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JULY 1999

## Winning the War for the West

*After fiercely battling each other over the best use of public lands, some ranchers and environmentalists are beginning to agree: letting livestock graze can benefit the environment*

by [Perri Knize](#)

*(The online version of this article appears in three parts. Click here to go to parts [two](#) and [three](#).)*

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**I**N June of last year, while ranchers in Natrona County, Wyoming, waited out three days of rain to finish branding their calves, vandals calling themselves "Islamic Jihad Ecoterrorists" cut the barbed-wire fences separating [Bureau of Land Management](#) public range from private land, allowing the unbranded cattle of seven neighbors to mix. More than 150 cuts were made, resulting in about \$100,000 in damage. At least two perpetrators left notes under rocks and nailed to posts on county roads reading, "No more welfare for cowboys" and "Just in time for the welfare cowboys' convention."

It was only one of the more extreme

offensives in an ongoing regional battle over who owns the West. Ranchers today are up against a world that no longer views cowboys with nostalgia. The epithet "welfare cowboys" has become common in the national media, along with calls for an end to subsidized grazing on public lands. At the forefront of the grazing controversy are environmental groups, from the [National Wildlife Federation](#) and the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) to grassroots organizations like the [Southwest Center for Biological Diversity](#) and the [Oregon Natural Resources Council](#). The time has come, they say, to make rich and politically powerful "corporate" ranchers -- an elite that has dominated the affairs of the West for more than a century -- pay the full cost of the range program and manage their herds to environmentally correct standards. Better yet, some groups say, run them off the range, and use the land only for wildlife and recreation.

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["The Rancher Subsidy,"](#) by Todd

According to critics, domestic livestock that spend some time on the public range -- 88 percent of western sheep and roughly half of western cattle -- are defecating in trout streams, trampling stream banks, and denuding the ground of forage and protective cover needed by wildlife, wreaking havoc on fragile ecosystems. Even worse, the public is paying for this devastation: federal outlays for the management of public grazing lands exceed permit fees from ranchers.

This call to arms is based on half-truths,

**Oppenheimer  
(January, 1996)**

The West's fabled ranchers are in trouble. The damage done to the land by cattle has become a contentious environmental issue. The ranchers' greatest enemy, though, is the free market.

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skewed facts, and outright fallacies. The typical public-lands rancher is not a wealthy cattle baron. Though his ranch may be registered as a family corporation, he is barely making a living. His permit fees are not a form of subsidy -- he has already paid full market value for the right to graze public lands. Overall the federal range is in better condition than it has been in more than a century. Furthermore, many scientists who study what happens to land where cattle graze admit that no definitive case can be made for or against livestock grazing.

It would be comforting to believe, for the sake of the West's future, that the Islamic Jihad Ecoterrorists terrorized the Wyoming ranchers only because they do not realize how debilitating any extra burden can be for a struggling ranch family. But then, few people in our technological age can comprehend the backbreaking physical labor during every daylight hour -- with no vacations and little financial reward -- that a western livestock operation requires.

Even worse for these families, cattle prices are about the lowest they have been in twenty years -- and operating costs and land values have skyrocketed as new residents inundate the region. This means that the pickup truck a rancher could buy in the 1950s with the proceeds from selling eight steers now costs more than forty steers. On average, ranchers make only a two percent return on their operations, and many don't do that well. They would be better off

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liquidating their assets and putting them in a passbook savings account. Instead they turn down big offers from real-estate developers, put up with "ecoterrorists," and hang on by taking temporary jobs in town when the cattle market bottoms out. Ranching, it would seem, is a profession for romantic idealists, not profiteers. Those who hew to it do so for only one reason -- they love the land and their way of life.

### Caught in the Crossfire

**D**EAN Welborn, a lifelong cattle rancher, was sixty-three, suffering from bursitis, and looking for a way that his son and daughter-in-law and their four children could continue to ranch without him.

