



Western Watersheds Project MESSENGER

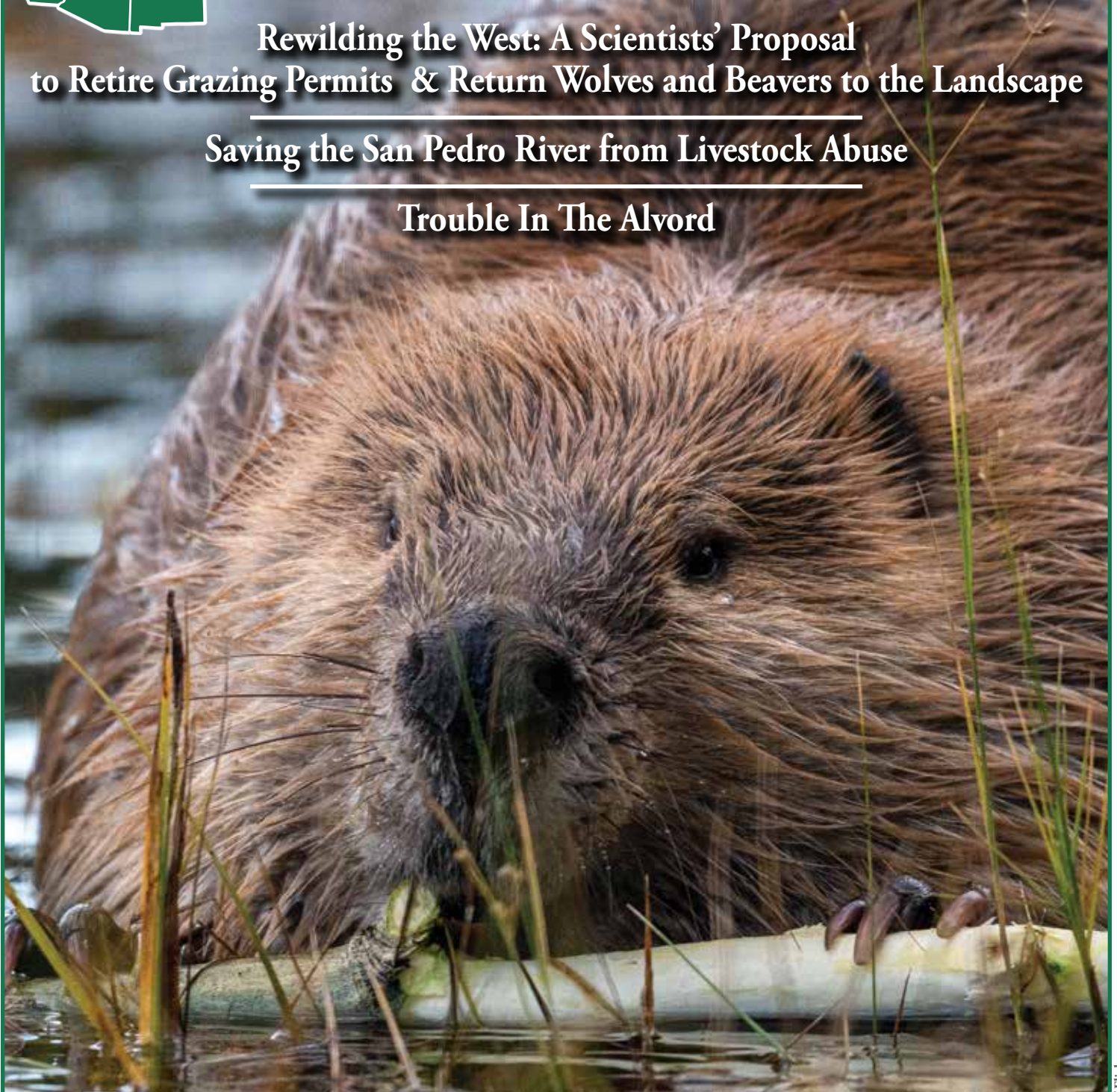
Vol. XXX, No. 2

Fall 2022

**Rewilding the West: A Scientists' Proposal
to Retire Grazing Permits & Return Wolves and Beavers to the Landscape**

Saving the San Pedro River from Livestock Abuse

Trouble In The Alvord



**Working to protect and restore western watersheds and wildlife
through education, public policy initiatives, and legal advocacy.**

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Table of Contents

Rewilding the West: A Scientists' Proposal to Retire Grazing Permits and Return Wolves and Beavers to the Landscape <i>Erik Molvar</i>	3
Saving the San Pedro River from Livestock Abuse <i>Greta Anderson</i>	4
New Study: Western Livestock A Major Contributor To Climate Problems <i>Erik Molvar</i>	5
WWP's Efforts Convince the Bureau of Land Management to Remove Desert Allotments from Grazing <i>Cyndi Tuell</i>	6
The Remarkable Return of the Wolf to California <i>Laura Cunningham</i>	8
Major Investigative Report Highlights WWP's Work on Mexican Wolf Depredations <i>Greta Anderson</i>	9
Trouble In The Alvord <i>Adam Bronstein</i>	9
Introducing New Staff Members at WWP	10
WWP's Policy Work Pays Off <i>Josh Osher</i>	11
The Healthy Public Lands Project Inaugural Conference <i>Josh Osher</i>	11

*The Messenger is edited and produced by Greta Anderson, Erik Molvar and Nancy Linscott.
 Design & Layout by Denice L. King • greentreedkdesign.com
 Printing by ESP Printing, Boise, Idaho.*

Rewilding the West: A Scientists' Proposal to Retire Grazing Permits and Return Wolves and Beavers to the Landscape



By Erik Molvar

In August, a new scientific report was published in the journal *BioScience*, laying out a blueprint for large landscape conservation to restore ecosystem health on western public lands. Titled 'Rewilding the American West,' it outlined a bold vision in three steps: Retire the public land grazing allotments, return wolves, and restore beavers to rivers and streams.

