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Glacially-carved valley, Hoover Wilderness and Virginia Lakes. Photo: Laura Cunningham

EASTERN SIERRA GRAZING CASE: A WIN FOR WILDERNESS!

Getting the Sheep and Cows Out of the Mountains



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The Eastern Sierra landscapes of Mono County, California, are some of the most stunningly beautiful in the state. Between Yosemite National Park and the Bodie Hills are alpine ridges, glacially-carved valleys, icy lakes, and lodgepole pine-sagebrush habitats with views looking eastward out across Mono Lake and off into the vast Great Basin. Managed by the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, this area holds an unusually high degree of biodiversity and rare species, and is visited by hikers seeking quiet recreation and back-country trails into the High Sierra.

The Hoover Wilderness protects these wild crags of metamorphic rocks, volcanic deposits, and granodiorite, and many blue lakes. This is one of the original units of the National Wilderness Preservation System, first established as a Primitive Area in 1931, and then as a Wild Area in 1957. In 1964, Congress designated it as a Wilderness Area.

The Hoover is a hotspot for biodiversity, with whitebark pine, Yosemite toad, Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog, Lahontan cutthroat trout, Bi-State Distinct Population Segment of greater sage grouse, northern goshawk, pika, pygmy rabbit, and sightings of wolverine and the rare Sierra red fox. Gray wolves have traveled through the area as they wander south in the Sierra.

Yet these spectacular and popular landscapes have been grazed by livestock for decades, including inside the Wilderness Area. Domestic sheep herds have been historically grazing these mountain meadows and forests into recent times, but were removed in order to help recover the state- and federally-Endangered Sierra bighorn sheep, and to prevent respiratory disease transfer from domestic sheep to bighorn.

Sierra bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis sierrae*) were once found along the Sierra Nevada crest from Sonora Pass south to Olancha, California, but their population crashed during the 19th and 20th centuries because of diseases contracted from domestic sheep, forage competition with domestic livestock, and market hunting—and more recently drought and severe snow events—have left the population holding on at only 10% of estimated historic population levels. In order to stave off extinction, state and federal wildlife agencies recommended that Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest remove the domestic sheep from grazing allotments that overlapped the Sierra bighorn ranges. The Forest Service canceled the sheep allotments in the Hoover Wilderness and Virginia Lakes area of the Eastern Sierra to help bighorn populations recover. Removing the domestic sheep started a wonderful process that allowed the land and vegetation to begin to recover. Yet the rancher who grazed sheep herds here then requested that the Forest Service to graze cattle, instead.

In 2018, the Forest began an environmental assessment review that would allow cattle to replace sheep and graze the Hoover Wilderness. That is where WWP got involved.

As Western Watersheds Project's California Director, I observed the recovery of these montane habitats from sheep grazing, and we wanted to halt any future cattle grazing here. These public lands needed to be free of all livestock grazing.

The Forest Service's Bridgeport Southwest Grazing Project proposed cattle grazing on canceled sheep allotments on 33,000 acres over five allotments that had been naturally restoring for 10 to 15 years after domestic sheep were removed. The allotments have names like Dunderberg, named for the peak in the Hoover Wilderness, and Sinnamon Meadow.

We went to these allotments and documented plant and wildlife species. We photographed and took extensive notes on the sagebrush, aspen, willow, meadow, subalpine conifer, and alpine communities. We documented the native grasses, any invasive plants, and photographed recovering erosion from past livestock grazing. We sent all of this information and observations as reports to the Forest Service during their environmental review process. WWP took local advocates out to show them these restoring habitats.

Then we learned the Environmental Assessment was internally contentious within the Forest district office, and this gave us momentum to continue to engage the agencies and push for no cattle in the Hoover Wilderness.

In the end, the Forest Service chose the No Action alternative in their environmental review—meaning no cattle would be allowed on these canceled sheep allotments. The allotments would remain closed to all livestock grazing—a big win!

The rancher protested this preliminary decision, but the Forest denied it. The Hoover Wilderness to this day is free of sheep and cattle grazing.

