Lemhi River, and all the soil they conserved is leaving us, year by year, torn away by plows and the hooves of cattle.

In the waning days of 1830, a Hudson’s Bay Company expedition camped near Timber Creek. The expedition’s leader, John Work, described Timber Creek as “a small poplar river which falls in from the Southward . . . here the [Lemhi River] runs through a swamp . . . Formerly beaver were very numerous and there are still a few both in the main river & the streams that fall into it.”

Beaver were being trapped out of Idaho. While camped near what is now Challis, Idaho, on Oct. 25, Work wrote, “19 beaver were taken, which the men reckon few considering the number of traps set and the good places at which they were set.”

As his party of about a hundred men, women, and children traveled up the Lemhi, they took only 42 beaver, despite the good habitat: “The banks of the river flat and in places swampy and well wooded, principally with poplar and willows.” Work’s trappers “complain of a great scarcity of beaver considering the fine appearance of the river for them, and the numbers which were formerly found in it.”

The swamps that Work wrote of are gone now, plowed for crops of barley and alfalfa, drained by irrigation ditches, grazed into alkali-rimed hummocks by cattle.

Just north of Leadore, a swamp that Work mentions is now grazed yearlong by many cattle, whose mouths and hooves have removed the willows that once covered it. In the early spring, before the grasses try to grow once more, vertical banks of bare soil can be seen from the highway, sloughing away inexorably under the weight of thousands of shearing hooves.

In Work’s day, the policy of the Hudson’s Bay Company — and of the British government itself — was to keep the United States out of the Oregon Country by turning it into a “fur desert.” No beaver, no Americans, the company reasoned.

When the market for beaver pelts collapsed in the late 1830s, many beaver populations in what is now Idaho had been exterminated. Here began the long process of watershed degradation that continues today, as beaver dams began to wash out, unentended.

Beaver populations were still only a shadow of what they had been when white settlers moved into the area in the late 1860s and immediately declared war on beaver, both for the money to be made from their pelts and their habit of blocking irrigation and mining ditches. The war continues today.

A few years ago, I attended an irrigation district meeting at which several ranchers talked openly of their plans to kill beaver on the upper reaches of Timber Creek. Tearing the lodges apart with a backhoe and then shooting the fleeing beavers was the best method, one rancher said. Another recommended dynamite. It is an article of faith with them that beavers are taking “their” water by holding back the spring runoff.

Ironically, some of those same men are now supporting a study for a possible dam on Timber Creek, which if built would cost the taxpayers $20 million to 30 million to impound a mere 600-1,200 acre feet of water.

How ironic that a few colonies of the very beaver they are so eager to kill could do the same job for free: holding back snowmelt from the Lemhi Mountains, gradually releasing it to cool the waters of the Lemhi River late in the summer, just when native trout and returning salmon are most in need of it.

The healing of the West’s watersheds will require not only the removal of cattle, but also the restoration of this keystone species.

Louise Wagenknecht is a WWP board member.

When roused to its duty by the stirring words of John Muir, the government at last began to take charge of its own forests in the Sierra Nevada, the first thing Muir did was turn out the wandering bands of slade-makers. His struggle with the shepherders was long.

Longest of all was the battle with cattle ranchers. Regarding themselves as lords of the land as proprietors who had won their way, as tenants of a tests interest with precedence over every other interests, they went armed and took orders from government foresters until a little more respectfully than they would have treated their men, shepherders. Decades of legal, education, political and firmness were required to bring about the present precarious balance among the interests of the government, the ranchers and the forest service, which we have in our lands.

A Natural History of Water

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Saving the Sagebrush Steppe From Our Footprints

by Kelley Weston

In his biophilia hypothesis E.O. Wilson speculates that human beings are hard-wired to look to the short term and the close by. We rarely look more that five years out and tend to focus on our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the whole. Therefore, what is immediate in time and space becomes disproportionately powerful in our decision-making process.

In contrast, most widespread environmental damage occurs in bits and pieces over decades. By focusing on the near term and near by, we miss the accumulation of small incremental changes that eventually build up to critical levels and provoke a crisis.