The paper hits the bullseye on some really key ecological restoration principles. Wolves and beavers, each in their own way, are a key missing piece in western landscapes, and their return has outsized value in bringing back a more natural balance to ecosystems that have been out-of-whack due to the meddling of powerful political interest groups. And the study also identifies the most important human-caused disturbance on western native ecosystems: Cattle and sheep grazing were found to be the most frequent causes of rare species endangerment, officially named as a threat to 48 percent of the 92 species listed under the Endangered Species Act found within the bounds of the proposed Western Rewilding Network.

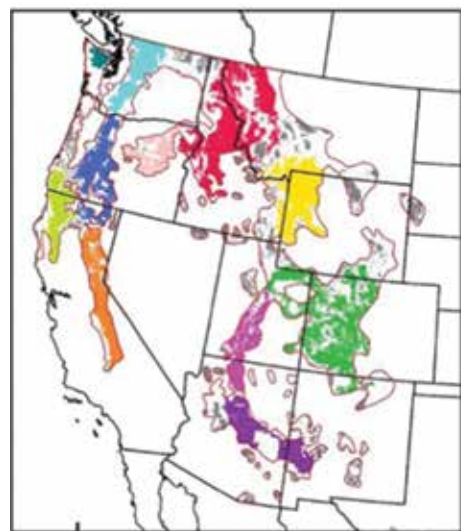
Industrial land uses such as mining (22% of species), logging (18%), and oil and gas drilling (11%) lagged well behind livestock grazing as causes of biodiversity loss, yet still remain major and important contributors to the biodiversity crisis popularly labeled the Sixth Mass Extinction Event. This study follows on the heels of work by the late E.O. Wilson, a world-renowned ecologist who called for preserving half the Earth in a wild state for biodiversity conservation. Wilson projected that this level of land and sea protection would be necessary to provide sufficient habitat to support at least 85% of the species inhabiting the planet today. It is sobering to

realize that even this massive increase in land protection may not be enough to prevent 15% of the Earth's native species from going extinct. At present, only about 17% of the Earth's surface is considered protected.

The Western Rewilding Network was explicitly designed to fit into President Biden's '30 by 30' initiative, which commits the administration to protecting 30 percent of the United States by 2030. What qualifies as 'protected land,' however, has been a subject of some debate. Do lands count as 'protected' if they are grazed by livestock? Given the primary effect that livestock is having on biodiversity loss, it would seem not. This new study solves the problem with voluntary grazing permit buyouts as the first step. This, along with the return of wolves, takes pressure off riparian (or streamside) habitats, allowing the cottonwoods, aspens, and willows needed by beavers to recover. In the absence of livestock, pressure for "predator control" by state and federal agencies also eases.

Wolf recovery has been a major conservation priority for the past three decades, but progress has been slow. The Western Rewilding Network was constructed around areas that have at least 1,930 square miles of contiguous public land, a land area deemed sufficient for an independent, self-sustaining wolf population. The Network also identifies potential wolf habitats connecting these large core areas. The scientists point out that "wolf management by some of the western state governments is geared toward reducing their numbers, and it is essential that these policies be reversed and federal protected status be fully restored."

To justify this major conservation initiative, the scientists provide a compelling rationale: "We are in an unprecedented period of converging crises in the American West, including extended drought and water scarcity, extreme heat waves, massive fires triggered at least partly by climate change, and biodiversity loss with many threatened and endangered species. Furthermore, we note that lands in the



proposed network are already owned by the public and meat produced from all federal lands forage accounts for only approximately 2% of national meat production."

It's not every day that scientists and former land and wildlife managers advance such a visionary policy initiative, and Western Watersheds Project was excited to have the opportunity to lead the conservation world's media response. Western Watersheds Project has been pursuing the central goals of the Western Rewilding Network for many years. Now that the scientific community has put a spatially-explicit blueprint on the table, it's time for us (and allies, far and wide) to roll up our sleeves and make it a reality. ■

The full article is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biac069>.

Erik Molvar is the Executive Director of Western Watersheds Project

Map of potential reserves of federal lands from Ripplé, et al., 2022. ; Wolf: Photo by OR Dept of Fish & Wildlife

Saving the San Pedro River from Livestock Abuse



By Greta Anderson

In August, Western Watersheds Project signed a settlement agreement with the Bureau of Land Management that will set the agency on track to get cows out of the San Pedro Riparian National

Conservation Area (“NCA”) once and for all. We had sued over the 2019 Resource Management Plan’s indefensible decision to allow harmful, ongoing livestock grazing in this free-flowing desert oasis in southeastern Arizona.

When the NCA was established in 1988 by the Arizona-Idaho Conservation Act, Congress required that the area be management to “conserve, protect, and enhance” the conservation values of the land. Livestock were thereafter excluded under the original management plan. However, shortly after that management plan was completed, the Bureau completed a land exchange and added grazed state trust land leases to the NCA. Those state grazing leases were transferred to the Bureau and continuously renewed for livestock grazing without question. There was also a long-term issue with unmanaged trespass livestock use on the NCA. Our decade-plus of involvement helped to drive the completion of the 2019 management plan in which the agency attempted to legitimize its choice to let cows continue to trample four allotments. It added new “targeted grazing” of unspecified duration and location within the NCA.

We weren’t going to let that stand. WWP and our co-plaintiffs, represented by Advocates for the West, filed suit in early 2020.

