



# Western Watersheds Project MESSENGER

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Spring 2023

**Advocating for Pygmy Rabbit ESA Protections**

**Celebrating a New Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Southern Nevada**

**Fighting to Save Peehee Mu'huh**

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

[www.westernwatersheds.org](http://www.westernwatersheds.org)



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Photo by Morgan Heim



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**Western Watersheds Project**  
**MESSENGER**

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Photo by Miranda Crowell

*A pygmy rabbit peers from a burrow.*

## Advocating for Pygmy Rabbit ESA Protections



**By Greta Anderson**

Western Watersheds Project first sought Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections for the pygmy rabbit via a listing petition submitted in 2003. That was twenty years ago, and in the interim, Advocates for the West took the agency to court in 2004, and the Service agreed to provide a determination in 2006. We had to go back to court to get a final listing decision, and, following some more wrangling about deadlines, the Service declined to list the pygmy rabbit in September 2010.

Now, two decades since the first petition, the pygmy rabbit is in even more serious trouble, and we're back in front of the agency petitioning for protection.

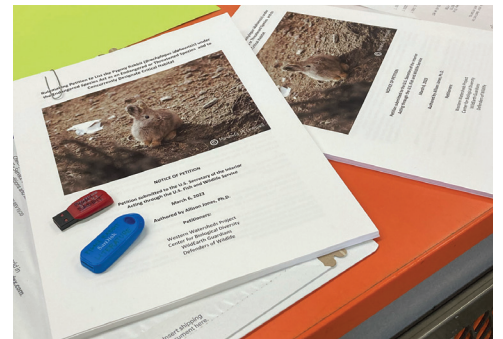
WWP filed the new pygmy rabbit ESA listing petition on March 6, 2022. (Available online: <https://bit.ly/3Jil3td>). Drafted by WWP Board Member Allison Jones, and joined by Defenders of Wildlife, the Center for Biological Diversity, and WildEarth Guardians, the project compiled all of the recent information about pygmy rabbit populations. Spoiler alert: There wasn't much recent information.

The state wildlife agencies stopped paying attention to pygmy rabbits once the threat of

federal listing was alleviated by the 2010 finding, and only a few states continued to monitor the species. In those states, populations have declined precipitously. Wyoming's pygmy rabbit occupancy rate declined 69 percent between 2013 and 2019. In California's Mono Basin, the occupancy rate has declined by one-third in the last five years alone. In sum, what we do know about pygmy rabbit populations is alarming.

Alarming, but not surprising. Pygmy rabbits are sagebrush obligate species, and that habitat has been disappearing at a rapid pace as well. The U.S. Geological Survey recently determined that only 13.6 percent of the original Sagebrush Sea remains intact and ecologically functional. They estimate that we are losing 1.3 million acres of sagebrush each year, primarily due to development, cheatgrass invasions, and wildfire. In Wyoming especially, current and future oil and gas development is a dire threat to pygmy rabbit populations: Active oil and gas well disturbance affects over 5.5 million acres (42 percent) within the current range of the species. There are and additional 2.7 million acres of rabbit habitat in the state that have already been leased.

There are other serious threats as well. Livestock grazing harms pygmy rabbits by spreading the cheatgrass that carries the fire and leads to the permanent destruction of the rabbits' required sagebrush habitat. Pygmy



*Pygmy rabbit ESA petition being prepared for submission to Fish and Wildlife Service on March 6, 2023.*

rabbits have also been plagued by Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Viruses (RHDVs), including a newly emergent strain (RHDV2) that was first detected in 2022 in Elko County, Nevada. This is a highly contagious virus and can lead to sudden death within just two days, and its severity has led at least one expert to worry that it could lead to the widespread extirpation of pygmy rabbit populations.

We're hoping that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service affirms the need to federally-protect the pygmy rabbit and that ESA listing will help focus conservation efforts in the Sagebrush Sea to the benefit of this and other species. ■

*Greta Anderson is the Deputy Director of Western Watersheds Project*





Photo by David Moscovitz

## President Biden: Bring on the Beavers!



*By Adam Bronstein*

"A keystone species is a species on which other species in an ecosystem largely depend, such that if it were removed the ecosystem would change drastically." - Oxford

Dictionary

On February 27, 2023, Western Watersheds Project and Dr. Suzanne Fouty (Forest Service, retired) sent a letter to President Biden signed by 250 non-profit organizations, scientists, and advocates from across the country asking for an executive order protecting beavers from hunting and trapping on federal public lands. The idea behind the petition is that beavers can and do provide important ecosystem resilience and carbon capture opportunities, and the federal government should be protecting the species rather than allowing it to be eradicated from the western landscape.