In the summer of 2024, I hiked up the Virginia Lakes trail into the Hoover Wilderness on these allotments that are now free of livestock. I wanted to monitor the recovery of these grazed areas. The prior sheep trampling and grazing erosion was naturally recovering. The meadows and willow groves were restoring to their former vigor, and I found many native grasses such as alpine timothy, prairie junegrass, Cusick's bluegrass, California needlegrass, and spike fescue. Sedge wetlands were lush, and the glacial lakes were crystal clear, with no manure or active erosional inputs due to hooves.

I saw tracks of what might be a bighorn sheep, and at 11,000 feet the Clark's nutcrackers and black-crowned rosy finches flew around snow patches. I was happy that we could do the work to help conserve these amazing wild landscapes. **This is a Western Watersheds Project win to keep livestock grazing out of Wilderness.** 🍃





Photos: Tyler Lastovich (top)
SD State University (bottom)

VIRTUAL FENCING ON PUBLIC LANDS: A MODERN SOLUTION WITH UNSEEN CONSEQUENCES?



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The use of “virtual fence” for livestock management is becoming more common on public lands. Like the invisible fence used to keep dogs in people’s yards, virtual fence is designed to confine livestock in certain areas, but over much larger regions. As this technology develops and is increasingly employed by ranchers and land management agencies, Western Watersheds Project has identified important questions about the potential benefits and drawbacks to wildlife and other public values from virtual fence.

First, how does it work? Cows or other livestock wear electronic collars made by companies like Vence® or Nofence. These collars communicate with one or more GPS towers called base stations or gateways. Using a computer or smartphone connected to the internet, a rancher or manager can create boundaries on a basemap. Those locations are then transmitted to the collars from the gateways. When the cow approaches the invisible line, its collar beeps a warning. If it continues and crosses it, the cow receives a shock from the collar. Ranchers can view where each cow is located on the map in real time and receive notifications.

It is easy to understand why permittees would be excited about this technology. Forget the horse and the spurs—now you can be a rancher from your kitchen table! Time and labor costs for riding, herding, finding livestock, and fence maintenance are likely to be much less. Further, in the projects WWP has reviewed, the cost of the base stations has generally been borne by the agency, i.e., the public, while the grazing permittee pays only for the rental cost of the collars.



Is there any public benefit? Perhaps the greatest benefit of virtual fence would be the replacement of physical fence. Removing some of the hundreds of thousands of miles of barbed wire fencing on our public lands would reduce deadly barriers for wildlife, and improve public access, recreation, and scenery. Unfortunately, thus far no virtual fence proposal that WWP staff have reviewed included the removal of physical fencing.

Additionally, more precise and effective exclusion of livestock from riparian areas, campgrounds, archaeological sites, trails, Endangered Species habitat, and burned areas would have clear public benefits. Cows could be kept off roads, reducing potential for collisions with cars. Landowners on inholdings in open-range states might be saved from having to fence out livestock. However, it remains to be seen how effective virtual fencing is over the vast and rugged terrain of the West. There have been reports of short battery life, cows that disregard the deterrent shocks, and black holes with no collar reception.

Mapping of livestock use, including records of livestock straying from designated areas, would also be very valuable for management purposes and public oversight. Nonetheless, while WWP is not aware of any official policies about data availability, ranchers are likely to consider this information proprietary and be very wary about its public availability. Indeed, we've heard of agency managers claiming that they have been prohibited from even asking permittees for collar data, which would be available under the Freedom of Information Act if it was in the agencies' possession.

That raises another serious question about virtual fence: Who decides where virtual fences should be "placed," and when they should be changed to another location—the agency or the permittee? Would these schematics be analyzed under NEPA, and how would the agency or public be able to monitor that plans were being followed? Of all the recent virtual fence proposals listed on BLM's planning website, none analyzed anything but the impacts of constructing the gateway towers, and most were approved under a cursory "categorical exclusion" rather than a full environmental assessment.

Critically, would more efficient management of livestock result in more actual grazing on the landscape? If permittees could confine animals to less-frequently grazed areas of an allotment, allotments might support far more livestock than they do now, and areas that currently receive light or no use because of rougher terrain or greater distance to water would provide additional AUMs. This also means that areas where wildlife were previously relieved of competition with livestock could be put into new use.

