



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Leaders in Wildlife Science, Management and Conservation

Final Position Statement

Livestock Grazing on Rangelands in the Western United States

Functional rangeland ecosystems, supporting a wide diversity of native plant and invertebrate species, are critically important to sustaining wildlife diversity and productivity in the western United States. Scientifically sound management plans and practices are key to restoring lands degraded by many years of poor range management that damaged soils, water, wildlife, invertebrate and plant diversity. Livestock grazing is only one of the influences on western rangelands—these lands support a wide variety of uses and values. Livestock grazing is recognized as both a land use and a management tool that can be used to alter rangeland vegetation to achieve specific objectives.

Resource management agencies must recognize, plan, implement, and quantitatively monitor livestock herbivory to sustain and improve renewable rangeland resources for the future use and enjoyment of the American public. An ecosystem approach to rangeland management is an effective starting point for restoration and conservation of rangelands. It promotes heterogeneous landscapes comprised of diverse mosaics of plant, invertebrate, and animal communities, including the full range of state and transition models for ecological sites; and is based on plans consistent with ecosystem characteristics and with local habitat objectives for wildlife species. An ecosystem approach also provides for declaring certain lands unsuitable for livestock grazing, a critical component of rangeland grazing plans.

Effective grazing management plans developed under this ecosystem approach consider multiple uses and provide opportunity for improved wildlife-livestock interactions while restoring important resource functions and values that will help sustain viable biological and human communities. An important component is to also meet conservation objectives for habitat and populations of threatened and endangered wildlife and plant species. Such plans need to be economically viable and based on fair market values.

Ecosystem-based grazing management plans must also include provisions, support, and criteria for quantitative, repeatable monitoring and adaptive management as new scientific information and studies become available. A goal of adaptive management of grazing on western rangelands would be to continue to improve wild and domestic herbivore programs and practices as new knowledge and understanding of rangeland ecosystems becomes available.

These programs involve effective coordination and cooperation among state and federal agencies and affected publics in developing policy alternatives, implementing policy provisions, and evaluating policy outcomes of grazing management strategies on western rangelands.

The policy of The Wildlife Society in regard to the effects of livestock grazing on rangelands in the western United States is to support:

1. Implementation of stocking rates (grazing intensity), timing, duration and livestock grazing systems that will improve, restore, and maintain rangeland and riparian ecosystems.
2. Implementation of scientifically-based grazing management that uses results of field-based, experimental designs accepted by relevant scientific expertise; considers all resources, trends, and interactions plus the broad spectrum of human values and needs; and provides for applicable adaptive management.
3. Enforcement of grazing regulations on state and federal lands and strong penalties when grazing agreements are violated and when non-permitted livestock repeatedly trespass.
4. Restoration of degraded plant communities using native plant species; non-native plant species should be used only when native species are not an option.
5. Consideration of alternatives to grazing for vegetation manipulation and rangeland restoration, including fire, mechanical, biological, or chemical means, or combinations of such alternatives, or grazing exclosures.
6. Agency efforts to recognize and guard against the potential for disease transmission between domestic livestock and wildlife.
7. Agencies in developing and implementing objective and quantifiable criteria for designating lands unsuitable for livestock grazing when appropriate, based on soil productivity, forage distribution and abundance, utilization by wildlife, and other factors.
8. Research and development of cost-effective, quantifiable, and repeatable long-term habitat monitoring and evaluation procedures for western rangelands.
9. Research evaluating the effects of wild herbivore foraging on rangeland ecosystems, and the results of rangeland restoration practices designed to improve degraded plant communities, especially riparian areas.
10. Development of strong professional and public education programs that clearly articulate goals and outcomes of rangeland management.

Approved by Council November 2017. Expires October 2022.