When problems are small, crisis management is usually adequate. But it proves ineffective as a response to the momentum of long-term change. Global warming, loss of biological diversity and wholesale conversions of ecosystems to human use do not produce small crises and are not solved by quick fixes.

We can understand the dynamics of this degenerative process by studying the decline of the sagebrush steppe ecosystem. The ongoing disintegration of ecological stability in the West is the direct result of human mismanagement. The delicate structure of the pre-Colombian sagebrush steppe ecosystems, characterized by a complex composition of grasses, forbs and shrubs, was the result of a highly variable semiarid climate and long fire-free periods.

Grazing by introduced livestock from the late 19th century to the present day has severely damaged the bunchgrass and herbaceous component of sagebrush plant communities, opening areas to invasion by introduced annual grasses that, in turn, have altered the frequency of fire. More frequent fires, conversion of sagebrush steppe for agriculture, conversion to wheatgrass and ryegrass pasture and the rapid spread of introduced grasses and other non-native species have virtually eliminated pristine pre-Colombian sagebrush steppe habitat.

Isolated relics of sagebrush steppe habitat with a good perennial understory occupy only 1 percent of the total original habitat area. Over the last 130 years the sagebrush steppe ecosystem of western North America has been so radically altered and the changes are now so widespread that many believe that perhaps only 25 percent of the original 270 million acres can recover to a state resembling its original condition.

The remaining 74 percent is either compromised by the infestation of introduced species or converted to human use. This steady degradation of lands in the West closely resembles a process described by David Quammen in an article for Harpers magazine entitled "The Planet of Weeds" in which ecosystems slowly degrade into a state of depleted diversity. "Weedy" species of plants and animals useful to humans or able to adapt to human manipulation prove better able to adapt to continuous abuse and rapid change and are naturally selected over less adaptable species.

The accelerating spread of medusa head, cheatgrass, thistle and other noxious weeds as well as the proliferation of coyotes, foxes, magpies and other adaptable species into habitat once dominated by more fragile native species is a perfect example of the process. The horrible end result of this scenario is not the ecological apocalypse so often described by environmental activists but something infinitely worse: a long, drawn-out existence in a trashed junkyard of fragmented and marginally functional ecosystems virtually immune to recovery.

When an environmental disaster of this magnitude is finally recognized, there are always calls for education and public action. Consequently there is a great deal of momentum these days to thin, cut, burn, seed, graze and otherwise manipulate lands in order that they might recover from imbalances caused, in most cases, by past misguided cutting, burning, seeding and grazing.

It is a seductive theory with a core of scientific truth. The problem with the new management however, is not in the science, which, though limited, is often good. Nor is it in the techniques, which can also be effective. The problem is in the underlying motivations that are largely concerned with maintaining the status quo and an ethic of progress that believes human beings should and can order and control nature.

The question in management is always what are you managing for? To move from managing for the status quo to managing for a world of ecological restoration, we must accept reality: If the health of land and water and species is in conflict with its value to people, then there is a fundamental flaw in our understanding.

Human beings cannot afford to physically restore the tens of millions of acres of sagebrush steppe, forests or other ecosystems still able to recover. We can catalyze the recovery by removing the debilitating forces causing the degradation, such as inappropriate grazing, irrigation, agricultural conversion and other easily recognized irritants. And with great humility and caution we can reintroduce powerful natural forces like fire.

We can also protect critical riparian and wetland habitats and other vital, relatively small features — and even create them if necessary. But ultimately our success depends on the regenerative force of nature inherent in all life.

With all of our science and the prospect of billions of dollars for ecological management, we are still utterly dependent on the natural cycles of regeneration to get the job done.

We have a choice to make in the West. Will we continue to expend our time, money and intelligence to subsidize ecological destruction, or will we use it to support restoration?

Of all the public lands in North America, the sage steppe ecosystem has perhaps the fewest barriers to successful restoration. Mining is relatively localized and commodities such as gold, copper and other metals will continue to decline in value as they are replaced by less expensive and more easily obtainable materials.

There are few forests worth harvesting and the current level of livestock production and its use of public lands will decrease markedly when government subsidies are withdrawn.