There are serious questions about the use of virtual fence on public lands and it remains to be seen if they will provide any value to the public. But given the rapid increase in the availability of virtual fence technology commercially, and interest from the livestock industry, we are certain to see many new proposals in the near future. 🍷

A photograph of an older couple hiking away from the camera on a trail. The man is on the left, wearing a grey hoodie and a tan backpack. The woman is on the right, wearing a purple jacket and a blue backpack. They are walking through a forest with trees covered in autumn foliage. The sun is low in the sky, creating a warm, golden light. The title "Leave a Legacy" is written in a white, cursive font over the top left of the image.

Leave a Legacy

By including Western Watersheds Project in your estate plans, you can ensure lasting protection for our public lands, watersheds, and wildlife from the harmful impacts of extractive industries. Your legacy gift will help preserve the beauty, biodiversity, and freedom of these wild landscapes for generations to come.

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Nancy@westernwatersheds.org or
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SCAPEGOATING WILD HORSES ACROSS THE WEST



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Western Watersheds Project (WWP) and many of our allies have been vocal in our criticism of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for disproportionately blaming wild horses for land degradation on public lands, when the real ecological disaster in the West is cattle grazing. In nearly all areas managed for wild horses, cattle and are also present in overwhelming numbers, often outnumbering horses by a ratio of 34:1.

Despite this, the BLM frequently asserts (without evidence) that wild horse populations, particularly when they exceed the agency's "appropriate management levels," are the primary cause of land degradation. Wild horses are convenient scapegoats for the damage that is overwhelmingly caused by cattle.

The BLM manages 245 million acres of public land, of which 155 million acres are designated for livestock grazing. Only 11% of these have wild horses. On these lands, the available forage is divided, with a significant portion allocated for cattle, leaving less for wild horses and wildlife. When overgrazing leads to land degradation, the BLM often points to wild horses as the sole cause, using this argument to justify their removal through helicopter roundups.

When comparing the impacts of cattle and wild horses, the difference is significant. Cattle, being larger and heavier, tend to gather around water sources, where their concentrated activity leads to severe damage to riparian areas. This includes soil compaction, erosion, and the destruction of vegetation, which destabilizes ecosystems. In contrast, wild horses cover a wider range and are more mobile, distributing their grazing over a larger area.

As a result, their impact is spread more evenly, and they do not cause the same level of localized damage. Despite these clear differences, the BLM often equates the impact of cattle and wild horses, ignoring the fact that cattle, especially in their current numbers, are far more responsible for land degradation.

The BLM's tendency to blame wild horses is further driven by political and economic pressure from the ranching industry. Ranchers who graze cattle on public lands benefit from low-cost grazing fees, which offer significant financial advantages. Pressure from the livestock industry creates a strong incentive for the BLM to prioritize the interests of ranchers over those of other stakeholders like environmentalists and wildlife advocates. By placing the blame for environmental harm on wild horses, the BLM is able to maintain the status quo and avoid conflicts with ranchers, allowing harmful cattle grazing to continue largely unchecked. This has resulted in a disproportionate focus on controlling wild horse populations while the real issue—cattle overgrazing—is left unaddressed.

When public lands suffer from grazing-related degradation, it is the responsibility of land managers to make accurate and good-faith assessments to address the root cause. The reality is that until cattle and sheep grazing on public lands is brought under control, the ecosystems will continue to suffer immensely. The ranching industry's tendency to scapegoat wild horses is an ongoing problem, and real change will only come when cattle grazing is recognized and addressed as the primary driver of degradation. Current federal regulations authorize the Bureau to permanently close wild horse HMAs to any or all types of livestock. While wild horses can contribute to overgrazing, their overall impact is nowhere near that of cattle.

