



WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT **MESSENGER**

SPRING 2024

Vol. XXXII



Featuring
WESTERN WOLF EXPANSION
WOLVERINES IN COLORADO
WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM
SCIENCE VS. MANAGEMENT

westernwatersheds.org

Photo: A female gray wolf with her pup / Getty via Cava

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Erik Molvar.....Executive Director
Greta Anderson.....Deputy Director
Megan Backsen.....Staff Attorney
Adam Bronstein.....Oregon Director
Laura Cunningham.....California Director
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Greg LeDonne.....Idaho Director
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Delaney Rudy.....Colorado Director
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Dagny Signorelli.....Utah and Wyoming Director
Dave StricklanSagebrush Specialist
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Idaho Headquarters: P.O. Box 1770 • Hailey, ID 83333
(208) 788-2290 • wwp@westernwatersheds.org

New Mexico/Arizona: 738 N. 5th Ave., 206 • Tucson, AZ
85705 • (520) 623-1878 • cyndi@westernwatersheds.org

California: P.O. Box 70 • Beatty, NV 89003
(775) 513-1280 • lcunningham@westernwatersheds.org

Colorado: P.O. Box 621 • Paonia, CO 81428
(970) 648-4241 • delaney@westernwatersheds.org

Wyoming/Utah: New P.O. Box coming soon
(970) 312-1828 • dagny@westernwatersheds.org

Montana/Washington: P.O. Box 8837 • Missoula, MT 59807
(208) 576-4314 • patrick@westernwatersheds.org

Oregon: P.O. Box 1855 • Sisters, OR 97759
(541) 595-8034 • adam@westernwatersheds.org

Nevada: New P.O. Box coming soon
(208) 421-4637 • paul@westernwatersheds.org





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**WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT INVITES YOU TO
OUR 2024 ANNUAL BOARD AND MEMBERS MEETING**

Saturday, August 24, 2024, 10 a.m.
Camp Tuttle, Brighton, UT

To RSVP or for more information, email
wwp@westernwatersheds.org by **August 9th**

WOLF RECOVERY EXPANDS

Despite federal apathy, rancher and trophy hunter hate campaigns

By Erik Molvar, *Executive Director*

Depending on where in the West, 2023 was either a great year to be a wolf or was either a great year to be a wolf or a life-or-death struggle to elude humans. Wolf populations expanded and formed new packs in the West Coast states and a reintroduction effort in Colorado got off to a promising start.

At the same time, wolves in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming faced murderous state policies, while an apathetic federal government stood by and did nothing to fulfill its responsibilities to protect the species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the California Endangered Species Act. And in the Southwest, Mexican wolves got a long-overdue reprieve when a new livestock depredation method – based on science rather than maximizing rancher payola and paranoia – replaced years of corrupt mischaracterization of nearly all dead livestock as wolf kills. Through it all, Western Watersheds Project was a voice for the wolves, contributing important gains while setting the table for legal action to get northern Rockies the well-deserved protections they have been denied for so long.

California leads West Coast efforts, with new wolf packs established

The best place to be a wolf is California, where dual listing under the federal ESA California Endangered Species Act not only blocks hunting but also prohibits the killings of wolves even when they prey on cattle and sheep. Livestock producers are compensated when cattle or sheep are taken by wolves, but they don't get to call in a state or federal death squad and engage in revenge killings.

Thanks to California's enlightened approach, a number of new wolf packs have been established in the state. The southernmost pack is the five-wolf Yowlumni pack that established itself in the Sequoia National Forest near Kings Canyon National Park and had its first litter of pups in 2023. Two new packs were established in the eastern Sierra Nevada northwest of Reno, the Beyem Seyo Pack (with six pups and two adults) and an unnamed pair. Overall, it has been a solid year of wolf recovery in California, as wolves reclaimed habitats long silenced of their howls.

Just across the border in Oregon, wolves continued to expand in the western part of the state, where they are still federally protected under the ESA. But wolves have been killed at an accelerating pace east of the Cascades, and their population is stagnating statewide. Oregon remains plagued by a state wolf plan that allows trigger-happy ranchers to kill wolves “in the act” of depredating cattle and sheep.

There have also been reports of multiple wolves being poisoned, but as yet there have been no criminal consequences. Washington has a similar situation, but has had fewer wolves lost to the cattle industry. The Washington wolf population grew 5% according to the last census, with a new pack established in the North Cascades.