Welborn figured he'd have to sell the Lima Peaks outfit in southwest Montana that he has owned for thirty years and buy a smaller, more manageable place. But before he could buy the nearby Briggs ranch, he needed to know if federal managers would let him run enough cattle on the ranch's attached 25,000-acre grazing allotment on public lands, known as the Muddy Creek allotment, to make the operation pay.

It looked promising. The Bureau of Land Management's file on the allotment -- habitat for elk, mule deer, nesting waterfowl, and a pure strain of West Slope cutthroat trout -- reported that it was showing continual improvement from the years when the land had been severely overgrazed by domestic sheep and cattle. BLM managers had recommended the

**Livestock  
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"Wilderness areas and national parks have been victimized by overgrazing. Meanwhile, ranchers have been rewarded for ravaging the West by reaping subsidies from taxpayers." A delineation of the National Wildlife Foundation's position on Western public rangelands.

Muddy Creek permit holders for a Stewardship Award in 1989, and had granted a 15 percent increase in cattle numbers for 1990. Welborn bought the ranch in the spring of 1992, believing that the BLM's glowing review made it safe to assume that stock allocations would remain the same.

But 1992 was a bad year for safe assumptions in the cattle business. Anti-grazing sentiment was running high in the environmental movement and in Washington, D.C.: the cry was "Cattle-free in '93." After the election of Bill Clinton the Department of the Interior -- parent agency of the BLM -- came out in force against grazing. The new Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, proposed a series of "range reforms," including doubling grazing fees, setting national land-management standards, and changing the agency's objectives from cattle and grass production to ecosystem health.

In response to these pressures the U.S. Forest Service -- the other manager of the federal range -- and the BLM set new standards and guidelines for grazing permits. The region where Welborn ranches became a demonstration area for what some characterize as a "cookbook" grazing prescription: throw the cows off the stream banks when animal tracks exceed a certain number, and throw the cows off the grass when stubble height is down to a certain number of inches. The goal was an easily

applied standard that would help riparian zones, along the banks of streams and lakes, and uplands, above the stream banks, recover from more than a century of destructive overgrazing.

The Muddy Creek allotment was one of two areas chosen for aggressive implementation of the Beaverhead Riparian Guidelines, named for the Forest Service office that drafted them. After the BLM transferred the allotment to Welborn, managers reduced his allowable herd by 72 percent. This not only left Welborn financially hamstrung (he has since used up his family's savings trying to keep the ranch afloat) but also ended up threatening the trout fishery it was intended to protect. With his cattle sometimes thrown off Muddy Creek after only three days of grazing, Welborn has no choice but to graze them on his own deeded land -- the location, ironically, of most of the prime West Slope cutthroat-trout habitat.

Being forced to degrade fisheries habitat does not sit well with Dean Welborn. He hardly fits the profile of the environmentally rapacious cattle rancher: he and fellow members of the Snowline Grazing Association, a ranching collaborative, have fenced off riparian areas for neotropical birds; pulled noxious weeds so that they don't go to seed; and put in water troughs to lure cows away from riparian zones. "We've gone out of our way to be good stewards of the soil," he says.

Ecosystems are far more complex and

chaotic than anyone fully understands, and the Beaverhead guidelines, critics say, don't allow for that complexity. With cows moved off his allotment after very short use, Welborn claims, the upland grass is not being grazed enough to attract wildlife. Elk, deer, wild sheep, and antelope prefer the younger, more palatable shoots that are stimulated by the pruning of cattle grazing - a function that bison once provided in the same region. So the wild animals, instead of grazing the uplands, make camp in the riparian areas, where the vegetation is tender and lush. Hundreds of elk pound the stream banks and pollute the water with their droppings, just as cattle do. But the BLM doesn't manage wildlife.

In 1994 Welborn persuaded the BLM to reconsider the Beaverhead Riparian Guidelines. A new BLM area manager who was sympathetic to Welborn's predicament and understood the threat to the trout drafted a remedial management plan, but it was quickly appealed by a local environmentalist. After three years of waiting for a hearing in federal court, the BLM finally withdrew the remedial plan and at press time was drafting another allotment-management plan. In the meantime, Welborn has had to abide by the standards and guidelines in the 1993 grazing plan. He says he hopes that the new plan will allow him to run enough cattle to make his ranch viable while enhancing the natural-resource value of the land. Otherwise, he says, he will have to put his

ranch up for sale, and the grazing restrictions will oblige any new owner to subdivide it.