Once cattle are removed from large expanses of public lands, predators like cougars and wolves can survive to play a greater role in controlling horse populations in tandem. 🍀

Photo: Kimerlee Curyl

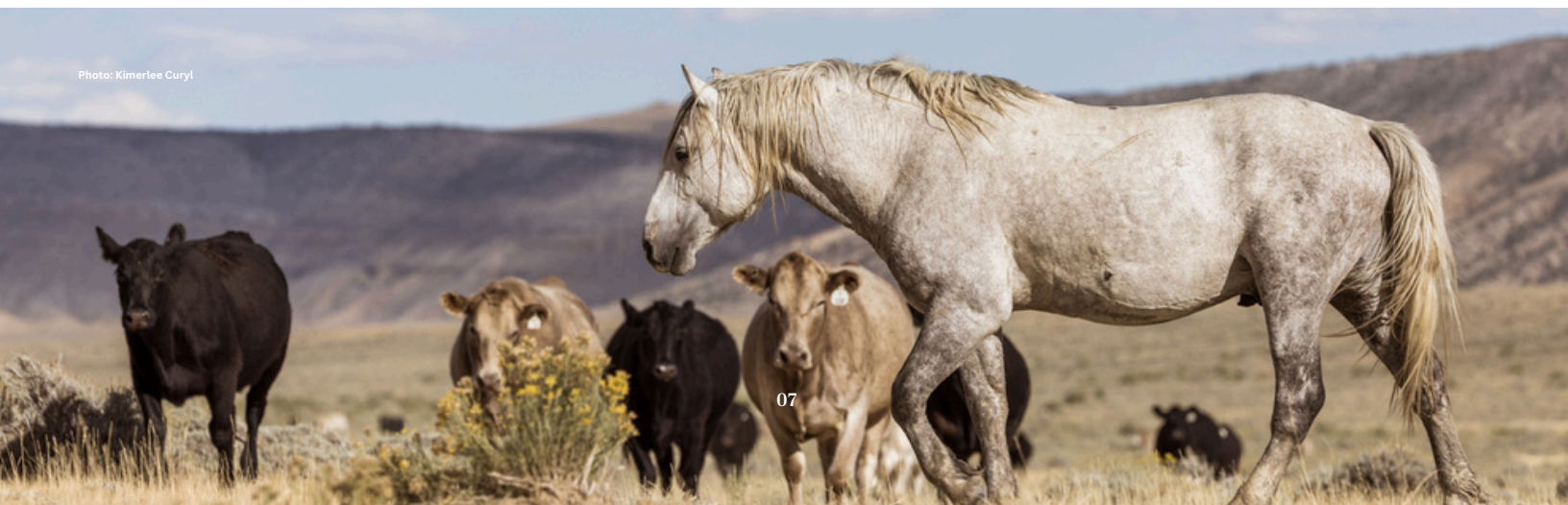




Photo: Kerry Hargrove

Western Watersheds Project is proud to bestow the Sagebrush Sentinel award on sage grouse biologist Dr. Matt Holloran, for his contributions to the science and conservation of sage grouse and their habitats throughout the American West. The sage grouse is considered an “umbrella species,” requiring large tracts of unspoiled sagebrush habitat to survive. When adequate conservation measures are applied to secure the long-term persistence of sage grouse, sagebrush habitats also support scores of other sensitive species of native plants and animals. Dr. Holloran’s key contributions to our collective understanding of sage grouse habitat have helped Western Watersheds Project and many other conservation groups secure improved protective measures for sage grouse and other species.

One of Dr. Holloran’s first major contributions to sage grouse science came at the beginning of his career, when he wrote his PhD dissertation under the guidance of Dr. Stan Anderson on the impacts of oil and gas fields on breeding and nesting sage grouse. The study, conducted through the University of Wyoming’s U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Cooperative Research Unit, was funded by the oil and gas industry which might have been expecting that Holloran’s research would find negligible impacts from drilling. Instead, Holloran’s dissertation determined that oil and gas roads had a negative impact on sage grouse lek populations when the road was sited within 1.9 miles of the lek (the traditional display and breeding site that sage grouse use year after year with great fidelity). Any drilling activity occurring within 3.1 miles of a lek, and even drilling sites quietly producing gas for decades afterward when located within 1.9 miles of a lek, also drive down sage grouse populations. Dr. Holloran’s findings landed like a bombshell when they hit the media. The findings have stood the test of time and are still cited as a primary authority on oil and gas impacts on sage grouse today.

For a graduate student to report findings like these in the most rabidly pro-oil-and-gas state in the nation, in a study funded by the oil and gas industry, took immense courage. This is not always the result when state land-grant universities, which are prone to political pressure from governors and legislators, publish scientific findings on favored industries.

