



Statement of the American Farm Bureau Federation

**TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**

**The Essential Role of Livestock Grazing on Federal Lands
and its Importance to Rural America**

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Presented By:

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**On behalf of
The American Farm Bureau Federation**

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, and Members of the Committee, my name is Stefanie Smallhouse. I am President of the Arizona Farm Bureau Federation and am presenting this testimony on behalf of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the nation's largest general farm organization. I am honored to be here today to offer testimony to the committee regarding *The Essential Role of Livestock Grazing on Federal Lands and its Importance to Rural America*.

Those of us who work in the small percentage of the population producing food and fiber, and the even smaller percentage who produce beef, appreciate the chance to share with you information about the role we play in strengthening our nation and providing food security for Americans. I am going to describe the relationship between private lands and government-owned or -entrusted lands within the world of cattle ranching in the West and how this relationship is an important public/private partnership. This partnership maintains open space on private, state and federal lands through management of watersheds; encourages capital investments for the benefit of livestock and wildlife on working landscapes; supplies a large workforce to manage and care for the public trust without added expense to the taxpayer; creates economic activity and sustains a tax base for rural communities; and bolsters our food security through the efficient nutrient conversion of a vast natural resource otherwise unusable for human consumption.

In large part, the American West was settled by farmers and ranchers engaged in livestock production. When Congress began to regulate livestock grazing on federal lands, a key component of that regulatory scheme as expressed in the Taylor Grazing Act was the maintenance of the economic stability of the ranching community. Many rural communities throughout the West depend on federal lands grazing for their economic stability. Ranchers are good stewards of the lands they use. Some of the best wildlife habitat is found on these lands. Federal lands ranchers preserve open space and provide valuable environmental contributions across the West. A significant number of ranching families live in the same places that their ancestors settled in the 19th century.

Drought, wildfire, fluctuating prices and lawsuits have made livestock ranching a much more challenging endeavor in recent years. Fourth and fifth generation ranchers face the loss of their lands. The stability of the ranching community that the Taylor Grazing Act sought to preserve is severely challenged.

My own family ranches in Southeastern Arizona. The Carlink Ranch straddles the Lower San Pedro River and operates in the same location it did over 130 years ago. My husband and I are raising the sixth generation to live and work on this cow calf operation. We have been recognized locally and nationally for our conservation ethic and the sustainability of our practices is evident in our longevity. We also produce a very fine beef product!

The ranch itself is a working partnership between private, county, state trust and federal lands. Our private lands are farmed for irrigated hay and forage crops, which allows us to properly rotate and manage our cattle herd for year-round grazing. The Lower San Pedro River corridor is primarily private and an area of heightened environmental awareness for the habitat it provides in an arid southwest environment. In 134 years, we have actually decreased the number of houses in our footprint, while increasing water sources, forage and open space. Like many other

western cattle ranches, the Carlink Ranch provides an open space causeway for wildlife traveling between two mountain ranges. What we refer to as our uplands, is primarily government-owned or -entrusted land. Were it not for our presence along the river these two upland ranges would exist as solitary and disjunctive areas of habitat.

The public-private partnership which exists between ranchers and publicly held grazing lands in the Western United States allows us to conserve and efficiently manage the vast natural resources with which we are blessed. Some of the most pristine environments and riparian areas in the West exist on private ranch lands. These lands are the anchor for millions of grazing land acres on federal and state trust lands. Western ranches tend to be vast in acreage to survive periods of drought, combat creeping development and mitigate for restrictive environmental actions. This requires an assembly of various ownership within one ranch operation; however, the assemblage is managed as one unit regardless of ownership and this is more in line with landscape scale conservation efforts which don't start and stop dependent upon political boundaries. Ranchers invest in working lands infrastructure and maintain that infrastructure for livestock, wildlife, and the public in general. Cattle are an integral part of managing our forests to prevent catastrophic fire and ranchers play an important role in planning for prescribed burning and fire recovery. Grazing management on federal lands improves watersheds and water infiltration. In Arizona, we are well into a twenty-year drought. Without the development and maintenance of the water sources we have for our livestock, wildlife would be without water for most of the year. We have invested a great deal of money in controlling the invasive mesquite tree, which consumes water at an alarming rate and creates a monoculture with little understory vegetation to slow water infiltration.

This partnership benefits the well-being of our citizens and their access to an abundant, affordable and safe source of animal protein for a well-balanced diet. In order to keep that supply abundant and affordable, the production of beef must be efficient. Only about 16.5% of land in the U.S. is arable farmland and used in the production of food, feed and fiber crops; from the remaining undeveloped land we must garner other food sources. Nearly half (47%) of the western U.S. is owned by the federal government and produces cellulose indigestible for humans. The association between cattle ranching and government-owned lands in the western U.S. is the highest and best use of those lands in assuring a complete and balanced food supply in the U.S.