Fast forward two years to summer 2022: We agreed to settle our lawsuit in exchange for the Bureau reconsidering the compatibility of grazing authorizations on four allotments within the San Pedro Riparian NCA within 8 months; to evaluate whether livestock grazing is actually ‘conserving, protecting, and enhancing’ the values the designation is meant to protect; to examine impacts to southwestern wil-



Our lawsuit became front page news in Arizona.

low flycatcher, Huachuca water umbel, desert pupfish, Gila topminnow, northern Mexican gartersnake, Arizona eryngo, and yellow-billed cuckoo, and to take action to address ongoing trespass and unauthorized livestock use in the areas that are closed to grazing.

New environmental analyses are already underway that demonstrate that grazing is harming the NCA’s values, and we intend to hold the agency’s feet to the fire to exclude grazing from the entire NCA.

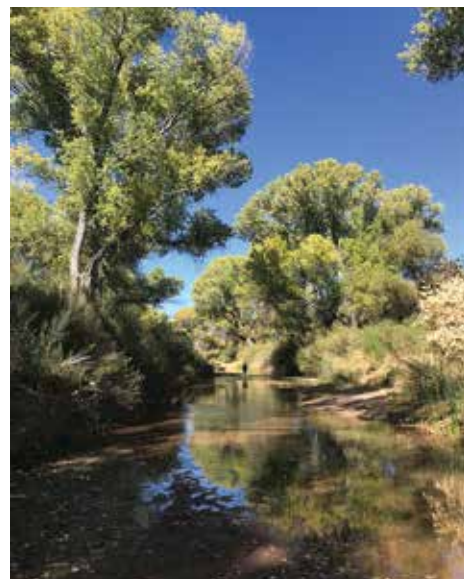
The San Pedro Riparian NCA contains lands that are the ancestral homelands of the Chiricahua Apache, Opata, O’Odham, Hohokam, and Sabaipuri people, and the area contains important cultural sites. There is no reason that these sites should be trampled by livestock for the sake of four permittees who never had legal leases on the NCA in the first place.

Look for new – and hopefully improved – decisions soon. ■

Greta Anderson is the Deputy Director of Western Watersheds Project



Kingfisher Pond at the San Pedro Riparian NCA.



The inviting desert oasis of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area.

Photo by WWP Staff

Photo by Greta Anderson, WWP

Photo by Cyndi Tuell, WWP

New Study: Western Livestock A Major Contributor To Climate Problems

By Erik Molvar

A new scientific study has undertaken a numerical assessment of the climate effects of livestock grazing on western public lands. Led by Oregon State University ecologist Boone Kauffman, the new paper paints a disturbing picture: Cattle on western public lands are not just major emitters of greenhouse gases, but also are responsible for desertification and biodiversity losses that give rise to invasive weeds and frequent fires, making them a major contributor to climate change. This comes at a time when the livestock industry and its apologists are aggressively promoting “restoration grazing” as a cure-all for ecological problems, even launching a Hollywood puff-piece called ‘Kiss the Ground’ that makes vague claims that livestock are in some way beneficial to soil health or carbon sequestration.

The greenhouse gases emitted directly by livestock – mostly in the form of methane, a byproduct of ruminant digestion – are substantial. Based on Environmental Protection Agency figures, each cow-calf pair produces more than 233 pounds of methane per year, according to the study, plus the nitrous oxide that wafts off their manure. This adds up to 13.6 million tons of greenhouse gases every year from the cattle on BLM and Forest Service lands – the equivalent of all the passenger vehicle emissions from Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Nevada combined.

Perversely, due to the low forage quality on western public lands, free-range cattle in the West produce almost triple the methane per animal when compared to feedlot cattle, according to the study.

However, direct emissions of greenhouse gases are only part of the climate equation when it comes to grazing cattle on public lands. Native vegetation communities suffer an 88% loss in aboveground carbon storage when they are converted to the invasive weed cheatgrass, and an 82% loss in aboveground carbon when planted to crested wheatgrass, another invasive weed. The study acknowledges that cheatgrass monocultures – and the frequent range fires associated with them – are the direct result of heavy livestock grazing and its destruction



Vegetation change of a riparian ecosystem following cessation of grazing. The left photos are riparian zones on the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, Oregon in 1990 - the last year of grazing on these public lands. The right photos are the same sites about 24 years after cattle were removed. Wetland vegetation now predominates where there was mostly bare ground and exotic dry grasses.

of native bunchgrasses and biological soil crusts. The study noted additional losses of soil carbon reserves due to extirpation of deep-rooted bunchgrasses and shrubs, but the magnitude of soil carbon losses was not calculated. Deforestation of pinyon-juniper communities to increase forage for cattle, and the creation of fuel breaks, also were flagged as causing important net losses of carbon sequestration on western public lands.