Wolves return to Colorado

In December, ten wolves were translocated from northeastern Oregon to the mountains of Colorado, fulfilling a legal commitment born of a citizen-led ballot initiative (backed by WWP and our allies) that won a narrow but decisive victory in 2020. State law now requires Colorado to manage wolves based on the best available science.

But it has nonetheless been a rocky road for wolves, with the state Cattlemen’s Association and fringe sportsmen groups like Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation seeking to thwart the reintroduction at every turn. The state unwisely appointed a collaborative committee stacked with wolf opponents to advise the wolf management plan, which was then drafted for the benefit of ranchers rather than wolves. WWP and our allies fought hard to remove the most egregious provisions, testifying before the Parks and Wildlife Commission and injecting science into the process.

We managed to get trophy hunting struck from the wolf management plan, but it still has provisions for killing wolves in retribution for livestock losses, and excessive payments for ranchers whose beef ends up on the “wrong” dinner plate. We’ll keep fighting until the lethal management of wolves is stricken from the plan.

At the same time, WWP has been working to get Mexican gray wolves into the Colorado wolf reintroduction mix. There are hundreds of Mexican gray wolves languishing in captivity, while Colorado struggles to find gray wolves to import to the state.

Establishing Mexican wolves in southwestern Colorado could provide a genetic buffer to prevent unmanaged intermixing before the Mexican grays are fully recovered, and could recapitulate an intermediate form of wolf that once inhabited this region but was driven extinct.

Mexican wolves get reforms but still struggle

Several years ago, WWP spearheaded an investigation of corrupt rancher depredation claims, claims that paid out livestock producers for many lost livestock lacking any definitive connection to wolf predation. These “killer wolf” claims led to a number of deadly removals by state and federal agencies, including the killing of an entire pack. But once our investigation hit the press, congressional concerns cropped up, and a whistleblower stepped forward from within USDA Wildlife Services to underscore the conclusions of the WWP investigation. In response, new federal standards were put in place requiring definitive proof of wolf involvement in the killing or injury of livestock before a dead cow could be eligible for full compensation. This is already cutting down on retribution against wolves.

As WWP and allies continue to battle in court against a bizarre Mexican gray wolf management rule that makes Interstate 40 the limit on northward wolf expansion, Asha the wandering wolf made her second northward foray in 2023, proving once again that northern New Mexico is biologically appropriate Mexican wolf habitat.



Photo: Asha in captivity / USFWS

WWP drew publicity to Asha’s journeys, putting the arbitrariness of the boundary rule in the spotlight and perhaps buying Asha more weeks in the wild before she was captured in December. When she got to Valles Caldera National Preserve, the park superintendent celebrated her return. WWP continues to advocate for her expedient re-release into the wild.



Feds ignore wolf carnage in the Northern Rockies

In Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho (and parts of Washington and Oregon), ESA protections were removed for wolves via a budget rider led by Senators Tester and Simpson in 2011. Placed under state management, the Northern Rocky Mountain states opened up trophy hunts for wolves and provided extremely loose regulations (if any) for other types of wolf killing such as trapping and aerial gunning. In 2022, Western Watersheds Project filed a petition, joined by 70 other groups, to restore ESA protections for wolves in these states, but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ignored an overwhelming body of scientific evidence—showing that wolves deserve federal protection, and revealing state regulatory mechanisms as grossly inadequate and state population estimates as unreliable—and denied federal protections in February 2024. We are now suing them to reverse this decision.

Wyoming was the original worst offender, designating wolves as ‘predatory animals’ under state game regulations across 85% of the state, which means there is completely unregulated killing of just about all types – shooting, trapping, even running animals over with snowmobiles. This is the opposite of wildlife management and has resulted in the extirpation of wolves throughout suitable habitats in the vast majority of the state. In Wyoming, wolf hunters using recorded distress calls from game species lured ESA-protected wolves from Colorado across the state line into Wyoming before killing them.

Idaho soon began to emulate Wyoming’s bloodthirsty wolf policies, legalizing aerial gunning and night-vision goggles for hunting, approving millions in taxpayer funds to be spent on wolf bounties (following the lunatic fringe of the hunting lobby – Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the cynically-misnamed Foundation for Wildlife Management), and opening up a yearlong unregulated trapping season on private lands.

