

# *All wildlife would benefit if public land grazing fees were closer to market value*

The federal government announced in January that its 2020 grazing fees on Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service land would again be \$1.35 per animal unit month, the fee charged for a single cow and its calf per month to graze public land. The fee has changed little since the base price was set to be no less than \$1.26 in 1966.

Grazing, when managed correctly, is not a serious problem on public lands. But it is often not managed well, and the fee charged is far less than it should be when compared to inflation, other federal fees, or market value. With a few exceptions, cattle on the landscape have a negative effect on wildlife.

If just pegged to the price of inflation, the value of \$1.26 in 1966, the cost of an AUM, converted to today's dollars, should be \$10.03 – just a little under eight times what is being charged. In 2006, Oregon charged \$5.60 per AUM on its state-owned lands, about the same as private lands charged, and prime private grazing land is often charged at \$15 per AUM.

The government price is set by some amorphous formula. According to a recently BLM press release, “the figure is calculated according to three factors—current private grazing land lease rates, beef cattle prices, and the cost of livestock production. In effect, the fee rises, falls, or stays the same based on market conditions.”

The formula or the data plugged into the formula is not available anywhere on line, so it is impossible to check the data.

Cattle prices have remained almost identical to the inflation index. In 1966, the average price paid per 100-weight was around \$21. This past year the average price was between \$140 and \$170 per hundred-weight. Just according to the inflation rate, beef should be averaging around \$200 per 100-weight. Does the fact that prices are about 25 percent below what they were in 1966 justify paying far less than real market value for the public land grazing rearing those beef? If it was really tied to beef prices, the price would still be around \$7.50 per AUM.

By way of comparison, the daily vehicle entrance fee for Yosemite National Park has gone from \$3 per car in the 1960s to \$35 per vehicle in 2018 (and where it is today). Inflation alone should make the price \$29. This means at least one segment of the public is getting gouged over inflated fees.

The interesting thing about grazing fees is that sport-

ing conservation groups and environmental organizations have long asked to be allowed to buy some grazing permits to save the forage for wildlife use, often willing to pay more than their market value and well beyond the AUM charged. But a complex leasing formula that favors the local land-owners effectively prohibits the forage for being sold at real market value and/or used for wildlife. The abnormally low fees effectively subsidize the public land cattle industry.

Nationwide, the BLM manages livestock grazing on 155 million of the 245 million acres of the public land it administers, but the only public who benefit from the leasing seems to be the 18,000 permittees who raise cattle on BLM lands. The U.S. Forest Service administers another 6,250 leases on its lands – all of our lands. The AUMs are underpriced and wildlife cannot benefit from the forage eaten by cattle.

A two-prong change in the system would allow for a better return on the leases on this public land:

— First, the leases should be open to bid by anyone who wants to bid. Most land would remain in livestock leases, but the most environmentally important lands for wildlife would likely end up controlled by conservation groups and put back into native habitat for wildlife.

— Second, the AUM should be set based on market value and inflation, not tied to cattle prices in any way. If it is economically unfeasible to raise cattle on sparse public lands simply because the grazing fee, the free market should keep the cows off that ground.

The BLM is starting a process now “to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement to consider proposed revisions to the agency’s grazing regulations.” The idea of multi-use is sound, but it should not exclude wildlife – especially if there are groups or individuals willing to purchase the cattle lease at or above its market value.

The agency says it is welcoming “stakeholder ideas

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and perspectives.” They also say they are trying to “improve existing land-use planning and grazing permitting procedures, while simultaneously promoting public lands conservation.”

“The BLM hopes to improve its stewardship of the nation’s rangeland resources by strengthening controls to prevent unauthorized grazing, enhancing environmental protections across various non-grazing land-use programs, and improving public input opportunities,” according to a recent press release.

The agency is clearly looking to do this within existing livestock lessees and has done 11 demonstration projects in six states, but it is not looking at the financial benefits that could come from leases outside of the livestock industry and the raising of AUM fees. There is little said about the value of forage to wildlife over livestock.

There have been a series of public hearings held this month in other states, but the public has an opportunity to read more about the proposed revisions and comment, if done by March 6. There is more information available at this direct link: <https://go.usa.gov/xyMqb>. Individuals and groups may also contact Seth Flanigan, the BLM Project Manager by phone at 208-384-3450 or e-mail [BLM\\_WO\\_grazing\\_email@blm.gov](mailto:BLM_WO_grazing_email@blm.gov).

The cattle industry says that something like 40 percent of cattle spend at least some time on public land, while the environmental community says it’s less than one percent. The reality is probably somewhere in between with the BLM suggesting that about 22 percent of cattle raised in this country spend at least some time on public lands. It would just be nice if leases were more equitable to the public that owns this land.

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