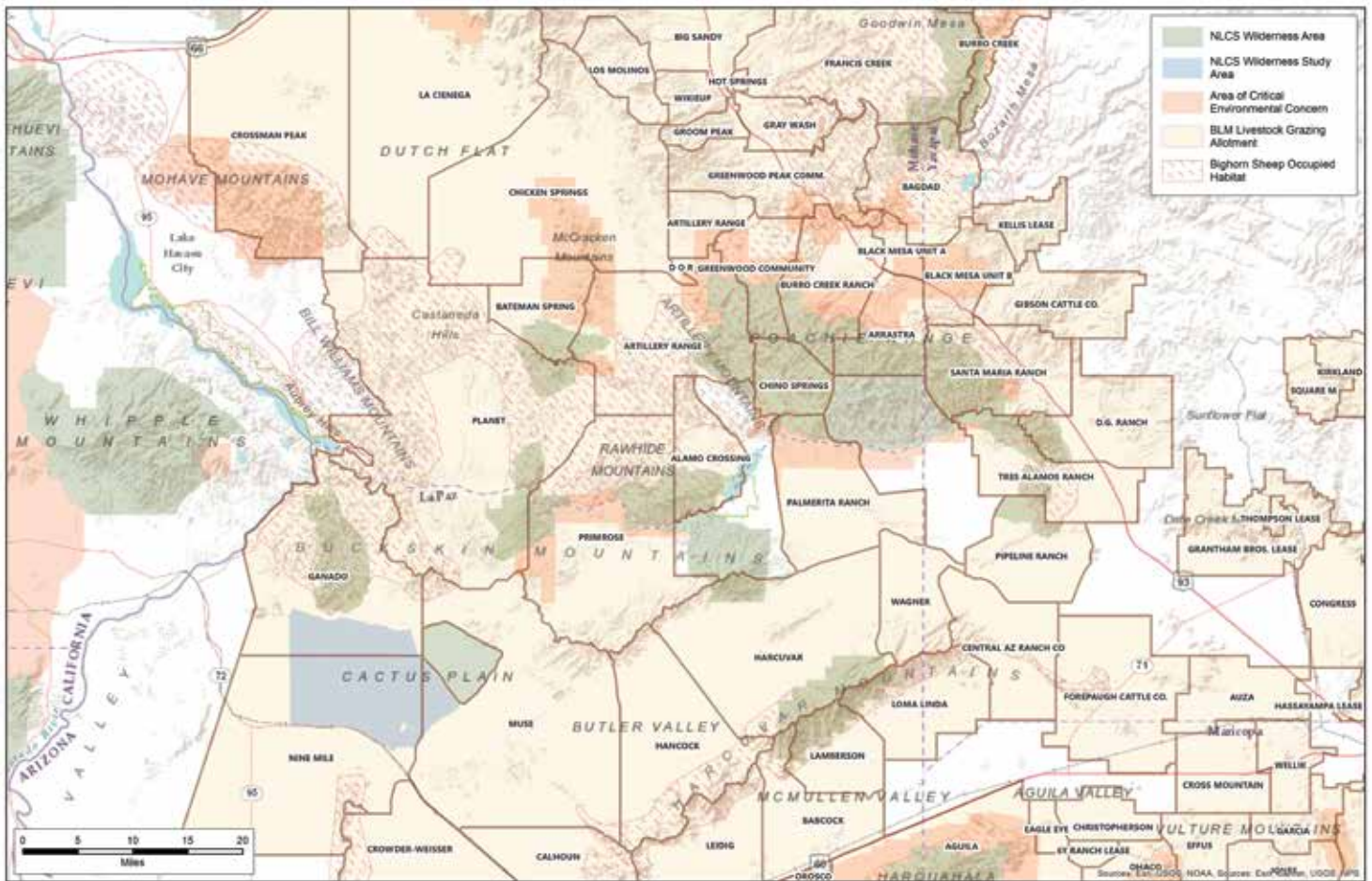
The study also calculates the ‘social cost of carbon’ from public lands ranching. This metric was initially developed to measure the economic downside to fossil fuel extraction, and became a required calculation in federal environmental reviews under the Obama administration. This social cost of greenhouse gas emissions was calculated at \$36 per animal unit month (or AUM, one cow-calf pair or five sheep grazing on public land for one month). Compared to the \$1.35 that the federal government charges when it rents public lands to livestock producers, the social costs far outweigh the payments made by public lands ranchers, making livestock grazing a losing proposition for the taxpayer. The study also enumer-

ated the direct social costs from public lands ranching’s carbon footprint: 186 premature human deaths, 52 million hours from lost labor due to extreme heat, and 20,778 tons of lost crop production.

The paper highlights the additional biodiversity and ecosystem costs of public lands grazing. Under the Bureau of Land Management’s Lakeview (Oregon) Resource Management Plan, according to the researchers, domestic livestock are allocated 86% of the available forage, while deer and pronghorn get only 8%, elk get 2%, bighorn sheep get 1%, and wild horses are allocated 2%. The other 363 species of native wildlife that use Oregon public lands are allocated 1% among them. The authors conclude that public lands supply less than 1.6% of the forage consumed by beef cattle in the United States.

In summary, the article makes plain that in exchange for allowing livestock grazing on federal lands, the public gets desertification, biodiversity loss, cheatgrass invasions, more frequent fires, and major climate impacts. All for a trivial amount of beef production (and a little wool for scratchy sweaters). It’s a losing proposition. ■

Photos by W. Pyle and S. Rice, in Kauffman et al., 2022. Environmental Management volume 69, pages 1137–1152.



Map by Melissa Cain, WWP

Map of the Lake Havasu Field office grazing allotments with Wilderness areas, ACECs, and bighorn sheep-occupied habitat.

WWP’s Efforts Convince the Bureau of Land Management to Remove Desert Allotments from Grazing



By Cyndi Tuell

In July 2021, WWP received a notice from the Bureau of Land Management (“Bureau”) that it was

going to consider grazing management on five grazing allotments on hot, arid desert lands in western Arizona - the Bishop allotment and the Bill Williams Complex, which includes the Crossman Peak, Alamo, Planet and Primrose allotments. WWP has been involved with and concerned about the management of these lands since 2008 and won an earlier appeal in which the administrative law judge found numerous specific failures in the agency’s analysis of its plan to reauthorize grazing on the Bill Williams Complex. Unfortunately, as our readers know all too well, winning appeals just

maintains the status quo on grazing allotments, so we had to wait until this next round of analysis to push for on-the-ground management changes.