It got so extreme that the legislature even stepped in and wrested the wildlife management authority from Idaho Fish and Game so the politicians could ramp up the wolf killing even faster. WWP and allies won a major legal victory against year-round wolf trapping in March, blocking trapping on public and private lands for nine months of the year to protect grizzly bears during the times of the year they are out of their dens.

In the race to the bottom, Montana did its best to keep pace, authorizing almost 300 wolves to be killed over the winter of 2023-2024 – perhaps more than half the statewide population. Wolves were lured across the border from Yellowstone National Park (where hunting is prohibited), and a study published in January 2023 showed that enough Yellowstone wolves were killed to break up entire packs in the northern reaches of the Park, interfering with their ability to take difficult prey like bison.

In a crowning display of hubris, Governor Gianforte personally killed a wolf caught in a trap in 2021, in violation of state requirements that a trapping certification is required in such circumstances, and got off scot-free.

Through it all, WWP has poured science into the U.S. Fish and Wildlife listing process, mobilizing experts who provided key studies that demonstrate that Montana and Idaho wolf population models grossly overestimate how many wolves actually live in each state, and showing that even at present populations (well above the legally required minimums that the three states use as population targets), wolves are far below minimum viable populations and are showing losses of genetic diversity as a result, putting them at risk of extinction.

The road ahead

We are confident that we have set up the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a major drubbing in federal court – it is obvious that political expediency, not science, drove its recent ‘not warranted’ finding.

We fully expect to be able to win a reversal – the violations in this case are egregious violations of the “best available science” standard. Once the decision heads back to the agency, they will get a second chance to get it right. Meanwhile, we are watchdogging the welfare of wolves all around the West, supporting their continued resurgence, and speaking out for these animals who cannot speak for themselves.

The USFWS seems to be pursuing a stakeholder-based collaboration as a primary approach to wolf recovery, instead of re-listing wolves in the states where they are most vulnerable. WWP has no confidence that mutually acceptable solutions for ranchers and trophy hunters will ever include any beneficial outcomes for wolves. We’ll be enforcing the ESA in court, and holding future policies to its “best available science” requirements instead. ■



BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: NEW REGULATIONS WOULD PROHIBIT AGRICULTURE ON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

By Paul Ruprecht, *Nevada Director*

New regulations proposed in February 2024 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for national wildlife refuge management would go a long way toward improving the value of these special areas for wildlife.

In 1997, Congress passed the Refuge Improvement Act, which required the agency to protect the “biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health” (BIDEH) of the refuge system. However, FWS has never released regulations to implement this BIDEH mandate, until now.

According to FWS, these regulations are needed to address the “dual threats of biodiversity loss and climate change.” The draft provisions state several broad policies, including promoting habitat connectivity, healthy water, soil, and air, and ecological restoration. The regulations in most cases prohibit particular activities that are incompatible with these values, such as native predator killing and pesticide use. At the same time, the agency would protect its existing water rights within Refuges.

Importantly, the regulations would also largely prohibit agriculture on Refuges. Things like livestock grazing, haying, and crop production would not be allowed unless they were “necessary” to meet the purposes of the Refuge, and then only if a desired habitat effect could not be reached using natural processes. In other words, FWS could not authorize haying or livestock grazing to increase duck habitat if fire, flooding, or native herbivores would do the job instead (as they have for thousands of years). Uses like growing potatoes seem out of the question under the new management scheme.

If we take FWS’s proposal at face value, managers would now also use natural means instead of livestock to fight cheatgrass—perhaps by relying on passive restoration to promote recovery of native bunchgrasses and soil crusts, as the best available science suggests is the right approach. Sounds like a win!



Photo: Cattle in a hay field on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Photo: Adam Bronstein / WWP

Unfortunately, many of our most valuable Wildlife Refuges currently allow livestock grazing and haying, often despite the presence of rare and sensitive species. Examples include Malheur and Klamath Marsh in Oregon, Red Rock Lakes and CM Russell in Montana, Ruby Lake and Stillwater in Nevada, Clear Lake in California, and Seedskaadee in Wyoming. WWP recently fought livestock grazing at Clear Lake National Wildlife Refuge in California, where cattle compete with nesting sage-grouse and trample rearing habitat for endangered Lost River and shortnose suckers. Sadly, we lost our lawsuit at the Ninth Circuit appeals court and cattle continue to stomp the shores of Clear Lake. Happily, the BIDEH regulations may now prescribe a new path forward for Clear Lake NWR and these other Refuges.