Economic development in many rural communities throughout the West is limited to production industries such as mining, logging and agriculture. In Arizona, the beef industry contributed \$1.2 billion in economic output in 2012 and was considered the economic base in six of the fifteen counties. Nearly three-quarters of Arizona's total land is managed by grazing. (Kerna, et al., 2014). Over one-third of all ranches in Arizona include a mixture of two or more government owned lands within the ranch unit and another third consist solely of federal grazing lands (Ruyle, et al., 2000). Generally, ranch lands provide more in tax revenue than they require in services.

Mr. Steve Barker, a range ecologist with a long and respected career in both the public and private sectors, recognized the importance of this relationship several years ago. He asked the question, "What would it cost the taxpayers of this country to provide that same level of management of public lands that ranchers provide every day?" At a minimum, each ranch

employs at least 2 people who are on call for work duty throughout western rangelands 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These resource managers are a presence in both the widely used recreational areas and the vast remote areas of the Western U.S. They deter poaching, resource destruction, illegal dumping and destruction of cultural resources, while assisting members of the public in areas where help is hard to find. They generate direct revenue to federal and state governments through permits and leases for cattle grazing. These land managers provide their own operational equipment, buildings, benefits and administrative necessities. They invest in and maintain range improvements, benefiting livestock, wildlife and the public. Many of these ranchers and their employees have been caretakers of the same resources for their entire lives and often for many generations. They have years of experience and a wealth of knowledge of these environments.

Using Arizona as an example, 85% of the state's grazing land, not including tribal lands, is administered by either a federal agency or state trust land (Ruyle, et al., 2000). According to the USDA, in 2012 there were over 3300 beef cattle ranches in production in Arizona. Given the important relationship between private, federal and state grazing lands, it's logical to assume most if not all of these ranches are managing federal and/or state natural resources. State trust land management varies considerably from state to state, but if you were to assume the average salary of a federal employee to be \$60,000 annually, to replace the ranch workforce would be a minimum increase in federal spending of \$792 million. This spending would double because the federal government would need twice as many employees to cover the 24/7 presence of the rancher. A conservative estimate of the increased taxpayer funding necessary to manage public lands just in Arizona, if ranching were not a permitted use of such lands, would be over \$2 billion and this does not include the additional staff to administer and manage the increased field personnel or the capital investment of the rancher. This is assuming you could find 13,000 people to live and work in remote locations under strained working conditions. The local area knowledge and resource experience would be nearly impossible to replicate.

The value of this partnership to the American people is at risk of being lost to a dysfunctional regulatory system which slows productivity to the point of complete paralysis when confronted by the threat of litigation. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was a mandate to the federal government to consider the effects of their actions, encourage mitigation to reduce negative impacts, and disclose what impacts might result from the action. It was not intended to provide a spring board for special interest groups to file frivolous lawsuits against government agencies for no other reason than to be obstructive, endanger the sustainability of family ranches and earn revenue. This process has veered away from the framework of logical thinking, scientific evidence and partnership planning.

NEPA requires the consideration of the environmental impacts of any major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Compliance with traditional NEPA requirements has placed a tremendous burden on the agencies.

In just one of Arizona's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Field Offices there is currently a backlog of more than 160 improvement projects. Projects which could be a positive benefit for the land, livestock, wildlife and the public as a whole are sitting inactive in the NEPA process due to the tactics of environmental organizations. Simple fence line and pipeline projects requiring very little NEPA analysis are taking upwards of 5-7 years to gain approval. During

this time, funding assistance for the projects is lost and the greatest losers are the American public.

Responsible grazing is consistent with environmental and conservation goals on the rangeland. While we recognize that NEPA is a federal requirement, we support modifications to NEPA to expedite the process, make compliance cost effective, recognizing the appropriate role of the permittee in the public involvement process and creating standards that are attainable. It is clear that the current requirements are too much for the agencies to comply with. The large number of allotments and permits, coupled with the dwindling manpower and resources of the agencies, will again inhibit federal land management agencies from keeping up with their schedule. Congressional oversight of federal land management grazing programs is required to ensure federal implementation is effective and efficient. Agencies should focus on cutting red tape so that more time and effort is devoted to on-ground improvements. In addition, greater flexibility should be provided to land managers and permittees, while at the same time improving the conservation of the land. Both Congress and the agencies need to start thinking of how to resolve this problem now. Unless solutions are found, western rangelands and the rural economy will continue to decline.

In closing, the existence of cattle ranching in the west is built upon the important and sometimes strained relationship between the American cattle rancher and the public trust. Early in the twentieth century, it was the rancher who promoted the idea of managed grazing and a permit system to control overgrazing on public lands. In our daily work to produce food for others we are dependent upon the public to trust our intentions, our operations and our stewardship. We do not take this trust for granted and strive to better our operations daily. In return we produce safe, nutritious and affordable food while conserving the landscapes where we work and live. A great amount of science, technology, sweat and heart goes into every acre of land, drop of water and serving of beef. We trust that our government and the citizenry will support us through genuine efforts to keep the partnership working for all of us.

References:

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