Even with a legacy of 130 years of mismanagement, millions of acres of land can recover naturally with only a minimum of interference. We have a perfect opportunity to release part of the world from our iron grip and let it be wild.

Kelley Weston is WWP board president.
Sagebrush Is to the West What Coral Is to the Ocean

by Keene Huefile

A panel discussion of some historical significance took place Jan. 31 in Pocatello, Idaho. At the Student Union of Idaho State University, four experts in various aspects of plant and range science, each with about 30 years of professional experience, presented and then debated their science, opinions and recommendations in a public forum on the subject of "The Ecological Role of Sagebrush Habitat."

To many of the settlers who came to America from Europe to create an agricultural-based system of living off the land, sagebrush, in its many species and companion native plants, was, and still is, a noxious plant, a "weed" to be rid of in favor of grass and hay for livestock grazing and farm land for grain, beet and potato production.

The eradication of sagebrush habitat, and therefore of sagebrush ecology, has already taken place quite successfully in the name of "taming the West," "progress," "civilization" or, most recently, "the economy."

While many people are somewhat knowledgeable about the issue, many more have little awareness as to the many billions of tax dollars that have been and are being spent on various subsidies to create this desert landscape (as Marc Reisner aptly characterized it in "Cadillac Desert").

Sagebrush country continues to be a wonderland for a great variety of beautiful native plants and animals that have adapted and evolved and are thriving (or once thrived) in our widely and dramatically varied soils and changing seasons. To many people, the aesthetic and scientific values of expansive sagebrush country and habitats alone deserve to be preserved in their complex, healthy evolving states.

Long before the Europeans set foot on the western American sagebrush landscape, Native Americans had been living successfully and in harmony with the plant and animal communities that comprise the sagebrush ecosystem. In fact, sagebrush and its many plant and animal species were the basis of human life for Native American people.

These differing values and views of sagebrush ecology were the genesis of the Idaho State University panel and debate.

Carl Wambolt of Montana State University began his presentation by debunking a number of widely-held myths, many of which are used by federal and state agencies whose job it is to protect our native plants and animals. He also offered clear and compelling science that pronghorn antelope, elk, mule deer and, of course, the dwindling native sage grouse depend upon sagebrush for food and cover, especially in the winters.

Wambolt presented tenable evidence that contradicts the U.S. Forest Service's "assumed" natural fire cycles. He also provided research that showed no difference in the cover of grasses and forbs between burned areas and unburned controls, but desirable sagebrush canopy was greatly reduced in the burns.

Alma Winward of the USFS in Ogden, Utah, chose to talk about the taxonomy of sagebrush. He acknowledged that his agency has made many mistakes in its management of the public's forests but insisted that it is a good idea to continue to use prescribed burning in a careful manner. He stressed burning to create "mosaic" patterns and cause "edging" effects.

Bruce Welch, a shrub scientist with the USFS in Provo, Utah, has written a book manuscript on sagebrush ecology based on more that 1,600 scientific studies and six range management texts covering all aspects of sagebrush ecology and management. He described sagebrush as a "mother plant." He also pointed out that sagebrush functions or acts essentially like an "evergreen" in that it keeps many of its leaves year-round.

He argued that the alleged necessity for fire "treatments" is driven by a cultural bias among some federal range scientists and land managers and upon flawed and misused science based on non-scientific assumptions. He made it clear that proposed eradication of sagebrush habitats to "increase diversity" or "biodiversity" is a hoax.

Jay Anderson, a retired ISU professor of ecology, has conducted many research studies at INEEL. He stressed that most sagebrush habitats have been degraded by livestock and most have not recovered. The loss of valuable understory plants due to grazing has led to loss of the nutrient cycle by legumes and has decreased the forbs that wildlife depend upon. The loss has also resulted in an increase of exotic plants such as cheatgrass.

Anderson provided evidence that higher sagebrush canopy cover, along with the cover of forbs and grasses, correlates with higher species richness and greater stability of plant populations. He stressed that we should protect healthy sagebrush habitats as reservoirs of genetic diversity. He also advised that we should avoid the reaction by livestock advocates and agencies in doing post-fire seedings. If prescribed fire is used, he said, it should only be used based on site-specific complements of native species.