The impact of removing livestock from National Wildlife Refuges is both dramatic and compelling. In the early 1990s, the Hart and Sheldon National Wildlife Refuges in southeast Oregon and northwest Nevada issued new management plans that phased out domestic livestock grazing on the Refuges. Grazing permittees were offered buy-outs by third parties, and the Refuges have been free of cattle ever since. In the intervening 30 years, these landscapes have sprung back to life. Studies have documented recovery of riparian areas and aspen stands, as well as migratory bird population increases. Fences have been removed to benefit pronghorn and sage grouse. *The inspiring story is told in a documentary called “Rewilding a Mountain” which you can watch at the QR Code above.*

Here’s to hoping that we will have many more Refuge success stories like these to tell in the coming decades. ■



Photo: Female sage grouse on Seedskaadee National Wildlife Refuge / USFWS

SAGE GROUSE PLANNING: PLAN TO PLAN TO PLAN TO EXTINCTION

By Greta Anderson, *Deputy Director*

In March, the Bureau of Land Management released its third iteration of the Resource Management Plan Amendments for Greater Sage Grouse.

It's a huge plan that will amend 77 land use plans in portions of California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming over nearly 69 million acres. This year's draft plan follows in the footsteps of the 2015 Obama-era plans and the revised but enjoined 2019 Trump-era plans, in that the agency doesn't go far enough to give the bird the meaningful protections that it needs.

I wrote about our hopes for these plans in the Spring 2022 Messenger. I shared about the substantive comments we submitted alongside our allies, as well as the extensive proposal to designate all sage grouse habitat as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).

We had hoped that by reminding the Bureau the 2015 plans had too much discretion at the local level, inconsistent and inadequate protections across the landscape, and too many loopholes for industry, that President Biden would provide an actual commitment to protect sage grouse and, with it, all the plants and animals that depend on the Sagebrush Sea.

Suffice it to say, the 2024 draft plan is not as good as we had hoped. Despite ongoing habitat declines and diminishing grouse populations across the West, the current proposed management paradigm is even weaker than previous plans. The preferred alternative includes several instances of backsliding, from decreasing lek buffers to removing habitat objectives to manage livestock grazing.

The preferred alternative doesn't even include an acre of the ACEC we proposed, though the agency did analyze and find that 11 million acres met the criteria for this additional protection. **Comments on the plan are due June 13, 2024.** More information about the plans can be found at the QR Code at left. ■



**SUBMIT YOUR
COMMENTS BY JUNE 13**



Photo: Female sage grouse in flight, Seedskaadee National Wildlife Refuge / USFWS

WOLVERINES IN COLORADO

Despite opposition from the livestock industry and previous challenges, recent legislative support and a threatened status under the ESA have renewed momentum for reintroducing these crucial mesocarnivores to Colorado.

By Delaney Rudy, *Colorado Director*

Since joining WWP as the Colorado Director in December, I've had the pleasure of working on an exciting rewilding project: reintroducing North American wolverines to Colorado.

Wolverines play a crucial role in their ecosystems. As scavengers, they often feed on carcasses left by larger predators like wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions, thereby contributing to ecological balance and curtailing the spread of disease. Wolverine require large, contiguous habitats, making their presence a significant marker of extensive and connected wild areas - essential for wildlife resilience to climate change. Protections for wolverines and their habitats provide benefits for the health of the entire ecosystem.

But, as is often the case with carnivores, (even mesopredators), the species has foes in the livestock industry. Despite very few instances of wolverines killing livestock, Colorado's livestock industry has been vocally opposed to the reintroductions. In one of only two recorded instances of wolverine-livestock conflict in North America, a wolverine killed a number of sheep in Utah, before being captured, collared, and relocated to the Uinta Mountains. This led to an outcry of protest from a Wyoming rancher who grazes sheep on a Forest Service permit in the Uinta range. In Colorado, the bill has been opposed by the Colorado Cattlemen's Association, the Colorado Livestock Association, and the Colorado Wool Growers Association. We are engaged to balance and reduce the outside voice of the livestock industry in state decision making about native wildlife.



There hasn't been an official population estimate for the animal in the continental United States since 2014, and our ability to assess the population size of the elusive critters is limited. When it was last assessed, the population was estimated to be between 250 and 300 individuals. Of these, only about 50 are part of the breeding population. This very small number of breeding individuals highlights the vulnerability of the species and underscores the importance of expanding their range to ensure their survival and bolster their genetic diversity.