State fish and wildlife departments have disproportionately represented the narrow interests of hunters and trappers, excluding and alienating the remainder of the population who has a vested interest in seeing biodiversity protected, whether it be "game" or "non-game" species. Criticisms of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation are gaining steam across the country, and the failure to protect the beaver is a shining example that times must change indeed. Biodiversity and healthy ecosystems serve all of us.

The wetland habitats that beavers create are natural carbon capture and storage zones. Wetland soils sequester 3-10 times more carbon than virgin forests. That is a staggering number to contemplate. When we talk about

protecting mature and old growth forests, the focus is on protecting current carbon reservoirs. Expanding beaver habitat would bring new carbon storage capacity online as a nature-based solution. Silicon Valley and their imagined and unproved techno-fixes cannot compete with the beaver!

The benefits go well beyond carbon storage. They include creation of vital habitat for fish, birds, mammals, reptiles, and macro-invertebrates. These habitats are particularly important in arid environments across the West. One study found an 86% increase in mammal occupancy and utilization in riparian areas where beavers are present versus where they are not. Coho salmon are particularly dependent on the beaver's hydraulic engineering. Where there are strong surface to groundwater connections, water is cooled when it travels underground through stream substrates around beaver dam complexes, providing rich, oxygenated water for trout and salmon and their offspring.

Water is a major issue we face, whether it be too much or too little. Beavers help store water on the landscape behind their dam structures and through groundwater recharge, eliminating the need for concrete dams and reservoirs on the landscape. The Colorado River Basin, among countless other watersheds, would benefit immensely from beaver expansion. When flooding events occur, beaver dams help hold back water, mitigating disastrous effects downstream to human infrastructure.

Beavers create natural firebreaks and provide refuge for wildlife during wildfires through expansion of the "green zone". Water and green vegetation do not burn. A 2020 peer-reviewed article by Emily Fairfax in

journal Ecological Applications noted; "We found that beaver-dammed riparian corridors are relatively unaffected by wildfire when compared to similar riparian corridors without beaver damming. Beaver activity... does play a significant role in riparian vegetation fire resistance and refugia creation." Beaver dams also filter out water pollutants after wildfire events to the benefit of humans and wildlife downstream.

In the year 1600, as many as 400 million beavers occupied the North American continent, dropping precipitously through the late 1800s due to European demand for hats made from their fur. If fashion trends had not changed, it is very possible that the North American beaver might very well have gone extinct by the turn of the century. Beaver populations are now thought to range between six and twelve million individuals. Trapping and hunting of beaver on federal public lands continues in 2023 across nearly all of the western states. Trappers today are more efficient than ever and cause a disproportionate impact on populations.

Eliminating the trapping and hunting of beavers is the only mortality factor that we can control and our public lands provide the perfect opportunity to protect beavers for the benefit of all life. The states have failed us and it is now time for federal action. Please consider signing our online petition [Change.org/ProtectBeavers](https://change.org/ProtectBeavers) to add your name to the cause. Beavers are the keystone of keystone species and we must work together for as long as it takes to see that they get the protection they deserve. ■

*Adam Bronstein is WWP's Oregon and Nevada State Director.*





Thacker Pass, Nevada.

Photo by Erik Molvar.

## Fighting to Save Peehee Mu'huh



**By Talasi Brooks**

Two years ago, WWP and its allies Great Basin Resource Watch, Basin and Range Watch, and Wildlands Defense sued to stop the Thacker Pass Lithium

Project from destroying thousands of acres of sage-grouse priority habitat and pronghorn winter range in northern Nevada. The mine intends to dewater an aquifer linked with all nine known springs inhabited by the rare Kings River pyrg, a rare springsnail that WWP petitioned for ESA listing in 2022. The mine was fast-tracked for approval at the end of the Trump administration following a rushed and truncated environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act that overlooked potentially severe impacts to the environment.

In the race to approve the mine—during COVID, no less—the Bureau of Land Management also conducted a scant and inadequate tribal consultation, even though it came to light over the course of the litigation that the area holds cultural landscapes that are precious to native peoples.

In 2021, WWP sought a preliminary injunction to preserve the status quo by preventing ground disturbance for cultural surveys slated to begin while the case was pending before the district court. Two Tribes, the Reno Sparks Indian Colony and the Burns Paiute Tribe, as well as an Indigenous group, the People of Red Mountain, intervened as Plaintiffs in the suit and also sought an injunction to preserve the site, known as “Peehee Mu’huh,” which is culturally rich and precious to their people. Unfortunately, the district court denied both motions and cultural resource

surveys began. However, following those initial disturbances, the Project was largely put on hold and the project proponent, Lithium Nevada Corporation (“LNC”) agreed to notify a local rancher who had also sued over the mine before beginning project construction.