### **Continued...**

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**Perri Knize** is a freelance writer who lives in Montana. Her articles on environmental policy and on travel have appeared in *Audubon*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*.

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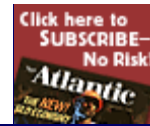
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## The Ranching "Subsidy"

**I**N fiscal year 1998 the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service together spent at least \$75 million on the federal grazing program, and took in only about \$20 million in grazing fees. This deficit does not mean, however, that ranchers underpay. Setting aside for the moment the questions of whether ranchers should bear the full cost of the range program and whether taxpayers benefit from it, the fact is that 90 percent of ranchers with grazing allotments have paid full value for their leases, though the money didn't go to the federal government.

The value of a ranch is based on the number of cows it can support, so a grazing allotment attached to a ranch adds significant value to the deeded land. The buyer of a ranch has no choice but to pay for this added market value. Although courts have ruled that grazing permits are not private commodities to be traded, federal agencies customarily transfer them to the buyers of private land to which they are attached. Banks recognize them as a

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commodity by financing their purchase, and the government recognizes their private-property value by taxing it.

Only the approximately 10 percent of public-lands ranchers who are still on their families' original homesteads are receiving a subsidy, in that they did not have to pay for their ranches or their allotments. These subsidies were legislated because grazing on the public range was a necessity if the West was to be settled. The Homestead Act granted pioneers only 160 acres in country where that much land might support just one or two cows; the land's aridity and ruggedness make it useless for most other forms of agriculture. Both the allotments and the homesteads were given as incentives to build communities in the West, and fees were set low to encourage private investment to improve these public lands.

Such incentives are of course obsolete today, when the West is growing faster than any other part of the country. But when all the costs of private and public forage are compared, it becomes clear that in many cases ranchers pay more for public range than they do for private. On average, according to some economic studies, it is a wash.

Even so, many ranchers say they would pay more for their permits before they would give up ranching -- if their banks would let them. They've invested money and sometimes the effort of generations in their

allotments, and consider these to be part of their ranches. Ranchers say they will pay more if need be even though they are subsidized far less than the average citizen: agricultural landowners get back only twenty-one cents' worth of local public services for every tax dollar they spend, whereas people living in low-density residential areas get a return of \$1.36, according to a 1990 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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An argument  
against grazing,  
posted by  
George  
Wuerthner on  
the U.S. Forest  
Service's  
message board.

When confronted with these facts, many of ranching's harshest critics say that their central concern is not federal spending but the impact of grazing on biodiversity. In their view, all grazing is environmentally destructive, and it is impossible to manage livestock responsibly on the West's fragile, arid public lands. George Wuerthner, an ardent and well-known anti-grazing activist, claims, "Livestock grazing is the single most ecologically damaging activity we engage in."

Yet it is the rancher who monitors land and wildlife conditions that would otherwise be neglected by short-staffed agencies. It is the rancher who enters into agreements with state fish-and-game departments to allow the public to hunt and fish on his ranch, because that is where most of the wildlife is. And it is the rancher who through the winter feeds much of the wildlife the public enjoys watching.

Both ranchers and wildlife would suffer if cattle were entirely removed from the

public range. BLM and Forest Service lands together support about four million cattle. If those cattle had to be sold quickly because there was no place to put them, prices would plunge, and the cost of private forage in the West would rise by about 10 percent, destabilizing even ranchers not dependent on grazing allotments. Those public-lands ranchers who did survive would have to graze their private land intensively, regardless of the impact on wildlife. After failed ranches had been sold and divvied up into suburban-style lots with tract houses, dogs, fences, and noxious weeds, it would be difficult at best for wildlife to find what was left of their winter range. When ranchers are forced to sell, we lose precisely what environmentalists say they are fighting for -- wildlife habitat.