Like most Coloradans, wolverines love snow. They are completely dependent on snowpack to store food and to den. Colorado offers some of the best wolverine habitat in the lower 48, and our high-elevation habitat is predicted to experience fewer of the catastrophic impacts of climate change that threaten wolverines as compared to their habitat in other states.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) has been working on a wolverine reintroduction for decades, but the effort was stymied by the ski industry in the 90's, and had been put on hold by CPW. Then, in November 2023, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) issued a final decision designating the continental US population of North American wolverines as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Because wolverines are now listed as threatened under the ESA, CPW needs legislative authorization to begin this effort.

On Monday, March 4th, 2024, bi-partisan legislators introduced a bill (SB24-171) to reintroduce North American Wolverines to Colorado, and the bill passed the Senate Agriculture Committee on Thursday, March 21. The bill is supported by Governor Jared Polis, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, several wildlife conservation organizations, and other stakeholders, including the Ski Industry Association.

We participated extensively in the development of the bill and have been working on outreach and coalition building to support its passage. We are confident that with bipartisan sponsorship and a broad range of stakeholder support, Colorado will soon be on its way to returning these iconic mesocarnivores to the landscape.

There is great reason to be hopeful, but we will remain vigilant to make sure that wolverines are adequately protected from anthropogenic threats. The listing decision was accompanied by an interim 4(d) rule, which is a specific tool within the Endangered Species Act used to direct the management of ESA-designated threatened species. The rule serves as a road map for the agency to aid in wolverine recovery and grants specific protections and exceptions for the species. WWP has concerns about some of the interim 4(d) exceptions, and submitted comments on the 4(d) rule in January raising concerns that it didn't adequately address threats to the US population posed by trapping and climate change, and we urged the FWS to more robustly analyze these threats when developing the final rule. We are hopeful that the protections provided by the final 4(d) rule will be stronger.

Also, the Colorado reintroduction bill will authorize Colorado Parks and Wildlife to reintroduce wolverines only when a 10(j) experimental, non-essential population rule for the Colorado wolverine population is published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 10(j) rules are used to define a subset population of an endangered species to apply specific management direction, which often involves rolling back protections. The bipartisan sponsors and stakeholders in Colorado required the bill to be contingent on the Fish and Wildlife Service's designation of a 10(j) rule. The FWS has committed to completing a 10(j) rule for wolverines in Colorado on an expedited timeline, with support from the state, and we will work with the FWS through to shape the 10(j) rule as much as possible to reflect the needs of the species and the importance of the Colorado population to species survival in the face of climate change.

With this effort on the heels of a successful first round of wolf reintroductions, it is an exciting time for rewilding efforts in the state of Colorado. Though I'm highly unlikely to ever see a wolverine, I'm looking forward to sharing our Colorado public lands with these iconic animals. ■



SCIENCE PROGRESSES – BUT MANAGEMENT STILL REGRESSES

A recent study aligns with centuries of observation by Indigenous hunters, highlighting the importance of managing grazing to prevent ecosystem damage, a concept becoming increasingly recognized.

By Dave Stricklan, *Sagebrush Specialist*

Last month, no fewer than five people with five separate affiliations sent me a link to a new paper, “Functional traits—not nativeness—shape the effects of large mammalian herbivores on plant communities,” published in the scientific journal *Science* (383: 531-537). The paper was a meta-analysis of 221 grazing studies worldwide that evaluated the impacts of megaherbivores (plant-eating animals with a body weight over 100 lbs.) on native vegetation. The researchers found that functional traits of megaherbivores – such as the animal’s size and the amount of food they consume—controlled their effects on vegetation, not whether a species was “native” to an area. No other factor had close to the same impact.

This is an important paper, but a lot of people have intuitively known this for a long time. For millennia, Indigenous hunters worldwide (including the people that produced the breathtaking cave paintings of horses, aurochs, and woolly rhinos from Chauvet, France, shown below, Figure 1) followed the herds of their land, mentally logged their movements, and evaluated their impacts to the landscape. They knew that when forage in an area is gone, the herds move on. Later, circa 1834, Osborne Russell recorded camping with a Bannock Indian village in the mouth of the Birch Creek Valley, Idaho. Russell counted 332 lodges in the village and estimated about 6 people per lodge. He also estimated that the entire encampment killed 1,000 bison to prepare meat for the winter. It is likely that there was not enough forage for that size of a bison herd to stay in the Birch Creek Valley all year, but the Bannock knew to be in the right place when the bison showed up. They scouted the bison and understood their grazing patterns and knew where the forage (and thus the herds) was – and wasn’t.