On February 6, 2023, the district court issued an order granting WWP summary judgment on its primary claim, but denying summary judgment on all other claims. The court held that the Bureau violated the law when it assumed that LNC held valid rights to permanently occupy mining claims where it intended to dump waste rock and tailings, without first determining whether LNC had discovered “valuable minerals” on those lands. However, because the court was persuaded that the Bureau could easily “fix” this error—i.e., backfill its conclusion with a missing rationale—it left the Bureau’s unlawful mine approval in place, leaving LNC free to begin mine construction by stripping all surface vegetation off of the lands where it intends to dump the waste rock and tailings. LNC plans to clear about half of the total 5,545 acres to be disturbed by the mine operations in the first

year alone.

WWP and the other plaintiffs challenging the mine filed emergency motions with both the district court and the Ninth Circuit to stop mine construction, but first the district court, and then a panel of two Ninth Circuit judges, declined to stop the mine. However, the Ninth Circuit judges placed WWP’s appeal on an expedited briefing track and scheduled the case for a hearing in June. This means that if the Ninth Circuit rules in WWP’s favor, it might do so before the destruction of all vital wildlife habitats in the Project area is complete.

There is still hope! We will continue fighting to stop the destruction of this precious place in the name of “green energy.” As our nation searches for ways to address the climate crisis, our solutions cannot come at the expense of biodiversity. Our laws to protect the environment provide a crucial backstop against greenwashing as companies move to profit off of the international demand to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy. ■

*Talasi Brooks is a staff attorney for Western Watersheds Project.*



Thacker Pass: Life Over Lithium billboard.

Photo courtesy of People of Red Mountain



# Celebrating a New Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Southern Nevada



By Laura Cunningham

A wide array of conservationists have worked to form a new national monument in the southern tip of Nevada across Mojave Desert basin and

mountain range landscapes, centering around Spirit Mountain, known as Avi Kwa Ame in the Yuman languages. Western Watersheds Project has worked for years protecting this biodiverse area, and the background stories of decades of work by many stakeholders to remove livestock grazing and halt energy projects deserve to be told. In March of 2023, President Biden designated this new national monument of almost 514,000 acres as the largest of his presidency.

The light-colored granitic peak of Avi Kwa Ame Mountain is sacred to more than ten tribes along the Colorado River region of Nevada, California, Arizona, and Utah. The peak is within the Spirit Mountain Wilderness Area; however, until the national monument designation, the viewshed and cultural landscapes around it still needed better protection. Cultural landscapes, springs, and petroglyphs in the region are important to the Fort Mojave Paiute, Hualapai, Chemehuevi, Quechan, Maricopa, Yavapai, Pai Pai, Halchidhoma, Kumeyaay, and other tribes.

Dense Joshua tree woodlands, unique desert grasslands, natural cactus gardens, and sculpted mountain ridges make this a picturesque part of the Mojave Desert. The desert grasslands in the region are of interest because of the large number of native perennial and annual species that grow here, both cool-season grasses that green up with winter and spring rains, and many warm-season grasses that benefit from the high levels of summer monsoon rains that drench the deserts locally. Such native grasses as big galleta, blue grama, black grama, six-weeks grama, bush muhly, fluff grass, desert needlegrass, and many more thrive in the absence of livestock. The grasslands are recovering very well from past cattle grazing.

Desert bighorn sheep inhabit the rocky ridges, while Gila monsters and diamondback rattlesnakes occupy desert basins. The Joshua tree woodlands hold several bird species found nowhere else in Nevada, including gilded flickers, Harris' hawks, and occasional curve-billed thrashers.

Western Watersheds Project and Basin and Range Watch organized a Bioblitz in 2018 (and ongoing) to help document the many species of desert plants and animals here. The Castle Mountains, Nevada, Bioblitz project hosted on the iNaturalist.org website was a great success, with 70 observers participating, and 295 species documented.



Photo by Laura Cunningham

*This retired grazing allotment in the newly designated Avi Kwa Ame National Monument shows remarkable recovery of desert grasslands since livestock were removed some 20-30 years ago. Had the national monument designation not occurred, this view of the Castle Mountains might have been disrupted by a large wind farm project that was proposed for this site. Joshua trees, Mojave yuccas, and big galleta grass instead provide protected habitat to native species.*

The background of conservation in this area goes back decades to a ground-breaking deal that was negotiated by then Nevada Senator Harry Reid (D-NV). In exchange for allowing the Las Vegas metropolitan area to grow across federally threatened Mojave desert tortoise habitat in Clark County, Nevada, other surrounding habitats would be conserved. This included buying out and permanently retiring grazing allotments on public lands.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with Clark County, The Bureau of Land Management (the Bureau), and other agencies and governments prepared the Clark County Multiple Species Conservation Plan of 2000 as a mechanism to protect 78 species and their habitats from threats such as urbanization, development, and livestock grazing as part of compliance with the Endangered Species Act, and a Section 10(a)(1)(B) incidental take permit.