In response to the Bureau’s 2021 notice, we sent the Bureau a letter specifically asking them to consider ending livestock grazing on these arid lands since they are clearly ill-suited for that purpose. By mid-September 2021, the Bureau had prepared their Land Health Evaluation and responded to some of our earlier questions and comments regarding the degraded conditions on these allotments. Yet they held on to their position that the allotments were meeting all land health standards.

WWP saw things differently. Even though livestock grazing had long ago been abandoned by most of the permittees – with even ephemeral use forsaken for the last thirty years – range

conditions, especially of perennial grasses, remain significantly degraded.

To strengthen our case, we wanted to make sure that the Bureau heard from other wildlife advocates who worry about the impacts of livestock grazing on arid lands. So we sent a request to our list of advocates in Arizona asking them to weigh in on what looked like a plan by the Bureau to re-authorize cows where they didn’t belong. Our friends and allies shared their concerns with the Bureau, raising our collective voices for the desert wildlife in western Arizona.

Our persistence began to pay off. The Bureau admitted that the number of authorized livestock, or AUMs, on the Bishop allotment were set a long time ago and no studies had been done to calculate its current carrying capacity. The agency also admitted that the 50 head of livestock (or 588

AUMs) authorized way back when may no longer be appropriate in light of drought and climate impacts and the presence of imperiled desert tortoises and bighorn sheep. We were invited to visit the allotments with the Bureau's field staff to check out conditions on the ground together. So in January 2022, Dave Stricklan, a Ph.D. range ecology expert and I visited the area along with the Bureau's Lake Havasu Field Office Assistant Field Manager and their Rangeland Management Specialist. With the help of Melissa Cain, WWP's GIS analyst, we came prepared with maps of bighorn sheep and tortoise habitat, endangered species habitat, and information on important protective land designations such as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and Lands with Wilderness Characteristics.

On our visit to the Crossman Peak allotment, we verified that this area was highly unsuited to livestock grazing. After a relatively rainy December, we found a few wild onion (*Allium sp.*), some buckwheat (*Eriogonum sp.*), including desert trumpet (*Eriogonum inflatum*), and perhaps the northwestern-most saguaro (*Carnegia gigantea*) I've ever seen. But we found only one small area where galleta grass (*Pleuraphis rigida*) was trying to make a comeback after decades of rest from livestock grazing. We also found plenty of dilapidated range infrastructure (aka "range trash"). The dangers to wildlife from layers of old fence and empty stock tanks were compounded by the seemingly endless number of abandoned and current mine shafts throughout the area.

Dave and I expressed our shock that the Bureau would consider livestock use on these lands, and our agency hosts acknowledged that the area really didn't look like it could support livestock grazing year-round, but instead suggested that perhaps ephemeral grazing would be acceptable. We pushed back, pointing out that in the rare instances that this area received enough rainfall to support ephemeral livestock use, that would be the exact same time the plants would have their best chance to reproduce. It would be a tragedy to let cows eat those annual



Photos by Cyndi Tuell, WWP

Top left: a dilapidated stock tank and a tangle of old barbed wire make up some of the hazardous "range trash" left to rot in the desert. Top right: multiple layers of old fencing serve only to imperil wildlife. Bottom left: Galleta grass (*Pleuraphis rigida*) tries to make a comeback after decades of rest from cattle grazing. Bottom right: Key Area 7 on the Bishop Allotment from the BLM Land Health Assessment and Evaluation Report, April 2022. This photo shows an arid landscape that was never suitable for livestock grazing.

plants before they had a chance to seed, or before wildlife had an opportunity to utilize green forage. We also noted that the degraded condition of the fences meant any permittee would have to spend a lot of time, effort, and money before the allotment could be used.

After the site visit, the Bureau revised their analysis and by April 2022 it better reflected the actual conditions on the ground. The Bureau admitted that the allotments were missing perennial grasses and they expected plant mortality to get worse in light of climate change and drought. In a surprisingly honest assessment, the Bureau's April 2022 Determination of Land Health stated, "In addition to the effects of drought conditions, historical grazing may have contributed towards not meeting desired resource conditions." In reference to Crossman Peak, the determination document continued, "...almost 40 years of non-ephemeral use is indicative that this allotment is just naturally incapable to support livestock even during wet years as any annual growth is crucial to consider for wildlife and nutrient cycling." The Bureau went even further and admitted, "It is possible, like all the grazing allotments within the Bill Williams

Complex, that these very arid allotments are and might have always been incapable of supporting livestock in a way that is beneficial to biological resources[.]"

The upshot? As a direct result of our efforts, five more allotments in western Arizona are free from the ravages of annual livestock use for at least the next decade. The Planet and Primrose allotments are closed for ten years, the Crossman Peak and Alamo Crossing allotments remain ephemeral, and the Bishop allotment went from active grazing to ephemeral-only use. This means the mountain plover, mule deer, peccary, mountain lion, desert bighorn sheep, yellow billed cuckoo, Southwestern willow flycatcher, desert tortoise, and Monarch butterfly will have a better chance at survival on these lands. The area can now return to a place where bighorn sheep and desert tortoise roam, without livestock consuming the few tasty plants available on the rare occasion it rains.