Dr. Holloran’s contributions to sage grouse conservation did not end there. He embarked on a career as a science consultant and continued to specialize in sage grouse and their habitat requirements. He has continued to publish. In 2005, he authored a study showing that sage grouse nest success was increased when taller grasses are present. His 2010 study showed that yearling sage grouse would not use habitats impacted by wellfield development, discovering the mechanism that explains why sage grouse populations decline following industrial development with a 2-to-10-year time lag: the adults stay on, with tenacious fidelity to lekking and nesting areas, but the youngsters won’t stick around. Also in 2010, Dr. Holloran was lead author on a study showing that wintering sage grouse avoid oil and gas facilities on the Pinedale Anticline in western Wyoming, and then he led a 2015 study that showed this avoidance continues even when truck traffic was reduced by building pipelines to transport condensate liquids away from wellsites to radically reduce the truck traffic. These were key studies on winter habitat requirements for sage grouse.

In 2015, Dr. Holloran took the lead in drafting a scientists’ letter, signed by ten other eminent sage grouse and habitat experts, seeking a strengthening of the federal West-wide sage grouse plans. The letter pointed out that the measurable, enforceable, and science-based habitat protections outlined in the Bureau of Land Management’s National Technical Team report (also endorsed by sage grouse conservation groups including WWP) were being ignored, and that the West-wide plans needed strengthening. The scientists’ letter also pointed out the need for 7-inch grass height habitat requirements, which ultimately were incorporated into the plans as Habitat Objectives. BLM and Forest Service land managers would go on to routinely ignore these habitat objectives, but the objectives gave conservation groups a solid basis to argue for increased habitat protections in the context of overgrazing by domestic livestock.

Recently, Dr. Holloran was hired by the Bureau of Land Management as their Wyoming Sage Grouse Coordinator. We hope that Dr. Holloran can transform the agency’s Wyoming State Office from a hub of extractive industry to a credible agency for sustainable land management. It will be a huge lift, but we have great confidence in Dr. Holloran’s abilities, and we’re grateful for the commitment to science – and to sage grouse – that he has shown throughout his career. 🍷



The Kings River pyrg (*Pyrgulopsis imperialis*) is a tiny freshwater snail, typically measuring around 2 to 3 millimeters in length (the size of the tip of a ballpoint pen)! Despite its small size, it plays an important role in its ecosystem, inhabiting springs and streams in the Kings River region of Nevada. Photo: Paul Ruprecht

WWP'S KINGS RIVER PYRG LISTING PETITION: 12-MONTH DECISION APPROACHES



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Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“the Service”) determined that WWP’s October 2023 petition to list the Kings River pyrg (*Pyrgulopsis imperialis*) under the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”) presented “substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted.” According to law, the Service now has 12 months from receiving a petition to determine the species’ status.

The Service’s positive 90-day finding highlights the urgent need to protect the Kings River pyrg, a rare aquatic snail struggling to survive in only 13 shallow, isolated springs in the sacred landscape of Peehee Mu’huh (also known as Thacker Pass) located in Humboldt County, Nevada. This area holds deep religious, cultural, and historical significance to the Paiute, Shoshone, and Washoe tribes.

Since early February, the Service has been conducting a species status review, during which it is soliciting the public to submit scientific, commercial, and other information regarding this highly vulnerable species that may affect its status.

The Atsa koodakuh wyh Nuwu (which translates to People of Red Mountain) is a committee of traditional knowledge keepers and descendants of the Fort McDermitt Paiute, Shoshone, and Bannock Tribes that has been at the forefront of efforts to protect Peehee Mu’huh from the impacts of the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine. Atsa koodakuh wyh Nuwu and WWP are working together to ensure that the Service’s 12-month finding results in full protection for the Kings River pyrg and prevents its extinction.

Our organizations recently submitted a comment letter to the Service providing new information indicating that the Kings River pyrg’s status is immediately at risk.

Our comment letter raised the following concerns. First, reports submitted by Lithium Nevada Corporation to the Nevada Department of Environmental Protection suggest that water volume may have noticeably diminished in the Thacker Pass spring complex and Thacker Creek in recent years.

This indicates that drought, aridification, and possibly exploratory drilling of the Thacker Pass mine are impacting vital water resources for the Kings River pyrg far sooner than projected.