While it is true that individual megaherbivore species differ – i.e. have different muzzle sizes, plant preferences, physiological digestion methods, ability to navigate difficult topography, etc. – the primary impact any herbivore has on vegetation is determined by how much photosynthetic plant tissue (primarily leaves) herbivores remove and how often. Grasses are better than other plants at replacing grazed-off tissue, but grasses also have an herbivory damage threshold.



Too much grazing in one place by any large herbivore, whether they are wild, feral, native, or introduced, means that the animal should naturally move elsewhere, either by self-migration, herding, or human transport to avoid permanent damage to plants and soils on the landscape. It seems pretty simple. You might think that the federal land management agencies would also key into the fact that the impact of herbivores on native vegetation depends on how much of it is removed, and set policy and management actions accordingly.

However, look at these two images of Trout Creek in New Mexico in the Quemado District of the Apache National Forest, which is administered by the Gila National Forest. I took them in the summer of 2018 when I was teaching a Field Range Management class at New Mexico State University. The first image is of Trout Creek (Fig. 1), upstream of the second image (Fig. 2). The first image is of a stream reach where cattle are excluded. The photos were taken on the same day. As soon as you get out of the area where cattle are excluded, the water and vegetation disappear again. This happens twice more along the stream. The effects of the megaherbivores on the grazed portions of the creek show how devastating unchecked utilization can be.



Figure 1. Trout Creek on the Quemado Ranger District, ungrazed. Photo: Dave Stricklan



Figure 2. Trout Creek on the Quemado Ranger District, grazed. Photo: Dave Stricklan

If you are reading this, you likely know that WWP is the best in the business at “encouraging” the agencies to follow the law. But there is also another nascent and loosely organized movement to just provide for better management by private people if the agencies can’t/won’t, sort of an ecosystem self-help movement. People are just taking it upon themselves to make things better on the landscape. This isn’t new, but the notion is expanding. We are working with a retired couple in New Mexico that is actively restoring a native Cienega. (I recommend reading about it in *Restoring the Pitchfork Ranch: How Healing a Southwest Oasis Holds Promise for Our Endangered Land* by A.T. Cole). I am also working with a group that is buying some private land and nearby public land grazing permits and replacing the domestic livestock with native herbivores at much lower stocking rates. This allows wild herbivores to thrive and also does away with the practice of calling Wildlife Services to kill native predators in the area. Both entities are using their own money and are not affiliated with any large or established environmental group. They are just doing it.

So to recap: 1. Herbivory and herbivores are natural and normal. The energy captured from the digestion of plant tissue drives energy transport in the middle trophic levels of properly functioning ecosystems; 2. When herbivory is concentrated in one place for too long, damage to plants and soils inevitably occurs; 3. History over the past eight or nine decades has shown that land management agencies are not able to respond to or prevent routine damage by too much herbivory (usually by domestic herbivores) occurring for too long in one place; 4. Thoughtful people are now employing common sense and creative solutions to this ecological problem and in some places, it is working.

A lot more has to be done on a very large scale and it is critical that society continues to remind the land management agencies of their legal responsibility to meet the legally established land protection criteria, but it seems clear to me that in order to protect public lands, new thinking by regular people like you and me needs to be applied to landscapes everywhere. ■

NEW FACES AT WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT

In addition to all the hard work our staff have been up to, we've had four new hires since the last newsletter!



Digital Director: Grace Kuhn

If you follow WWP on social media or get our online newsletters, you may have already noticed we've upped our game considerably. Grace Kuhn joined WWP in January as the Digital Director, sharing with us her expertise and years of experience fundraising and leading communications for a variety of national non-profits. She has inspired us all to be more effective in sharing WWP's work with the world, and we are grateful to have her working with us.



Colorado Director: Delaney Rudy

Colorado-born Delaney Rudy comes to WWP after working for the U.S. Forest Service on wilderness trail and fire crews and as a biological science technician where she gained an important perspective on WWP's critical role in reforming agency management! She has gotten to dive right in on issues like the Colorado wolf reintroduction and Gunnison sage grouse, and we're thrilled to have her on board.