The lands identified by the Bureau of Land Management as the Bishop and Bill Williams Complex allotments are the historic and traditional lands of Hualapai, Cocopah, Chemehuevi, and Yavapai Apache. ■

Cyndi Tuell is the Director of New Mexico and Arizona for Western Watersheds Project

The Remarkable Return of the Wolf to California



By Laura Cunningham

When I began studying California ecological history 30 years ago, I did not think wolves would be a part of the restoration and

recovery of wildlife and ecosystems in the state so soon. I was proven wrong when wild wolf OR-7 re-introduced himself in 2011 by crossing the Oregon border into California, the first wolf to enter the Golden State in over 100 years. I watched with great interest and cheered this wild wolf on, named Journey by children in a naming contest held by Oregon Wild.

This male wolf was born in the Imnaha pack in northeastern Oregon in spring 2009. He weighed approximately 90 pounds when collared with a radio transmitter by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) two years later. He left his natal pack in September 2011 and between then and early November he followed a southwesterly course that took him across many counties of Oregon and, ultimately, on December 28, he crossed into California northeast of Dorris, a small town in Siskiyou County. This represents a historic first step of the return of gray wolves to California.

While visiting California, OR-7 traveled in the southern Cascades, across portions of the Modoc Plateau, in the Lassen and Plumas National Forests, and as far south as Tehama, Shasta, and Butte counties. His average daily movement was approximately 15 air miles. OR-7 passed through ponderosa pine forests, mixed coniferous forests, lava flows, sagebrush shrublands, juniper woodlands, and agricultural lands. Although he crossed private lands (timberlands in particular), he traversed public lands for most of his route. There were no public safety incidents or livestock losses attributed to wolves in California while OR-7 was here.

OR-7 crossed the border from California to Oregon and back several times, finally mating and establishing a territory in Klamath and Jackson counties in Oregon in 2013. He sired three pups in 2014 and a second litter in 2015.

Since OR-7 visited California, several radio-collared wolves have dispersed into the state, and an additional unknown number of un-collared wolves.

OR-93

Fast forward to January 30, 2021 and OR-93, a male yearling wolf from



Photo: California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Trail cam video still photo of a radio-collared wolf in southwestern Kern County, California, May 2021.



Map by Laura Cunningham

Map showing the approximate movements of OR-93 until its disappearance in early April, 2021. At this point the radio-collared battery died, but the wolf continued to explore on, captured by a CDFW wildlife camera far south of here.

northern Oregon's White River pack, entered Modoc County, CA. After briefly returning to Oregon, OR-93 re-entered California in February, traveling south to Tuolumne County in March, and continuing on to San Benito County after crossing Highway 99 and Interstate 5. He was in Monterey County on April 1 and his last collar transmission was from San Luis Obispo County on April 5. By then, OR-93 had traveled at least 935 air miles in California, a minimum average of 16 air miles per day. This amazing wandering wild wolf crossed Sierran conifer forests, foothill blue oak savannas, grasslands, agricultural lands, and even urban areas.

This was a remarkable journey and OR-93 entered parts of California which had not seen wolves since the mid 1800s. OR-93 crossed busy highways such as US 99, Interstate 5, and Interstate 101, and came close to the Pacific Ocean before turning inland and possibly heading in the direction of the Los Padres National Forest and remote wilderness areas in the

region. He crossed the densely agricultural San Joaquin Valley without incident. In the Sierra Foothills and South Coast Range, OR-93 traveled through open grasslands, blue oak woodlands, chaparral, and flat valleys, rolling hills, canyons, and mountainous terrain.

Social media registered support for this wandering lone wolf with local accounts in San Joaquin Valley agricultural communities cheering on the "lobo" that wandered so far into southern California.

Through April 5, OR-93 had traveled at least 935 air miles in California, a minimum average of 16 air miles per day.

Map showing the approximate movements of OR-93 until its disappearance in early April, 2021. At this point the radio-collared battery died, but the wolf continued to explore on, captured by a CDFW wildlife camera far south of here.

After the radio-collared battery stopped working, CDFW received trail camera video from May 15, 2021 showing a collared gray wolf in southwestern Kern County on a ranch. Apparently, OR-93 wandered southeastwards through rough mountainous country and almost to the Mojave Desert. In late September, eyewitnesses saw him in northern Ventura County and CDFW staff also found wolf tracks.

Unfortunately, on November 10, 2021, OR-93 was killed crossing Interstate 5 near the town of Lebec. This incident highlights the need for more wildlife crossings over busy highways.

Looking back on this remarkable journey, I recall suggesting that wolves could naturally re-inhabit former ranges in Point Reyes National Seashore on the central California coast. I was met with skepticism. But as I watched the progress of wild wolves returning to their natural ranges in recent years, despite all efforts against them, I was amazed and pleased how far wolves have wandered back into California.

Restoration of California's wolves depends on conserving and protecting core wolf populations in the northern Rocky Mountains so that disperser populations are allowed to expand outwards to eventually reach California. We need to fully protect wolves under the Endangered Species Act in order to allow recovery of the species across its range. ■

Laura Cunningham is Western Watershed Project's California State Director

Major Investigative Report Highlights WWP's Work on Mexican Wolf Depredations

By Greta Anderson

In May 2022, WWP got major kudos and attention for its role in uncovering the fraudulent depredation reports being used as justification to lethally 'manage' or permanently remove Mexican gray wolves in Arizona and New Mexico. These depredation reports are the basis of removal orders and compensation payments, but WWP's deep dive into hundreds of records demonstrated widespread inconsistencies, errors, and assumptions that implicated wolves nearly all of the time in livestock deaths.