Species included in the plan are plants such as the Las Vegas bear poppy, pollinators such as the Mojave poppy bee, birds such as the phainopepla, and mammals such as the desert kit fox.

Under this plan, cattle grazing ended in the Avi Kwa Ame region by the 1990s and 2000s as Clark County secured funds through The Nature Conservancy to buy out private



Photo by Laura Cunningham

*A cow in a ranch paddock in Mojave National Preserve, California, just over the boundary from Avi Kwa Ame National Monument, Nevada. Cattle were common within the new national monument until between 20 - 30 years ago, when the last allotments were retired.*

ranches, including the famous Walking Box Ranch. Originally part of the massive Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, the Walking Box Ranch was purchased by Rex Bell in May 1931. Bell and his wife Clara Bow, both Hollywood film stars, lived at the ranch until the 1940s. The base ranch property with associated public lands grazing allotment changed hands several times in the ensuing decades.

The Bureau now owns the ranch houses and associated buildings, and BLM permanently retired the large allotments that once covered most of the monument area. This was done in order to conserve federally threatened Mojave desert tortoises which thrive here, as the Las Vegas metropolitan area has sprawled across their habitat.





The above photos show a gilded flicker (photo by Jon Oropeza), desert bighorn sheep (photo by USFWS), a Mohave desert tortoise (photo by Laura Cunningham) and a gila monster (photo by Shaan Hurley) – some of the numerous native species that will benefit from the national monument designation. All photos courtesy of Flickr Creative Commons except for the desert tortoise.



Photo by US Dept of Interior, courtesy of Flickr Creative Commons.

Located at the confluence of the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts, Avi Kwa Ame was designated a national monument by President Biden on March 21, 2023. This designation protects innumerable objects of historic and scientific interest, including its namesake Avi Kwa Ame – or Spirit Mountain – and the surrounding arid valleys and mountain ranges that are historically important and sacred places for several Tribal Nations.

The Walking Box Ranch is located in the middle of an expansive desert tortoise conservation area located in the new Avi Kwa Ame National Monument. This vacant ranch property might in the future be the visitor center to the park. The new national monument also provides connectivity from Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Nevada to Mojave National Preserve in California, and helps protect rare species from further ongoing threats such as energy development.

In 2015, a Swedish energy company submitted an application to the Bureau to construct a wind facility, the Crescent Peak Wind Project, on 33,000 acres of the Castle Mountains along the California/Nevada boundary and up to the border of the Wee Thump Joshua Tree Wilderness Area. This project would have been mostly within the newly designated Avi Kwa Ame National Monument boundary. Why did the Bureau allow energy applications on top of these retired grazing allotments? The answer we have received is because in 2000, during the signing of the Clark County Multiple Species Conservation Plan, the Bureau simply did not anticipate the huge renewable energy push on public lands, so language about wind projects was not included.

This left environmental groups to take up the slack and deal with this loophole in public lands management for conservation of the species covered in the habitat plan. Western

Watersheds Project along with a coalition of environmental groups, tribes, and hunters petitioned the Secretary of the Interior to protect these desert grasslands and mountains for bighorn sheep, golden eagles, and visual resources. In 2018, the Interior Department directed the Bureau to deny the application.

Yet the same developer returned with a new wind application on the Castle Mountains, calling it the Kulning Wind Project. Interestingly, the word “kulning” is said to be a Swedish term for luring cattle with soft, song-like vocalizations. Objections voiced by tribes and conservation groups including Western Watersheds Project about conflicts with land preservation convinced the Bureau to place this project on a “low priority” status.

Taking the offensive, later in 2018 Western Watersheds Project and Basin and Range Watch nominated the area as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to the Bureau. Many organizations signed on to our nomination. We submitted this nomination as a conservation alternative to the wind energy applications. The agency only considers new ACEC designations during their Resource Management Plan revisions or amendments. We saw how the Bureau would have to consider this ACEC nomination because they needed to amend the Southern Nevada Resource Management Plan to downgrade the Visual Resource Management Class in order to accommodate a proposed

308-megawatt wind energy project with 68 wind turbine generators proposed at nearly 600 feet tower height on the Castle Mountains and Crescent Peak in Nevada—in the middle of what is now the Avi Kwa Ame National Monument. We submitted comments during the environmental review for the wind project. Fortunately, the agency placed this latest wind energy application on the back burner too.