Where do we go from here? Anderson, Wambolt and Welch all took the position that North America has already lost far too much valuable sagebrush. They advised a halt to further eradication of sagebrush habitats.

The implication of their recommendation is clear: Sagebrush is to the West what coral is to the sea.

Keene Huefile is chairman of the Southeast Idaho Environmental Network. He lives in Pocatello, Idaho.
Wolf Recovery Coordinator Recalls the Call of the Wild

By Roy Heberger

Before my retirement from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in July 2000, I directed the wolf recovery program in Idaho. The work was the most rewarding, challenging, frustrating and stressful experience of my 33 years with the FWS.

To work closely with members and staff of the Nez Perce tribe was a fulfilling experience for me personally and professionally. I will always look back on my time working with the tribe with a certain degree of awe.

The participation of the Nez Perce in wolf recovery is the first documented case of a Native American people playing a key role in the recovery of a federally listed threatened or endangered species. The wolf holds spiritual importance to the Nez Perce, and the role of technical staff in wolf recovery efforts has been a key to the success of the program.

To meet people from all walks of life and of every political persuasion, lifestyle and viewpoint on wolves and wolf recovery gave me the opportunity to grow personally and professionally. There are more than two sides to the wolf issue. This became apparent from the exposure I had to various groups and individuals, from people who hated wolves to their core to those who revered them from their spiritual center. And there were a lot of folks and organizations in between.

I met Constitutionalists, secessionists, private property advocates, "wolf wackers" on the extremes, dedicated and effective pro- and anti-wolf advocates, ineffective people on the extremes, informed people, uninformed people, people who were mad, glad and sad, concerned people, disinterested people, apathetic people and scary people.

I am gratified that I had the chance to meet most of these folks, but also frustrated to a degree. The challenge was always there to make the program succeed, and biologically there is no question that it has in Idaho. Sociologically, we still have a long way to go. Change comes very slowly where people's attitudes are concerned.

I don't believe I ever tried to persuade a person to change his or her opinions or beliefs about wolves. For the most part I think this approach would have been futile. But I did try to present the facts about wolves and the recovery program at every opportunity. I tried to explain what scientific inquiry had contributed to our knowledge of wolves to date.

Something that tore me up inside was seeing good people so firmly believe that wolves would cause them physical harm. They were absolutely beside themselves with worry. The FWS had information and advice, but who was I — a not-to-be-trusted federal employee — to calm those fears? I relied on the evidence. There is no documented case of a healthy, wild wolf ever attacking a human in North America.

I also met people who saw wolves as something almost mythical, beyond reality — my reality anyway. I'm talking non-aboriginal folks here. They are the people, who, when wolves have fully recovered, will be very upset to see state wildlife agencies treat the animals like any other form of wildlife: game, fur bearer or predator. Some element of population control is likely to involve harvest. I'm limited, I suppose — a biologist by training and experience. I can't get to the mythical aspect of wolves, but that's OK too.

To see real accomplishment in the recovery of wolves in Idaho was perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the program for me. I spent my career with FWS and feel firmly that we need to maintain wild habitats, natural communities, wild populations and species diversity to retain the delicate balance required for ecosystem stability. We don't yet know the half of it ecologically. So we'd best tread lightly.

I loved my job with FWS until my last day of employment. So why did I retire at age 55? I simply had other things to do in this life before I arrived at "old age" — whatever that is.

I'm now enjoying other activities but manage to stay involved in wolf recovery and other facets of environmental activism, preservation and conservation of our natural environment. Wolf recovery was a very nice way to end a career. I am grateful to the FWS for the opportunities it gave me.

What's next? I have many boats to build, flies to tie and places to see and experience. But I will always remain passionate about wolf recovery. I hope my grandchildren, while camping and backpacking with their families, will someday experience the howl of a wolf in Idaho's great outdoors.