### **What Is a "Natural" Landscape?**

**I**N 1990 the Bureau of Land Management reported that the public range was in the best condition yet this century, and improving. The Forest Service has said the same thing. But a report issued by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the National Wildlife Federation at about the same time declared that the condition of the public range was "unsatisfactory."

Both views may be correct, and both may be wrong. According to the National Research Council, a division of the National Academy of Sciences, we have no consistent field data that can be used to test theories or make general statements about

the health of grasslands. The agencies' and the environmental groups' reports used the same data, according to a follow-up study by the General Accounting Office. The GAO, for its part, found that 29 percent of BLM rangelands are in excellent to good condition, 43 percent are in fair to poor condition, and 28 percent have not yet been classified. The BLM points out that it does not define these terms as we might in common parlance: "fair" or "poor" conditions might include high-quality forage, cover for wildlife, watershed protection, and an aesthetically pleasing landscape -- but not conditions that fulfill some management objectives, such as the presence of plants like those found by the first settlers.

What almost everyone does agree on is that from about 1880 to 1930 livestock grazing did terrible harm to the public range, and the range is slow to recover. But conditions have vastly improved since the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, in 1934, which for the first time restricted grazing and imposed fees on what are now BLM lands. The number of western livestock sank drastically, from 28.6 million in 1934 to 10.3 million in 1994. Additional protective legislation was passed in the 1970s. And grazing management has improved. Rangeland acreage rated good or excellent has more than doubled since the 1930s, according to the BLM, and acreage rated poor has been halved. Wildlife populations have been rebounding; more wildlife is on

these lands today than at any other time in this century.

Although it is generally acknowledged that riparian zones are still suffering, until a decade or two ago no one understood their importance, and riparian recovery efforts are just beginning. Aggressive restoration programs are now in place, using methods such as installing water tanks to divert cattle from streams, selective exclosure fencing to keep cattle off stream banks, and rotational grazing systems that change the timing and the duration of grazing. The GAO has found these efforts to be very successful, calling the improvements "dramatic." When we see degraded rangeland today, for the most part we are seeing the sins of ranchers' grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Today's progressive ranchers have no plans to return to those methods; they have found that ecosystem management is ultimately more economical, producing healthier cattle and better forage.

Yet environmentalists would have us believe that cattle grazing is an ecological evil on a par with clear-cut logging and open-pit mining. There is no justification for this claim. Modern livestock grazing has comparatively little environmental impact. Nevertheless, many environmentalists simply want all ranchers off the public lands. Some two dozen U.S. environmental groups have signed on to the Wildlands Project, a plan to create a reserve stretching from Central America to the Arctic Circle,

in order to protect biodiversity. Dave Foreman, a founder of Earth First! and now chairman of the Wildlands Project, describes it as a vision of "extensive areas of native vegetation ... off-limits to human exploitation. Vast landscapes without roads, dams, motorized vehicles, powerlines, overflights, or other artifacts of civilization."

The appeal for many is the idea of restoring the West to its natural condition. But what is "natural"? Researchers call it an unscientific and unrealistic standard. We do not know what "natural" looks like, and even if we did, it is probably no longer achievable, in view of the changes that have occurred on the land during the past century, including the introduction of exotic species -- especially noxious weeds.

Although it might seem logical to say that because domestic livestock were introduced, they are inherently undesirable, longtime observers of range ecology have discovered otherwise. In recent years wildlife biologists at the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks have returned cattle to wildlife management areas as part of a cooperative arrangement with local ranchers. They have observed that when cattle remove rank vegetation, in the fall, they enhance spring fodder for geese, elk, and antelope. Cattle are also used in these areas as a reseeding tool; they knock the seeds from mature seed heads to the ground and plant them with their

trampling. The capacity of cattle to revegetate has proved useful, too, for reclaiming mining sites in Arizona that have resisted reclamation by other means.