In 2022, the Department of Interior listened to a new campaign by many tribes and organizations to designate this same area as a national monument managed by the Bureau. Now that this has been achieved, the new national monument designation will unify the disparate management of the various public lands within Avi Kwa Ame, including wilderness areas, open lands, renewable energy areas of interest by the industry, and retired grazing allotments managed for conservation.

Thus, the efforts to protect these tortoises, desert grasslands and Joshua tree forests has been years in the making. Western Watersheds Project has persisted using a multi-pronged approach to protect these permanently closed grazing allotments in perpetuity. We are documenting and monitoring the recovery of these desert grasslands and the wildlife here into the future. ■

*Laura Cunningham is the California Director at Western Watersheds Project.*





Photo by Dave Stricklan

*Cows on your public land in the Little Lost River Valley, Idaho.*

## Teaching a Pig to Sing



**By Dave Stricklan**

Over the course of a weekend in late February, I drove the length of the Little Lost River and then the Pahsimeroi Valley in Idaho. I started at the Big Lost River

Sinks, which not that many years ago was full of water, and drove north to the mouth of the Pahsimeroi River, which not that many years ago was full of salmon. Along the way I saw herds of wintering elk (some of the bulls still antlered), buff and tan pronghorn with the three tan stripes of a sergeant's insignia across their throats, golden and bald eagles perched in scraggly remnants of gallery cottonwood forests, both mule and white-tailed deer in fragments of what was once classic habitat for each, rough-legged hawks down from the Arctic, and red-tailed hawks with brown belly-bands. Magpies and ravens were on the roadkill shreds. And in the late afternoon, I saw bighorn sheep too, a small but authentic herd moving across a side slope, just like they truly belonged there and were not at all surprised to be back on the landscape after being extirpated for decades due to overhunting and domestic sheep diseases.

Being in a drowsy, trance-like, slow-thinking sort of mood, I initially felt a kind of gratitude for being the guy privileged to see the last spurt of a once profound and rich bestiary that is the rightful natural heritage of these valleys. Then, slowly, like a lizard warming on a flat rock on a sunny day, my thinker began to move incrementally quicker. I began to feel a kind of shame that even the best of our *public* landscapes are devoid of bison or predator tracks in the snow. Today there are only remnants of the once thick mountain ri-

parian and gallery forests that in the past filled every side-canyon draw. Beaver and salmon are mostly absent from our best streams. The once huge winter mega-herds are now represented with the pathetic little wildlife vestiges that I saw during the day (again, on my public land). This paucity is a deliberate societal choice, forced on me by people who condescend to me while taking my tax dollars to simultaneously graze non-native, invasive species in a virtual monoculture, and did I mention, this is happening on *my land*!

Just for the record, these two valleys are capable of supporting greater biodiversity and biomass production than the Lamar and Hayden valleys of Yellowstone. Even though the Lamar Valley is sometimes called the Serengeti of North America (albeit usually by people who have recently moved to Bozeman, Montana and/or those who should know better). The valleys of Yellowstone just don't have the elevational reach from valley floor to mountain peak of many valleys elsewhere in the Northern Rockies. The Yellowstone valleys have neither the rich bottomlands nor a match of elevational gradient to the height of the peaks. That's not a knock on Yellowstone, but there are easily thirty other mountain valleys between the Central Idaho Wilderness Areas and Yellowstone that fit that more biodiverse and ecologically productive definition. There just are. But because they were more productive than Yellowstone, other places were farmed and grazed, and the wildlife was removed to make way for domestic livestock — on *my land*.

It is as simple as that. Non-native, privately-owned domestic livestock dominate and displace wildlife on public land outside of Yellowstone. All too often domestic livestock overgraze the uplands and destroy willows

and cottonwoods and denude riparian areas. Further, you and I abet this absurdity at a massively subsidized rate with our tax dollars, willingly or not. On public ground not located in Yellowstone, scarce spring water sources are captured and transported under the ground through black plastic pipelines to livestock watering troughs where cattle lounge in the dust. The domestic animals behaviorally prevent wildlife from drinking or being the parts of the more favorable lower elevation habitats. Domestic livestock thus fill the large animal grazer niche and form a monoculture of cognitively-challenged invasive species.

That's the tradeoff. In these valleys, society subsidizes private landholders to graze thousands of domestic cows where thousands of wildlife would be if there was room. Cattle to wildlife equivalents vary slightly depending on the source, but basically one elk is roughly equivalent to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a domestic cow. Five to six mule deer and somewhere between five and seven bighorn sheep are equivalent to a cow. Six to ten pronghorn or white-tailed deer equal a cow. A horse is slightly more than one domestic cow, bison cows just a little less than one domestic cow. And finally, sixty-two black-tailed jackrabbits equal one cow on the range.