Roy Heberger, former coordinator of the wolf recovery program in Idaho, holds degrees in fisheries and aquatic ecology from the University of Michigan. Twenty-one of his 33 years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were spent in the Boise office of the agency. He continues to live in Boise, Idaho.
Report From Greenfire: In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World

by Stew Churchwell

The late-winter sun has finally asserted itself enough to radiate warmth. The ground and fields at Greenfire Preserve are still covered with snow, but with 40-degree temperatures, the blanket of white is melting. Certainly, Greenfire will shiver from more hard cold this year. It's too early for winter to relinquish its grip, but the first return of the warm sun is a welcome occasion.

The animals feel it as well. As I write, 80 elk in the east pasture of Greenfire are kicking up their heels and chasing each other. A group of seven runs circles around the entire herd. Then another group of five threads itself through the herd, hard on the tail of the leader.

Yet another group of eight gallops after each other on their way to a far corner of the field. Have they gone mad? Not a chance. After watching their lethargic feeding for two months at subzero temperatures, it's clear that they have simply gone warm.

Since my last report, a lot more than the return of the sun has happened at Greenfire. Most important perhaps is the official receipt of our Department of Environmental Quality/Environmental Protection Agency 319 grant. The award has triggered a whirlwind of activity aimed at implementing restoration projects.

We should have known that moving ahead wouldn't be easy. As soon as word of our grant reached the local ranching community, the Experimental Stewardship Committee (ESP) sent a scathing letter to the director of the DEQ. The committee demanded an explanation for the award.

We were assured all along that the proposal was well-written and well within all grant guidelines. On the other hand, as Western Watersheds Project executive director Jon Marvel has often said, Idaho can be a political "Alice in Wonderland," where things are not always as they appear to be. The ESP protested the award for various reasons; in truth, the group's resistance is essentially political.

When political agendas come into play, many things can happen. Therefore, we have held off on starting any projects until we're certain of the outcome of the ESP letter.

Wild critters should have a say in this matter. Neighbors tell me they have never seen so many wild animals use the Greenfire property. Some 100 elk, 30 deer and four feral horses are taking advantage of last summer's irrigation effort. And since livestock were removed from the property when we assumed ownership of Greenfire, it's no surprise that wildlife has returned in abundance.

Initially, I tried to run the horses off the property. But they kept returning, and the more we interacted the more I became attached to them. One in particular pranced in circles and threw its head around, mane and tail flying. Then it stopped briefly to look right through me with a gaze so endearing that I finally decided four horses that get along just fine with elk couldn't possibly bring harm to the preserve.

I still see members of the otter family cruising in the East Fork. But the wildlife highlight so far this winter was a thrilling 20-minute observation of a bobcat just outside my office window.

I was watching six deer in the yard when I first spotted the cat making its way across the field. I thought it would continue on and cross the road; instead, it sat down in the field for five minutes, observing the world and flipping its tail. Then the cat turned and came back to the rail fence, following it toward the house.

Weaving in and out of the fence, from one side to the other, the cat slipped along toward the house. Then it jumped up and walked the bottom fence rails until the deer in the yard sensed its presence.

Imagine my shock when, suddenly, all the deer ran straight toward the cat, who quickly sprang to the top fence rail. One doe tiptoed, stiff-legged, right up to the predator. Nose to nose, deer and bobcat held an intense stare, the cat's stubby tail flipping slowly as if it were an unattached night crawler trying to avoid a fish hook.

Eventually, the cat grew bored with this close encounter. It jumped down from the fence and crept toward the river in the brush, probably looking for a cottontail. I saw him again as he walked just below one of the bedroom windows near the edge of the river. Four mallards paddled to the center of the river as he passed, and then he was gone.

A few days later, in a fresh dusting of snow, bobcat tracks in the yard revealed a return visit. I hope the cat plans to hang around for a while. How he warms these final days of winter.

Stew Churchwell is WWP's central Idaho director.
The Wasteland

"Hobby" ranchers — for whom livestock ranching is a secondary occupation — comprise more than 50 percent of all public lands ranching operations in America. Despite their affluence, their grazing operations are fed by a federal welfare system that annually supplies $500 million in direct and indirect subsidies to public-lands ranchers.