Efforts to remove all cattle from wildlife areas have proved in some instances to be misguided. Managers at the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, in Oregon, are perplexed by a drop in antelope numbers only seven years after livestock were banished from the refuge so that the land could "recover." The managers theorize that the problem is a rising number of coyotes, which prey on antelope fawns. But local ranchers say that the managers have it wrong: numbers are dropping because pronghorn antelope depend on cattle to clear away older grasses and make available younger, more palatable shoots.

"Whatever you do to change habitat will benefit some species and negatively impact others," Jack Ward Thomas, a wildlife biologist and a former chief of the U.S. Forest Service, says. "It's not as simple as getting the cows on or off."

It is likely that ungrazed grasslands will burn far more frequently than grazed ones; if cows are removed, wildlife populations will change, as palatable forage for elk, antelope, and deer decreases and annual plants and the animal species that prefer them also decline. There will be fewer rodents, which will mean less food for raptors, coyotes, and other predators.



"The question is, How do you make changes that will improve range conditions in a reasonable time frame and also not negatively affect people's ability to make a living?" says Donald J. Bedunah, a plant ecophysiologicalist at the University of Montana. "I don't believe rapid change is necessary. We don't have to persecute ranchers to accomplish what is needed."

### Continued...

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## Who Owns the West?

**A** FORCE akin to persecution has been gathering momentum.

Environmentalists from the desert Southwest to the Great Basin to the Rocky Mountain Front have been mounting a barrage of lawsuits calculated to shut down or cripple commodity uses of public lands and further incapacitate land-management agencies that are already suffering from congressional budget cuts and layoffs.

In 1994 the National Wildlife Federation sued the Forest Service for not complying with the Beaverhead Riparian Guidelines and demanded that all grazing allotments not in compliance be suspended. The same group later scored a court victory in Utah that forced the BLM to remove all cows from the canyons of the Comb Wash grazing allotment. The Oregon Natural Desert Association sued the BLM for violations of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, ultimately seeking a permanent ban on grazing. Gila Watch, a local watchdog group, appealed the 230-square-mile Diamond Bar allotment, in southern New

Mexico. In Idaho a campaign by activists forced the Forest Service to remove two thirds of the cattle grazed on the Stanley Basin allotment, in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. And in the Southwest a zealous assortment of biologists, land planners, and other activists, known as the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity, has created a legal "train wreck" with more than a hundred lawsuits against federal agencies, hindering range and timber management until forest plans are amended.

It's no accident that these clashes are escalating at a time of new westward migration. The population of the West has increased by 14 percent since 1990, and the nation's five fastest-growing states are in the West -- Nevada, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado. These are also among the states where ranchers are the most dependent on public-lands grazing. Since 1982 urban growth in the West has consumed more than two million acres of land. In Montana alone, where the land rush is slower than in other western states, about three million acres of agricultural land have been subdivided since 1985.

Rarely do New West migrants blend seamlessly into Old West culture. KEEP OUT signs now bar country lanes that once were open to the community. Drugs and gangs are overtaking some small-town secondary schools. Traffic jams and road rage are becoming more common than tractors on the highways. Off-road,

mountain bikes roam the range. For good or ill, the last remnants of the Old West are dying.

What we lose with the cowboy is far more than some antiquated and romantic notion of the West. When we lose the family ranch, we lose much that we need as human beings, and much of what brought migrants like me to the inland West in the first place: a daily, personal relationship with nature; a social contract that works; a sense of connection with others; a sense of fully inhabiting a place for the long haul.

Ranching communities are ruled by ethics that knit neighbors tightly and securely together -- the antithesis of the alienated urban culture in which 75 percent of Americans now live.

If ranches are to work as businesses and as a way of life, says Aaron Harp, a rural sociologist at the University of Idaho, ranchers need to rely on social relations established over years, even generations -- such as buying feed from the same local retailer their grandfathers bought feed from, even though it might be cheaper to send to Billings. Newcomers want a small-town feeling, but they don't recognize that their insistence on changing how things are done displaces exactly what they say they came for. "You have to interact -- pitch in and sandbag the creek when it floods," Harp says. "When the neighbor's cows get into your garden, you have to round them up for him and not complain -- then maybe he'll

plough out your driveway for you in the winter."

