

Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement

A Winning Solution for Conflict Resolution

- The Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act (“VGPR”) expands upon a very successful model of landscape conservation. For several decades, Congress has recognized that facilitating the buy-out of federal public lands grazing permits provides a market-based, cooperative tool that is a win-win for public lands and grazing permittees.
- The goal of the VGPR is to utilize market-based incentives to reduce conflicts on federal public lands and increase flexibility for federal grazing permittees.
- The VGPR would provide grazing permit holders the option to voluntarily waive their permits to graze on Federal lands in exchange for equitable compensation paid by private parties. The federal agency would then be directed to retire the associated grazing allotment from further grazing activity. The legislation would place a cap on the number of permits that can be retired each year.
- Congress has authorized the permanent closure of grazing allotments when the permits or leases are voluntarily waived in specific areas Death Valley National Park, Capitol Reef National Park, Arches National Park, Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve, and Wilderness Areas in the Owyhee Canyonlands and Boulder-White Clouds. Expanding this authority to all public lands managed by the Department of the Interior or the Department of Agriculture in the 16 Western states will enhance conservation efforts and provide additional flexibility for livestock producers grazing on federal public lands.
- Livestock grazing on federal public lands can lead to conflicts with other multiple uses including impacts to wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities. In many cases, simply removing livestock is the best solution to reduce or resolve these conflicts. The voluntary retirement of grazing permits authorized by the VGPR is the most cost-effective and equitable way to address this issue. Current law and regulations either do not allow for the retirement of grazing permits or make the process unnecessarily difficult and uncertain.
- In some cases, federal grazing permittees may want to give up their grazing permits simply because it’s the best choice for their business model or their life circumstances. However, due to the structure of the grazing program and the investments made in their permits, this may be financially untenable without some form of compensation. The



*Desert Tortoise on a retired grazing allotment in Mojave National Preserve
Photo by Western Watersheds Project*

VGPPRA facilitates agreements between third parties and grazing permittees that increase flexibility for the permit holders while ensuring that the conservation gains from removing livestock are permanent.

- Permitted livestock grazing occurs on over 200 million acres of federal public lands. It is by far the most pervasive use of federal public lands. Many of these landscapes are impacted by changing climatic conditions including prolonged drought and an increase in invasive annual grasses. Additionally, expanding wildlife populations, changing attitudes about public lands management and increased recreational use may lead to conflicts with livestock grazing. Voluntary permit retirement offers a path forward that allows rancher to make decisions that work for them while also creating tangible benefits for public lands and wildlife.
- The VGPPRA also preserves existing conservation gains from permit retirement agreements that have occurred without legislative authority by ensuring that these allotments are permanently off limits to grazing. Once thought to be secure, recent actions by the BLM to reauthorize grazing in retired allotments within the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument demonstrate the need for Congress to provide specific direction to the agencies and honor these agreements.
- The federal public lands grazing program is expensive to administer and the fees paid by grazing permittees only cover a small fraction of the costs. Retiring grazing allotments, especially those in high conflict areas, can lead to significant savings for the federal land management agencies and taxpayers.
- Many scientific studies indicate that long-term rest from livestock grazing can lead to significant improvements in the capacity of soils to sequester carbon. This is especially true in arid and semi-arid landscapes that make of the bulk of lands currently permitted for grazing. Voluntary grazing permit retirement can create opportunities for restoration and facilitate a market-based mechanism to improve climate resiliency on western public lands.

➤ Some species of iconic wildlife such as wild bighorn sheep suffer from disease outbreaks due to contact with domestic sheep that graze on federal public lands. The VGPRRA creates an equitable opportunity to resolve these conflicts when there is no other solution but to remove livestock in order to protect wild sheep.

➤ Native predators such as cougars, grizzly bears, wolves, and coyotes are often targeted for removal and killed as a result of conflicts with domestic livestock on public lands. In some cases, the best solution for the permittee, the land managers,



*Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep near the Wishbone domestic sheep allotment in Colorado
Photo by Western Watersheds Project*

and the public is to retire the grazing permits associated with chronic depredations. The VGPRRA can lead to solutions that help restore the natural balance between predators and native prey species on our public lands.

➤ Connective corridors for wildlife migrations are gaining recognition as an essential element of climate resiliency. Livestock grazing allotments can create barriers to movement for some wildlife species due to the presence of livestock related infrastructure such as fences and handling facilities. Opportunities to protect and enhance wildlife migration corridors can result as through the voluntary retirement of grazing permits authorized by the VGPRRA.

To become a co-sponsor or for more information about the Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act, contact Connor Stubbs in the office of Rep. Adam Smith at connor.stubbs@mail.house.gov