The 20 largest welfare ranchers (0.1 percent of permits) control 9.3 percent of all Bureau of Land Management forage, or 20.7 million acres of public lands.

The hobby rancher set includes Hewlett-Packard heiress Mary Hewlett Jaffe, Irvine Company owner Don Bren and American potato king J.R. Simplot.
Simplot, the largest supplier of French fries to McDonald's restaurants in America, is also the largest cattle operator on BLM lands in the country. He controls permits to graze livestock on 2 million acres of western public rangelands, an area six times the size of greater Los Angeles.

Simplot's land stewardship is another matter. The 50,000-acre Miller Creek grazing allotment that Simplot leases is under scrutiny by Western Watersheds Project for severe degradation and blatant violation of grazing terms and conditions.

Judge for yourself. Pictured on these two pages is Willis Creek on Simplot's Miller Creek allotment near Mountain City, Nevada.
Gene Bray Named Volunteer of the Year

Western Watersheds board treasurer and secretary Gene Bray was named Volunteer of the Year for 2001 by the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies (LAW Fund), a regional conservation organization with an office in Boise.

Bray, 70, a retired IBM engineering senior manager, has given many years of service to the LAW Fund and several other regional conservation groups. A longtime resident of Idaho, he continues to donate his time as a board member and field monitor for WWP and volunteers his engineering and computer expertise to Idaho Rivers United, the Committee for Idaho’s High Desert and the Idaho Conservation League.

Bray devotes much of his efforts to issues related to overgrazing by domestic livestock on public lands in the West. In addition to his work with conservation groups, Bray helped the Boise School District in 1991-92 by leading an effort to install the first computer-integrated science network in the state.

In February Western Watersheds Project presented “Cost of Freedom,” a sobering documentary about the wolf reintroduction program by Ketchum filmmaker Vanessa Schultz, to a captivated crowd at Boise State University.

The event was conceived and tirelessly organized by WWP members and supporters Debra Ellers and Dale Grooms of Boise. And it proved a rousing success, filling BSU’s Hatch Ballroom with hundreds of guests, bringing new members to WWP and giving important exposure to Schulz’s uncompromising film.

Idaho’s wolves, beneficiaries of a successful wildlife recovery program, still face a very uncertain future. Though predations of livestock are far fewer than predicted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, they have stirred a backlash in Idaho, where a new wolf management plan is being pushed in the state’s legislature.

In August WWP and the Idaho Conservation League sued the Sawtooth National Forest for its failure to protect wolves under the Sawtooth National Forest Plan of 1987 and a federal statute that created the Sawtooth National Forest in 1972.

Schulz’s ultimate aim with “Cost of Freedom” is to raise public awareness, even if it means losing trust in government agencies charged with protecting wildlife.

Western Watersheds Project invites you to join our free e-mail news list to receive timely news of WWP campaigns, activities and special events.

To join, simply visit the WWP website at www.westernwatersheds.org. On the home page, click on “Get WWP E-News.” Fill in your name and e-mail address on the short form and click on “Subscribe Now.”

Western Watersheds Project in 2001: The Year in Review

by Keith Raether

2001 was a watershed year for Western Watersheds Project. It was a year, in fact, that saw Idaho Watersheds Project become WWP. Our work now extends to eight western states.

While WWP’s sphere of influence expands, our mission remains the same: to protect and restore western watersheds through education, litigation and public policy initiatives that seek to end incompatible uses of public lands.

Here are highlights of our efforts in 2001:


March: WWP executive director Jon Marvel and WWP counsel Laird Lucas are cited among the 100 most influential figures in Idaho.

April: WWP files a series of lawsuits at the federal level, using the Endangered Species Act to challenge water diversions that impact salmon, steelhead and bull trout habitat.

May: WWP files an emergency petition to list slickspot peppergrass, a rare Idaho plant species.

June: In Idaho, WWP’s legal team delivers more than 65 notices of intention to sue under ESA over water diversions in endangered fish habitat in the Salmon River watershed.