Second, based on these same reports submitted by Lithium Nevada, it is clear that the company is not monitoring springs in Thacker Pass as required in its federal and state permits, resulting in significant data gaps and preventing sufficient analysis of the mine’s impacts on the Kings River pyrg’s habitat.

Third, BLM-managed livestock grazing is continuing to heavily impact two of the known Kings River pyrg-occupied springs.



In light of the data gaps, the troubling data regarding groundwater depletion, and Department of Environmental Protection statements indicating that a corrective action plan for the mine and permit revisions are currently under review, Atsa koodakuh wyh Nuwu and WWP have requested the Service to investigate the mine’s impacts on the Kings River pyrg and its habitat.

We will continue to provide critical information to the Service to establish present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of the Kings River pyrg habitat or range, and the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms. 🌱

GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT FACILITATES RESEARCH ON POST-FIRE RECOVERY



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There was record-breaking heat in July of this year on the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah. Conditions were already dry, so when a fire started (human activity is suspected) on Timber Mountain, it took off and burned over 11,000 acres, primarily in dense pinyon juniper woodlands. The burn was severe in places, with no vegetation remaining on site. The risk of soil erosion was high. The monument managers drew up an Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation plan to prevent further damage.

The typical management response in these situations is to chain the burned area with bulldozers to prepare it for seeding and then apply fast-growing non-native species to prevent soil erosion and re-establish forage for grazing. The trouble with this approach is that it doesn't consider the invasive nature of non-native grasses and protecting the islands of intact native vegetation that may persist within the fire boundary. Surviving vegetation can provide native plant materials, help stabilize soils, suppress weeds, and fix nitrogen. Often, vegetation resprouts mere weeks after a fire, immediately beginning the recovery of native species far faster than a vegetation treatment can.

Less than two months after the Deer Springs fire, we are seeing eleven native species within the fire perimeter: lemon scurf pea, Gambel's oak, coyote willow, globe mallow, redroot buckwheat, skunkbush, four-wing saltbush, prince's plume, scarlet gilia, stickseed, and sand dropseed. Remnant swaths of living biocrust are protecting the sandy soil, fixing nitrogen, and absorbing any precipitation that falls. Chaining would destroy this recovery.

Using non-native seed in the restoration seed mix is also problematic. The National Monument management plan prioritizes using native species, although non-natives are allowed in emergencies and to provide forage for livestock. The Environmental Assessment for this project specifically says that providing forage is one of their priorities for this area. This is a concern. While it's true that native seed is not always available, and that non-native species may establish quicker and reduce weed establishment, that must be balanced with the fact that the non-natives often used in restoration, such as crested wheatgrass, Russian wild rye, and intermediate wheatgrass, can be aggressive and outcompete native species. This risks permanently altering the native vegetation communities on the National Monument, communities that the monument is charged with restoring. Native plant communities have greater biodiversity and resistance to climate change than non-native ones, so replacing native plant communities is a better bet in the long run.

Agencies rarely conduct research into these management questions to better understand restoration dynamics and come up with better outcomes. In a welcome development, however, the National Monument science program has really stepped up to the plate after the Deer Spring Fire by inviting researchers to come to the monument and study fire recovery and restoration. They plan to facilitate studies on the use of native versus non-native plant materials, biocrust recovery, and different stabilization techniques. We hope the research will also include how chained versus unchained treatments affect rates of seeding establishment and exotic weed invasions, and we appreciate this new emphasis on science-based management and cooperation. *(Continued on next page).*



Photo: Laura Welp

In all my comments on agency vegetation projects over the years, including this one, I recommended installing research exclosures to serve as a control for comparison with treatment methods. Agencies usually decline this request, however. Fortunately, the National Monument science program understands how necessary exclosures are to answering these and other research questions. In what is a first in my experience, the National Monument plans to install these structures. WWP and other conservation groups will be on hand to help install them, identify plants, and provide other help if requested.

WWP also hopes that the National Monument will take this opportunity to focus on the urgent need to know more about the effects of long-term livestock grazing on the success of seedlings. The National Monument data show that post-fire seedlings have some of the lowest land health scores, and it's important to understand why. Given the landscape-scale effects of livestock grazing and the integral effect grazing management has on the long-term success of a vegetation project, this should be a priority for research. A network of large, long-term grazing exclosures would be invaluable.