WWP had first gotten some media attention for our findings in May of 2020 in an article in the Arizona Daily Star, "Advocates question investigations used to target 'problem' wolves." However, last spring an even bigger story broke. "Cry wolf: Endangered Mexican gray wolf recovery is being 'sabotaged' by ranchers who claim the canines are killing cattle – and the federal employees who sign off on reports," by investigative journalist Spencer Roberts, ran front and center on *The Intercept* website. (See <https://bit.ly/3EzatNH>). This article went into depth not just on our findings, but also included an interview with former New Mexico State Director for Wildlife Services, Robert Gosnell, who confirmed many of WWP's suspicions about widespread fraud and rubber-stamping in reports that unfairly blamed Mexican wolves for livestock deaths.

In many cases, the fraud was so blatant as to be laughable. One "confirmed" depredation report that we reviewed was based on nothing more than some bone chips and a pile of wolf scat. Another



Webpage cover story on WWP's work to expose Mexican wolf depredation investigations.

Image via The Intercept

was confirmed to be a wolf kill after the agent took some months-old hide, soaked it for a few weeks to stretch it out, and then measured the "bite marks" on the rehydrated skin to determine the culpable species. WWP's Tucson office had many a laugh reading the rationales provided for blaming wolves, but none of it was really funny. The field agents were implausibly blaming wolves for livestock deaths but it was being reported to the public as fact, deepening the myth of wolves as bloodthirsty cow-killers. The reports were also being used to compensate the ranchers for their livestock losses under a program that reimburses livestock operators for harms caused by government-introduced predators.

It was great to get some media attention to the alarm bells we'd already been ringing for several years, but the most important outcomes of our work include the recent high-level scrutiny of the program.

Senator Heinrich requested a full Office of Inspector General investigation, and we've been told that it is well underway. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hasn't killed any wolves for livestock depredations in the last two years, perhaps in part due to the attention we've brought to the false reports.

Most significantly, Wildlife Services itself is developing new Standards of Evidence for attributing livestock deaths to Mexican wolf predation. The New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association recently issued a press release about these new standards titled, "USDA Secretly Makes Wolf Depredation Compensation Impossible." Making demonstrable wolf involvement a prerequisite for confirmations would be a considerable improvement. ■

Greta Anderson is the Deputy Director of Western Watersheds Project

Trouble in the Alvord



By Adam Bronstein

The Alvord Desert, located just to the east of the fabled Steens Mountain in Oregon, contains a vast expanse of dry lake beds, sagebrush and wilderness-quality public lands. "The Alvord" includes the traditional lands of the Northern

Paiute people and provides refuge for populations of threatened Lahontan cutthroat

trout, bighorn sheep, antelope, mule deer, elk and sage-grouse. The basin is isolated and the stars are bright. The playas spin up massive dust storms that roll ominously across the landscape like something out of a Hollywood thriller. The Alvord evokes feelings of emptiness and loneliness while simultaneously transforming and rejuvenating the spirit.

The beauty and solitude of the Alvord is overshadowed by a long history of destructive livestock grazing that has had measurable impacts on wildlife leading to documented declines in ungulates and

sage-grouse populations. Earlier this year, the Bureau of Land Management ("Bureau") issued a final decision adopting a new Allotment Management Plan that would have continued and expanded the legacy of the ecological destruction by reauthorizing 1,892 AUMs, building new fences, drilling seven new watering wells and constructing pipelines and troughs. WWP appealed the decision earlier this year and the Bureau vacated and remanded the decision, citing the errors in their analysis that we had identified.

Continued on page 10

Alvord *Continued from page 9*

Nevertheless, the Bureau is back at it again having just recently reissued a newly updated Environmental Assessment in September 2022. No meaningful and substantive changes to the proposed management have been brought forward. Just like in the first round, the Bureau's new decision is deeply flawed and reckless, putting dwindling wildlife populations at further risk.

In support of expanding stocking rates, the Bureau is relying on vegetation data and ecological assessments gathered way back in 1992. But much has changed in thirty years. There have been fires, historic drought, further spread of invasive species and changes in native wildlife and wild horse populations. As for the new wells, the Bureau admits that it has no groundwater data and that no relevant studies exist for the region. Without adequate groundwater data, potential impacts of installing wells on nearby springs can't be determined; however, we do know that springs provide necessary habitat for wildlife and may serve as natural firebreaks. Potential reductions in spring

flow due to localized groundwater drawdown must be evaluated. The Bureau seems hellbent on appeasing the sole permittee in the area at any cost to the environment and shared public resources.

Looking past these horrendous management decisions, I cannot think of a better place to further educate the public about the negative impacts of domestic livestock grazing to public wildlife and wilderness because the Alvord is growing in popularity as a recreation destination. Above and beyond the known ecological impacts of cattle use, visitors are frequently treated to the sight of dead cows during the summer time when temperatures frequently soar above 100 degrees for weeks on end with little available shade. The public gets to see firsthand why cows don't belong here or anywhere else in the arid West for that matter.

If you have not yet had a chance to visit the Alvord, move it towards the top of your list. The best times to visit are early to mid-spring and mid- to late



Photo by Adam Bronstein

Bighorn skull in the Alvord Desert.

fall when the temperatures drop and the snow graces the ridges of Steens Mountain, providing a stunning backdrop and contrast with the desert below. Despite the Alvord's growing popularity, there is still plenty of solitude and beauty to be found.

We will continue to fight for the Alvord and we plan on appealing the new decision when it is issued. ■

Adam Bronstein is Western Watersheds Project's Oregon and Nevada State Director

Introducing New Staff Members at WWP

Welcome Megan Backsen as our new Tenth Circuit Staff Attorney! Megan was born and raised in New Mexico. She attended the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque



where she received a B.S. in Biology. She served five years in the U.S. Coast Guard before attending law school at Vermont Law School, then spent two years as a law clerk with the Alaska State Court before relocating to Idaho.