But here is the thing—on public ground, society isn't allowed to decide to switch out a few domestic cows for more elk or mule deer, or even let a few bison on the range in place of a herd of Angus and their dulled senses and behaviors. Even after decades of NEPA analysis and environmental monitoring, permits to graze domestic cattle on public ground are essentially a birthright and are becoming even less wildlife friendly over time.

I work with ranchers, who for various reasons are amenable to taking a willing-seller





Photo by Erik Molvar

*Pronghorn in the Little Lost River Valley, Idaho.*

buyout and retirement of their public land grazing permit. Even in cases where there is an anxious willing seller of a permit, it is virtually impossible to retire a grazing permit unless several extraordinary conditions line up. Fortunately for the citizens of the nation who don't hold a birthright grazing permit, and for elk, bighorn sheep and predators, and for the sustainable economic welfare of rural communities, there are surprisingly creative folks from surprisingly diverse backgrounds working on this Gordian knot.

Sometimes good things happen. You can help, too. When in the course of your hiking, fishing, hunting, or whatever activities you

participate in on public lands, you run into a landscape that is "cattle burnt," take a picture, forward the picture to your congressperson, senator, governor, or even, you know, the president—and ask them why they allow someone to do this on your land and ask them to make it stop and then report back to you.

Don't send your pictures and requests to the agency that manages the area; people have tried that, mostly unsuccessfully, for decades. Trying to get the land management agency to do something about the damage is much like trying to teach a pig to sing. First, it just doesn't work, and second, it only serves to

annoy the pig and is not a good use of your time, unless you like Quixotic adventures. Instead, ask your president to fire the agency official in charge of the land that is damaged, and their boss as well, and then hire someone who understands what the word "biodiversity" actually means. We live in a diminished world of our own making. It is past time to make a change. This is public land. ■

*Dave Stricklan, Ph.D., is the Sagebrush Specialist with Western Watersheds Project and the liaison with the Sagebrush Habitat Conservation Fund.*

# Please join us for Western Watersheds Project's 2023 Spring Meeting!

**Saturday, June 24, 2023**  
**10:00 am to about 3:30 pm MST**  
**805 Eastfork Rd.**  
**Clayton, ID 83227**



**Please RSVP to get the agenda, lodging  
and camping information by emailing  
[wwp@westernwatersheds.org](mailto:wwp@westernwatersheds.org)**

Sunset over the East Fork of the Salmon River,  
Mark Lisk, USFS - Flickr Creative Commons



# Arizona's Superbloom



By *Cyndi Tuell*

This winter in Arizona was particularly cold and wet. While 2022 ranked as the 28th driest year on record, with just over 12 inches of rain average across the state by the end

of last year, the early winter rains had people talking about the possibility of a superbloom – a relatively rare event when a lot of annual plants bloom all at once. The winter rains came in waves, timed just right to keep the soil wet, allowing long-dormant seeds the perfect chance to sprout. It got cold, but not too cold, and it didn't get too hot too early. In the first two days of January 2023, the Phoenix area got over half an inch of rain, more than the first six months of the previous year.

By late February of 2023 the possibility of the superbloom became a reality. Social media and local news outlets started sharing photos of Mexican poppies and lupine, and letting people know where to go to see the burgeoning blossoms: Picacho Peak State Park, Catalina State Park, Estrella Mountain Regional Park, Lost Dutchman State Park, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and Bartlett Lake. These annual flowers will last just a few weeks, maybe a month, but this ephemeral beauty draws visitors from all over the state.

In some places the visitors trampled the flowers they came to see in order to get a good social media photo. In the recent past some areas in California that became too well known for their superbloom had to be closed because the crowds were causing too much damage. This is a real shame and we hope that folks will learn to respect this rare treat from mother nature.

An even bigger threat to the superbloom, though, is livestock grazing. If you consider the best places to see annual flowers blooming after a winter of rain, you'll notice they all have one thing in common besides the weather: they aren't grazed by livestock.

In Arizona and some parts of California, the Bureau of Land Management authorizes something called "ephemeral grazing." That's because the superbloom is an ephemeral event, varying by year and location and making the typical methods of perennial forage allocations impossible. The Bureau even has a special rule for this kind of grazing authorization.

The Bureau's special Ephemeral Grazing Rule, published December 7, 1968, seems to acknowledge that ephemeral grazing will target marginal rangelands that are ill-suited to grazing to begin with. Allotments can be classified as ephemeral based on the following criteria:

- Rangelands are within the hot desert biome.
- Average annual precipitation is less than 8 inches.
- Rangelands produce less than 25 pounds per acre of desirable forage grasses.



*Superbloom at Picacho Peak.*

Photo C. Tuell/WWP

- The vegetative community is composed of less than 5% desirable forage species.