Social issues are never explicitly addressed as a significant component of the grazing debate. Instead it is framed as a controversy over public-land use. When environmentalists and agency managers promote tourism and recreation as alternatives to the prevailing agricultural economy, they don't stop to ask whether tourism will force established communities to give up their traditional livelihoods, because hikers don't like cow pies. Meanwhile, bankruptcy by bankruptcy, family ranching is vanishing. "It comes down to who will live and who will die," Harp says. "Who gets to stay? What people? What wildlife?"

The irony is that most ranchers share most environmentalists' objectives: clean water, flourishing wildlife, and healthy ecosystems. Unlike the farmer, who must break the soil, the progressive rancher adapts to the land he grazes. His understanding of the ecosystems on his land is built on years of daily observation and interaction. This is an untapped reservoir of knowledge that could be of great value to federal land managers, who rarely have the luxury of getting to know one landscape well. Ranchers want to leave the range in better condition than they found it, and they have made a multi-generational commitment to that ethic. There should be common cause between ranchers and

environmentalists, not divisiveness.

## Working Together

AN Dagget is an unlikely defender of the cowboy. While living in southeastern Ohio in the early 1970s as part of a back-to-the-land community, Dagget fought a company that wanted to re-open a major coal strip mine adjacent to his farm. He became a relentless environmental advocate, organizing demonstrations for Earth First! and similar groups. The Sierra Club declared him one of the most effective grassroots activists in America. He entered the range wars when he worked to dismantle a state predator-control program and supported the reintroduction of the endangered Mexican gray wolf. It was as a wolf advocate in Arizona that he first encountered ranchers.

### Related link:

**"It's unAmerican, or at best unWestern, but cooperation works," by Dan Dagget (October 16, 1995)**

"I had forgotten how uplifting it is to be part of a group of people who don't paint the world in shades of guilt."

"I was convinced there was nothing for an enviro like me to talk to ranchers about," he says. But more-moderate wolf advocates, concerned that extremists like Dagget would make things so hot with the ranchers that the wolf would never be reintroduced, invited him and five other radical environmentalists to meet with six archconservative ranchers. They were asked to try to find common ground with the help of a facilitator.

The ranchers and the environmentalists found they wanted the same things: a relationship with the land that would sustain them and future generations ecologically,

An article published in *High Country News*, "a paper for people who care about the west."

economically, and spiritually -- that would, above all, leave a healthy environment as a legacy. The six ranchers took the six environmentalists to visit their grazing allotments and showed them their efforts to restore the ecosystem. To Dagget's amazement, he says, "I saw the ranchers were achieving my goals better than I was."

The "Six-Six Group" began working together to adopt environmental-restoration goals and implement practical solutions. They also began to visit and exchange ideas with similar coalitions around the Southwest. And Dagget experienced a conversion: as relentlessly as he had once fought ranchers he became vociferous in their defense, promoting cattle grazing as a tool for range rehabilitation. In his book, *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict*, he tells the stories of ten ranches where livestock grazing is compatible with healthy range and wildlife habitat. He says that he chose these ten from many around the West that are meeting environmental goals.

The grazing methods advocated by the Six-Six Group are revitalizing the ecosystem, Dagget claims. Whether it and similar groups will prevail and save the land for both people and wildlife may depend on whether they can win policymakers' attention away from the extremists on both sides of the debate.