Megan took her first case with WWP in late 2017, working on our litigation to address the injustices of inaccurate Bureau of Land Management rangeland assessments on Utah's Duck Creek allotment, and has been working with our organization on a pro bono basis ever since. She is a committed public lands advocate who enjoys trailing running, backpacking, and rock climbing in her free time. Megan is thrilled to be officially joining WWP as the tenth circuit staff attorney. She began on October 17th.

Welcome Michael Saul, our new Colorado Director! Michael has spent the past twenty years engaged in legal advocacy on behalf of the endangered, threatened, and at-risk birds, fish and wildlife of the Intermountain West. After earning a J.D. from Yale Law School in 1998, he clerked for the Honorable Carlos F. Lucero of the U.S. Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals. A short stint in private practice led him to join the National Wildlife Federation as associate attorney, where he worked under Tom Lustig, Joe Feller, and Kate Zimmerman on public lands litigation involving energy development, livestock grazing, and wildlife conservation. In 2014, he joined the Center for Biological Diversity as a senior attorney, with a practice emphasizing sage-grouse protection and the campaign to end fossil fuel leasing on public lands. He has spent two decades roaming the West and fighting to protect wildlife habitat from oil and gas drilling, coal mining, and livestock grazing.



Michael is a long-time member, supporter, and ally of Western Watersheds Project, and in the summer of 2022 joined WWP as its Colorado Director. An avid explorer of the Rockies and Great Basin, Michael loves to spend his free time hiking, scrambling, and viewing greater sage-grouse, white-tailed ptarmigan, and pikas. Michael and his partner live in Denver, Colorado with two kids, two cats, and a dog, and far too many stringed instruments.

Welcome Laura Welp as WWP's Vegetation Specialist! Welcoming Laura after all of her years working for us as an independent contractor may seem strange, but we're delighted that she's finally and officially joined our staff! Laura will continue to support all of our staff in deepening our understanding of western ecology and biology, as well as focusing on vegetation destruction projects and Utah's national monuments.

... And goodbye to both John Persell and Kelly Fuller. Thank you for your hard work on behalf of wildlife and public lands!

WWP's Policy Work Pays Off

By Josh Osber

WWP has been working with a variety of conservation organizations in March 2020 to lead an effort to direct any supplemental funding that Congress might authorize toward projects and programs that would truly benefit wildlife and restore public lands. With the passage of both the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, billions of dollars have been earmarked for the federal land management and wildlife agencies. Our efforts, which included detailed letters to Congress and the Administration with hundreds of signatories, countless meetings with staff and officials, and many hours of careful planning and preparation played a big part in making sure these funds were includ-

ed in the bills finally signed into law. Since the passage of both bills, we have continued our advocacy to ensure that the money is spent wisely, that public participation and proper environmental review processes are preserved and emphasized, and that the programs are implemented with equity and environmental justice as key considerations.

Despite our best efforts, some potentially damaging language and funding remained in both bills, but we made important progress in our efforts to restore ecosystems and protect species, including:

- \$200 million for revegetation with a specific focus on implementation of the National Seed Strategy;
- \$125 million for Endangered Species recovery;

- \$500 million for the Department of Interior to conserve, protect, and restore ecosystems and habitat; and
- \$200 million to combat invasive species.

Over the next several years, we will work to ensure that these funds really do benefit wildlife and ecosystems, including pressing towards significant and meaningful reforms within the agencies to reshape their mission from extraction and exploitation to conservation and restoration. By participating in these kinds of policy discussions, we are shaping the conversations, finding new allies, and building momentum for our issues. ■

Josh Osber is the Public Policy Director at Western Watersheds Project

The Healthy Public Lands Project Inaugural Conference

By Josh Osber

At the end of May, the Healthy Public Lands Project (“HPLP”) gathered in Salt Lake City, Utah for its first ever conference. More than 150 people attended in person and additional participants attended via live webcast. The three-day meeting included eight panel discussions, three keynote speakers and a field trip to nearby public lands in central Utah. In addition to panels with a direct focus on public lands grazing, panels also included Indigenous perspectives on public lands management, links between extremism in the West and current threats to American democracy, as well as the mythology of “regenerative” agriculture. Our keynote speakers, Robert Davies, Brooke Larsen and Alastair Bitsoi’ delivered poignant presentations on climate change, activism and hope for the future.

The Healthy Public Lands Project is the outgrowth of a coalition that began in 2019 and includes public lands grazing activists and organizations working together to improve livestock grazing management on public lands so that watersheds and wildlife habitat are healthy and thriving. WWP is a



Photo by HPLP Staff



Photos by Adam Bronstein, WWP

Top photo: Many conference attendees signed up for an informative field trip on the impacts of grazing on public lands led by Erik Molvar, Executive Director of Western Watersheds Project. Left: Dr. Robert Davies, Associate Professor of Physics at Utah State University, delivered the keynote address on global environmental change. Right: George Nickas, Executive Director of Wilderness Watch, moderates a panel on grazing in Wilderness.

founding member of the HPLP and many of our staff are primary contributors to the work of the coalition. A number of WWP's staff presented at the conference or contributed their time to support the effort. It was a

successful first year and HPLP intends to repeat the event biannually. ■

A full list of presenters and video recordings of the presentations as well as supporting materials can be found at www.healthypubclands.org/conference



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Every day the public lands, streams and wildlife throughout the West benefit because of the work done by the dedicated staff of Western Watersheds Project. Everything WWP does to influence the protection and restoration of public lands is based on a vision that western North America may be one of the only places on earth where enough of the native landscape and wildlife still exists to make possible the preservation of a wild natural world.

None of this work would be possible without your generosity and shared passion.



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