- The rangelands are generally below 3,500 feet in elevation.

- Annual production is highly unpredictable and forage availability is of a short duration.

- Usable forage production depends on abundant moisture and other favorable climatic conditions.

- Rangelands lack potential to improve existing ecological status and produce a dependable supply of forage through intensive rangeland management practices.

But letting cows graze on the annual native plants that follow the seasonal rain is a perfect recipe for wiping out those annuals for the long-term and depriving wildlife of the rare years of abundance in the hottest parts of the desert.

One place where I expected to see the early signs of the superbloom was the Sonoran Desert National Monument. My most recent visit to the Monument was over "rodeo break" with my son because he got two extra days off school (and yes, the schools in southern Arizona really do close down for two days to "celebrate" the rodeo - it's wild.) Our first stop was at Picacho Peak State Park because it was on the way and during a week day we could spend some time with the flowers without the big crowds that come on the weekends. As we drove up the hill to the visitor center, we came around a corner and the wall of flowers that greeted us was stunning. Lupine and poppies everywhere we looked. We got out and hiked around for about an hour and we were amazed by the flowers and the number of birds and insects.

Next stop was about an hour's drive away at the Conley allotment of the Sonoran Desert National Monument, just west of Phoenix, north of Highway 238, and on the eastern side of the Monument. This area is the most recently grazed allotment on the Monument with the last legal grazing authorization in 2012, but the Bureau "accidentally" grazed in 2015-2016. It looked bad and was not at all a place we wanted to

camp. The soils were disturbed. The vegetation was sparse. The road was in bad shape.

We moved on toward the west to what is called the Bighorn allotment. This area was last grazed in 2009. The diversity and numbers of annuals here was much higher than the Conley allotment, though far less than what we saw at Picacho. This was where we spent our first night camping and exploring. We found lupine, poppies, several species of phacelia, some bladderpod, and several species of daisy-like flowers. The arroyos were lush with vines, bursage, creosote, ironwoods, and mesquites. The birds and flying insects were enjoying the winter vegetation as much as we were.

The next day we headed to the northeastern portion of the Monument, visiting the Arnold allotment which has only been grazed twice since 2009. There is a part of this allotment that is fenced off and it appears that livestock haven't grazed this fenced area for even longer. We could again see that where cows had been off the land the longest, the number and variety of flowering plants was substantially higher.

As I write this, it is once again raining in southern Arizona. There has been snow on the Rincon and Catalina mountains for months now, something I don't recall ever having seen in all my years living in Tucson. All this rain, snow, and this stunning display of flowers is amazing, but Arizona is still in a drought. Our reservoirs are at their lowest levels in decades. Our aquifers are still lower than ever, too. In light of climate impacts, this new infusion of rain is not enough to reverse our long-term drought and we will need to remain vigilant in protecting our federally managed lands from the ravages of livestock grazing, especially on arid lands. Hotter and drier times are in our future, and now seems like an especially good time for the Bureau to rethink the ephemeral grazing rule. If we want future generations to have even a chance at experiencing a superbloom, we should keep the cows (and the tourists) from destroying these plants. ■

*Cyndi Tuell is WWP's Arizona and New Mexico State Director*



# More Livestock Wells Mean More Damage in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument



**By Laura Welp**

If you spread livestock use out across the southern Utah landscape with artificial water sources, does it reduce the damage they cause?

That's what the Bureau of Land Management is saying. They propose to build new wells, troughs, and pipelines in four grazing allotments on the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) that already don't (or just barely) meet Utah Standards for Rangeland Health due to degradation from livestock.

One of the Bureau's go-to solutions to fix land health problems caused by cattle is to spend money on more wells. Cattle can't travel more than a few miles from water so they have to find forage within that distance. The Bureau's solution is to provide more water in parts of the allotment that cattle otherwise can't get to (and damage) due to lack of water. This, they say, would allow cattle to graze in what they call "underutilized" areas and take some pressure off the impacted areas around the current wells. (The native wildlife and birds in those proposed locations might disagree that those areas are "underutilized.")

But livestock can do a lot of damage around water sources if they are allowed to concentrate there, which is the default man-

agement style for many public lands' ranchers. The Bureau confines their analysis of cattle impacts to a ¼ mile buffer around wells, but the effects of grazing can occur up to two miles around a water source. That's 8,042 acres per well. Simply reducing use around the current wells will not improve conditions, especially not for soils or biocrusts. The damage is too severe. This project will just cause more impacts around wells in new areas without improving the old ones. These GSENM allotments have been failing land health standards for decades due to cattle mismanagement, in spite of the fact that they have many water sources already. Let's not make the problem worse by rewarding ranchers with more wells. It's time to address the problem at its source: stocking rates.