We are encouraged by the Grand Staircase-Escalante's emphasis on science in management. We hope this post-fire recovery research will serve as a magnet for researchers on a variety of restoration topics that will lead to a better understanding of landscape dynamics and more effective management. Hats off to the Grand Staircase-Escalante science program! 🌱



Photo: Laura Welp



Photo: Laura Welp



Photo: Laura Welp

Stock up on holiday gifts that help.

A portion of every item sold goes directly back to our work to protect the West. New styles coming soon.





VIGILANCE ON WYOMING'S PUBLIC LANDS: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL ACTION



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Shiny, new, and tightly pulled silver wire adorned the gate separating us from the grazing allotments we were to visit that morning just north of Cody, Wyoming. Neither of us had seen anything like it—the wire securing the gate shut was so taut it was nearly impossible to unhook. It felt like a message: the folks leasing those grazing allotments were content with their practices, and anyone questioning them was not welcome.

I was there with a member of the public, a hunter who was concerned about the steady decline in sage grouse populations he had observed in the area over the last 20 years. His concerns are not unique—declining sage grouse populations over the course of folks' lifetimes in Wyoming is something I've heard about in my ventures all over the state. Although sage grouse populations are known for fluxing every 7-10 years, Wyomingites testify to much longer declines in sage grouse numbers. It makes one wonder whether federal and state agencies are becoming desensitized to ever-smaller populations, a phenomenon known as "shifting baseline syndrome."

What we found behind the gate, on public land, was a junkyard of old truck and tractor tires, trash, and a makeshift shooting range. Agency documents show that the grazing permittee admitted this was their shooting range, trash, and pallet debris. Among the junk, we also came across a cow carcass that had been left or dragged there, increasing the likelihood of a bear being drawn to the site. Unfortunately, just this past summer, a grizzly bear in the adjacent Bighorn Range was lethally removed after injuring a cow—Wyoming Game and Fish doesn't approve of grizzlies being in the area.



Trash on public land north of Cody, WY. Photo: Dagny Signorelli

Atop the first hill we crested, we found baling twine, remnants of hay, and introduced weeds. It appeared that because of overgrazing resulting in the lack of natural forage on this public land, the permittee had resorted to feeding cattle with hay, a violation of their permit. Sage grouse depend on a healthy understory of grasses and forbs for both food and nesting. Grass height is a key factor in nest survival, so when sagebrush dominates and grasses are severely depleted—forcing ranchers to bring in hay—the future for sage grouse looks bleak.

As we continued through the allotments, we saw many cattle but only occasional sage grouse droppings (pictured below) from previous years. Despite it being the tail end of the lekking season, we found no recent evidence of the birds. The allotments we visited were either part of or adjacent to occupied sage grouse habitat.



According to Bureau of Land Management (Bureau) data, the most recent land health assessments for these allotments reveal that land health standards are not being met due to livestock impacts. One of the allotments is categorized as needing improvement, while another—despite failing its land health standards—is inexplicably classified as "maintain."

Even though the last Bureau assessment was conducted over 20 years ago, grazing has continued on these lands without an updated evaluation. Agency documents reveal that Bureau employees have noted very low plant vigor on one of the allotments compared to the thriving vegetation within the exclosure.

During our visit, three employees from the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) and three from the Bureau joined us on the trip to the allotments. We later obtained documents that revealed the Bureau employees wanted to see if we would trespass.

The BuRec permit explicitly states that "unacceptable conservation practices such as overgrazing will result in revocation of the permit," and it forbids the supplemental feeding of livestock with hay or grain. Yet we found hay hauled out onto BuRec land. It seems that when the permittee exhausted their resources within the permitted area, they simply shifted their activities to nearby BuRec land, technically outside their allotment boundaries. Fortunately, since our visit, the trash we discovered has been cleaned up.