These coalitions are beginning to get the recognition they deserve. In June of last year a MacArthur grant was awarded to



William McDonald, a rancher and a director of the nonprofit Malpai Borderlands Group, at the juncture of Mexico, New Mexico, and Arizona. The group's mission statement declares a commitment to restoring and maintaining "the natural processes that create and protect a healthy, unfragmented landscape to support a diverse, flourishing community of human, plant, and animal life in our Borderlands Region." The Malpai Group, which is managing a million-acre ecosystem divided almost equally between public and private lands, consists of about twenty ranchers, the Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Forest Service, the BLM, and a team of conservation biologists and other scientists from all over the country. So far it has preserved a threatened population of Chiricahua leopard frogs during a drought, by hauling 1,000 gallons of water a week to stock ponds; funded brush removal and native range reseeding programs; and begun to study the character and causes of rangeland vegetation shifts -- a source of heated debate about the effects of cattle grazing.

The group is also working to preserve the endangered rancher. One of its innovations is the Grassbank. If a neighbor needs to rest his pasture, because of drought or other environmental concerns, he can graze his herd on a neighboring ranch without paying the usual leasing fees. In return for use of the Grassbank, the rancher places a conservation easement, held by the Malpai Group, on his own ranch, barring

subdivision and forfeiting his development rights.

Conservation easements are among the most powerful tools available for saving family ranches and protecting wildlife habitat. State governments, nonprofit agencies, and private coalitions buy the development rights to ecologically valuable private ranchland; the family retains ownership of the land itself, and the right to continue using it in the traditional agricultural way. Such an agreement reduces the land's market value, generates cash for the family, and thereby reduces or pays for estate taxes when the time comes to pass the ranch on to the next generation. Ranchers can stay on the land, wildlife winter range is protected, and the public continues to enjoy undeveloped scenic vistas.

Near the town of Brothers, Oregon, Doc and Connie Hatfield, the owners of the High Desert Ranch, have helped to organize the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group, one of the first and most successful efforts to bring ranchers, environmentalists, and agency managers together to solve rangeland problems. They are marketing hormone- and antibiotic-free beef through a cooperative that includes other area ranchers. The Hatfield ranch is open to the public, to demonstrate how sound ranching practices can improve the environment.

In 1996 Jack Ward Thomas, then the chief of the Forest Service, and Mike Dombeck, then the acting director of the BLM,

initiated the National Riparian Service Team. The project sends a team to assist local cooperatives in improving their watersheds. It also offers public demonstrations of good management practices and helps conflict-ridden regions to forge collaborative partnerships and find local solutions to riparian problems.

More and more environmentalists are recognizing the stake that all westerners have in the preservation of private ranchlands -- and the inevitable consequences of inflaming the range wars. COWS NOT CONDOS is a bumper sticker seen around Montana's more liberal communities lately. It's the concept behind the [Montana Land Reliance](#), a conservation group that is helping ranchers find tools -- such as conservation easements -- to save family ranches from subdivision and thereby keep ecosystems intact. [The Sonoran Institute](#), in Tucson, Arizona, is another conservation group dedicated to finding collaborative solutions to the grazing controversy, and the Nature Conservancy is also a major player in ecosystem ranching -- from the famous Gray Ranch, in New Mexico's bootheel, to Utah's Canyonlands region, where it recently spent \$4.6 million to save a working ranch from real-estate developers. The Conservancy will continue to run the 5,167 acres of deeded land plus 250,000 acres of public grazing allotments as a model of sustainable ranching. The previous owners of the ranch want to preserve its

fragile desert, wildlife, and archaeological sites, including forty-two miles of riparian areas, and will continue to manage it for the Conservancy.

Despite these models of how ranchers and environmentalists can together achieve their goals, some ranchers will go down defending the way they've always done things, and some environmentalists will never veer far from regarding ranchers with an attitude that approaches a form of racism. "I have rancher friends, too," say many environmentalists who nevertheless advocate the wholesale removal of ranches from the range. "But ranchers are obsolete anyway -- why waste our time and money on them?"

Those ranchers who have survived until now have made it because they are as tough and as adaptable as coyotes. Given half a chance, they will survive the new westward migration as well. The real question is whether the people at either extreme -- who want public land used only as they see fit -- will get what they wish for. If they do, they may ultimately regret it.

*The online version of this article appears in three parts. Click here to go to parts [one](#) and [two](#).*

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