Grand Staircase isn't the only Bureau monument where we're seeing more well drilling these days. Utah, home of Bears Ears National Monument, is going to exchange state land within the monument with more valuable federal land elsewhere. Before that happens, the state is hurrying to drill new wells for livestock, as is the Bureau, including on The Nature Conservancy's Dugway Ranch. Between the state and the Bureau, Bears Ears National Monument could end up with 38 new water sources for livestock, and 38 new overgrazing hotspots. The consequences of drilling wells on nearby springs and seeps and on lowering the water table is a concern,



Photo by Laura Welp

*Remote stock tanks like this one not only create hazards for wildlife but can also remove plant and wildlife habitat associated with free-flowing springs.*

and so is the damage to acres and acres of land around the new wells.

Grand Staircase and Bears Ears are part of the Bureau's National Conservation Lands system. These areas are supposed to be managed for the protection of the objects for which the monument was designated, not the "multiple-use" approach where livestock grazing reigns supreme. We are urging the Bureau to honor the monument proclamations and management guidance to protect natural ecosystems and the lives that depends on them, and stop facilitating livestock grazing impacts. ■

*Laura Welp is an ecosystems specialist with Western Watersheds Project.*

## Western Watersheds Project 2022 Annual Financial Report

### INCOME

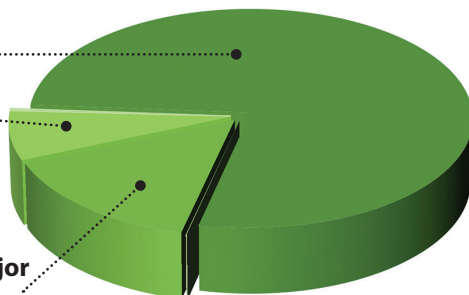
|                               |                  |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Memberships & Major Donors... | 229,761          |
| Grants .....                  | 1,186,840        |
| Earned Income .....           | 4,896            |
| Interest Income .....         | 718              |
| Legal Fee Recovery .....      | 109,597          |
| <b>Total Income.....</b>      | <b>1,531,811</b> |

**2022 Budgeted Expenses....\$1,566,372**

**2023 Budgeted Expenses....\$1,639,496**

### INCOME

Grants 77.5%  
Legal Fee Recovery 7.1%  
Membership & Major Donations 15%

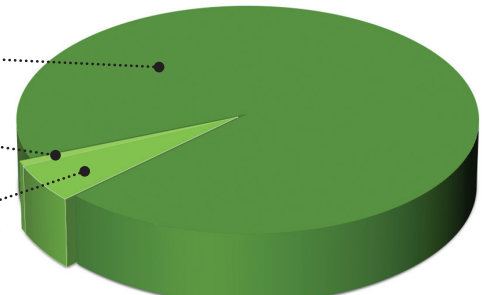


### EXPENSES

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| Accounting .....                              | 2,470              |
| Bank Fees & Donation Processing .....         | 9,530              |
| Gifts and Donations.....                      | 1,250              |
| Conferences, Meetings, Events.....            | 20,052             |
| Contract Services.....                        | 99,984             |
| Employee Benefits .....                       | 146,448            |
| Equipment Rental & Maintenance .....          | 3,423              |
| Grazing Leases.....                           | 1,194              |
| Insurance .....                               | 21,838             |
| Legal.....                                    | 9,696              |
| Occupancy .....                               | 27,816             |
| Payroll .....                                 | 1,017,425          |
| Payroll Expenses .....                        | 86,356             |
| Postage & Shipping .....                      | 3,112              |
| Printing & Publications .....                 | 16,743             |
| Program Expenses (business filing fees) ..... | 19                 |
| Supplies .....                                | 6,097              |
| Telephone/Internet.....                       | 19,532             |
| Travel.....                                   | 57,908             |
| Website .....                                 | 4,774              |
| <b>Total Expenses .....</b>                   | <b>\$1,555,667</b> |

### EXPENSES

Programs 94%  
Fundraising 0.7%  
Administration 5.3%







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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.*



#### Donate online or by mail!

Any size donation is greatly appreciated! And it's easy to become a sustaining member by giving monthly through our online donation platform at [www.westernwatersheds.org](http://www.westernwatersheds.org)



#### Make a Gift of Appreciated Stock!

Talk to your accountant or financial planner about the potential tax benefits of making this type of donation



#### Planned Giving makes a lasting impact!

Talk to your financial planner or attorney to find out how to give through bequests, charitable remainder trust, charitable lead trust, gift annuity or visit [FreeWill.com/WesternWatersheds](http://FreeWill.com/WesternWatersheds).

**FREEWILL**

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