Thankfully, a local bird hunter who deeply cares about the land took the time to bring this to our attention, after exhausting every effort to get a response from the agencies themselves. Without people like him—those who not only see what's happening but refuse to ignore it, especially at the local level—these issues would quietly persist, with our public lands and wildlife bearing the cost. This situation also shows that when people come together to hold these agencies accountable, we can make a difference. It's not just about policies or permits—it's about the landscapes we share, the wildlife we're trying to protect, and the communities that depend on both. Real change happens when enough of us care enough to keep fighting for it. 🌱

WWP WINS A MAJOR VICTORY AGAINST BIG OIL IN WYOMING



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In eastern Wyoming, the Bureau of Land Management approved 5,000 new oil and gas wells to be drilled in key habitats for sage grouse, hawks, and golden eagles under the Converse County Oil and Gas Project. Western Watersheds Project and Powder River Basin Resource Council joined forces to challenge this massive blank check for 50 years of drilling, and in September, *we won!* Our litigation team was supported by the outstanding lawyering of Advocates for the West.

In the history of significant environmental wins against Big Oil, this Converse County victory ranks among the biggest. In 2006, the 1,240-well Seminole Road coalbed methane project threatened to dump millions of gallons of salty wastewater into Seminole Reservoir, but environmentalists convinced the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality to rule that this would degrade the Miracle Mile trout fishery, a Class I waterway protected under the Clean Water Act.

Facing the requirement to pump the wastewater underground, the company abandoned the project. In 2009, Earthjustice (representing a coalition of sportsmen and environmental groups) reversed a plan to open 2 million acres on Otero Mesa, including potential wilderness, in southeast New Mexico. In 2012, conservationists won a ruling that protected 55,000 acres of sensitive elk habitat on western Colorado's Roan Plateau from drilling. Our ruling against the Converse County Oil and Gas Project blocks new drilling permits from being issued, essentially putting the brakes on oil and gas drilling across 1.5 million acres of federal lands and federally owned mineral deposits.

For Western Watersheds Project, the biggest issue with this project approval was that it waived the usual protections for nesting birds of prey. Ordinarily, drilling rigs cannot set up next to hawk or eagle nests and start drilling during spring and early summer when raptors are nesting. We argued that this departure from standard conservation practices resulted in "unnecessary or undue degradation" to raptor habitats, a violation of federal law. Because the judge deemed the project illegal based on the flawed groundwater analysis, she did not deem it necessary to rule on any other violations of law, including this one.



The Converse County project area is also home to important populations of the dwindling greater sage grouse. Sage grouse populations in northeastern Wyoming are a linchpin for sage grouse connectivity, linking sage grouse populations in eastern Montana and the Dakotas with the much healthier grouse populations of south-central and southwestern Wyoming. Without this linkage, remaining High Plains sage grouse populations would be isolated and vulnerable to random disease or weather events that could wipe out sage grouse across the Great Plains.

The northeastern Wyoming sage grouse have faced some of the steepest population declines anywhere, and scientists are concerned that they may be close to entering an extinction vortex. Hammered by coalbed methane development in the 2000s, and decimated by West Nile virus outbreaks, this population faced the industrialization of the southern half of the Powder River Basin under the Converse County project.

The State of Wyoming has been colluding with the oil and gas industry to eliminate the Douglas Core Area, an important block of sage grouse priority habitat inside the Converse County project area. This Core Area has surpassed the allowable threshold of industrial surface disturbance set forth in state and federal sage grouse plans, halting further development. Instead of enforcing sage grouse habitat measures to allow the grouse population to recover, the state (and now federal agencies) are trying to delete the Douglas Core Area entirely, so the habitat protections can be removed. This sets a dangerous precedent – when industrial use exceeds key biological thresholds, the conservation measures are simply swept aside. We remain vigilant to make sure that the Biden administration does not adopt this ruse in their 2024 federal sage grouse plan amendments.

In our case, the judge ruled that the Bureau of Land Management used a flawed groundwater model, that radically underestimated how much groundwater would be used.

Regardless, the stoppage of new drilling permits grants a reprieve to wildlife of all kinds, from golden eagles to sage grouse, from prairie dogs to ferruginous hawks. It's the biggest victory for lands and wildlife against the oil industry in more than a decade! 🍀

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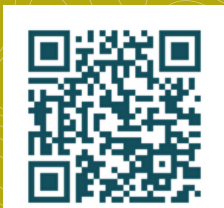
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