July: Willow Creek Ecology, founded by John Carter in Mendon, Utah, merges with WWP, becoming our base of operations in the state. Carter files appeals on 176 grazing permits covering more than 1.5 million acres of BLM land, the first legal challenge to northern Utah’s ranching industry.

August: In another federal action, WWP and the Idaho Conservation League sue the Sawtooth National Forest for its failure to protect wolves.

September: Riparian and upland restoration begins at WWP’s 440-acre Greenfire Preserve on the East Fork of the Salmon River.

October: WWP receives a major grant from The Bullitt Foundation of Seattle in support of a project to improve management in the Caribou National Forest of Idaho.

November: The National Public Lands Grazing Campaign, a national initiative to end livestock grazing on public lands through financial incentives to ranchers, is unveiled.

December: Eight conservation groups, including WWP, file a formal protest with the Bureau of Land Management to challenge a mammoth land management plan in Oregon.

Call for Volunteers

Western Watersheds Project is seeking volunteers for work projects at its Greenfire Preserve on the East Fork of the Salmon River.

Projects range from painting the main house to planting to moving fences. Volunteers need not be experienced, only enthusiastic to work in a beautiful setting with the knowledge that your efforts will return something to the land on the East Fork.

Work projects and dates have not yet been set. WWP will assemble a list of names of people who want to volunteer. As projects are determined, we will notify you of tentative work dates and details of projects. We will attempt to schedule projects around convenient dates for all.

For more information and to sign up for volunteer projects, please call or e-mail Dale Grooms: (208) 890-0548 or debdale@mindspring.com.

INCOME

8% Memberships

45% Contributions

27% Cash Reserve

Total Income $450,777

EXPENSES

13% Administration

5% Fundraising

82% Programs

Total Expenses $450,777

Grants, Gifts & Thanks

Western Watersheds Project has received a $60,000 matching grant from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to support riparian rehabilitation and restoration of the watershed and banks of the East Fork of the Salmon River and its tributary, Lake Creek.

The award is part of the DEQ’s Nonpoint Source Implementation Program administered with funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Much of the restoration effort will be carried out on WWP’s Greenfire Preserve, a 440-acre former ranch property on the East Fork of the Salmon River.

WWP fund development director Judy Hall and WWP central Idaho director Stew Churchwell developed the restoration project for DEQ.

WWP has also received notice of a $10,000 grant from the Lazar Foundation in Portland, Oregon, in support of our efforts to protect and restore watersheds in the West.

The award is a general support grant for 2002.

WWP extends special thanks to the following WWP supporters, each of whom contributed $100 or more to our efforts since the publication of our previous newsletter:

Sherry and Doug Aanestad
Arthur Benson
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Dolores and Don Chapman
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“IdaGo!” is a wise way to go if you would like to support Western Watersheds Project through a work force contributions program. WWP is a member of “IdaGo!” a coalition of 28 nonprofit organizations in Idaho. The coalition is represented by Community Shares of Idaho, which participates with the United Way.

If you are a federal or state employee, or work for Ada County, the city of Boise, or Boise or Meridian school districts, you can donate to WWP simply by designating us on your donor card. If your employer participates in a United Way campaign, you can also designate WWP for your donation.

For more information, contact Gene Bray at 208-888-3293 or gene@westernwatersheds.org.
Watersheds Messenger

Watersheds Messenger is published quarterly for members, friends and supporters of Western Watersheds Project. Changes of address, renewals, new subscriptions, undelivered copies and ideas for articles should be sent to WWP, P.O. Box 1770, Hailey, Idaho 83333. Phone: (208) 788-2290. Fax: (208) 788-2298. Please note our new e-mail address: wwp@westernwatersheds.org and web site: www.westernwatersheds.org.

Mission Statement

Working to protect and restore Western watersheds through educational outreach, public policy initiatives, litigation and by ending incompatible uses of public lands.

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Please Join Us or Renew Your Membership Now

YES, I want to renew my membership in Western Watersheds Project to help protect and restore all western watersheds. Enclosed is my tax deductible annual membership:

Living Lightly: $20.00  Individual: $25.00  Family: $35.00  Sponsor: $500.00
Advocate: $100.00  Patron: $250.00  Other: $  

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