Wyoming Director: Dagny Signorelli

Dagny Signorelli is a public land enthusiast with an educational and professional background in ecology. She conducted utilization monitoring on Bureau of Land Management grazing allotments and worked alongside the agency as a wildlife technician, focusing on lynx habitat determination. Her research extends to the study of fire ecology in wilderness areas, and she actively volunteers in the field of environmental justice. She's a super addition to our team.



Ninth-Circuit Attorney: Jaimie Park

Filling the shoes left by Talasi Brooks (more on that below), has been no easy task, but Jaimie Park is up to the challenge. She's got an extensive background in Indigenous law, environmental justice, and water and natural resource issues in the southwest. Jaimie's insight and areas of expertise will bring a new angle to our work and she's been quickly learning the arcana of public lands law as it pertains to grazing, wolves, conservation plans, and trespass cows.

But goodbye to Talasi Brooks! Talasi moved back to New England to be closer to her family. Talasi carried an impressive caseload for WWP and we'll miss her keen analyses and noble outrage about the injustices being wrought on our planet. **Good luck Talasi!**



GOOD NEWS SPOTLIGHT

Our 2023 petition to list pygmy rabbits under the Endangered Species Act was found to contain sufficient information to warrant full consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This puts pygmy rabbits – another sagebrush-dependent species – on track for protection (hopefully) within the next year.

Photo: A pygmy rabbit / Morgan Heim

ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CONFERENCE IS A WESTERN WATERSHEDS FAVORITE

By Adam Bronstein, *Oregon Director*

The annual Public Interest Environmental Law Conference (PIELC) held in Eugene, Oregon has become the largest gathering for environmental activists, attorneys, law students, and academics in the country. Hosted by law student volunteers at the University of Oregon School of Law, PIELC has been held since the early 1980s, growing in popularity and scale over the years. Attending the conference has become a tradition for WWP staff.

The conference typically spans several days and features a wide array of activities, including keynote speeches, panel discussions, workshops, and film screenings. These sessions cover a broad spectrum of environmental issues, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental justice, and environmental law. Conference panels and keynotes impart a lot of useful information informative to our work at WWP, but what makes the event particularly special is the opportunity to connect with fellow WWP staff and colleagues from partner organizations. WWP staffers frequently present at PIELC allowing us to highlight our work and the issues that we care about such as livestock grazing and species protection on public lands. This year, WWP organized and presented on three panels

Colorado's Wolf Reintroduction | Colorado Wolf Management Plan | Delaney Rudy

Delaney's panel covered the wolf reintroduction in Colorado. She presented on the development and implementation of the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Wolf Management Plan. She discussed the goals and assumptions of the plan, state delisting criteria, and the final 10(j) rule for the wolf population in Colorado; designating it a nonessential, experimental population. She highlighted that the development of the plan disproportionately represented the special interests of sportsmen and ranchers. She was joined by panelists from Defenders of Wildlife, the Center for Biological Diversity, and Colorado Mountain College.

Saving Sage Grouse | A Brief History of Sage Grouse Conservation | Erik Molvar

Erik's panel covered sage grouse conservation. His presentation was on the history of protecting the bird; from abundance prior to colonization through the present. He discussed the species' steady decline, the industries most responsible for that decline (livestock and oil), efforts to get the grouse ESA protections (successful for the Gunnison SG), congressional interference into adequate protections, and the West-wide sage grouse plans. Erik was joined by panelists from American Bird Conservancy and Advocates for the West.



Photo: WWP staff gathered at PIELC. Front row from left: Delaney Rudy, Jaimie Park, Greg LeDonne, Patrick Kelly and Cyndi Tuell. Back row from left: Paul Ruprecht, Erik Molvar, Adam Bronstein, Branden Rishel.

30x30 in Oregon: What Will it Take? | Conserving in Good Faith - Aligning 30 x 30 Conservation Goals with Ecologically Appropriate Land Protection | Adam Bronstein

Adam's panel addressed the 30x30 campaign, a global initiative aimed at conserving and protecting at least 30% of the planet's land and oceans by the year 2030. This ambitious conservation effort seeks to halt the loss of biodiversity. To meet land conservation targets under a specific Oregon 30x30 initiative, the conservation community will need to accelerate its efforts and advocate for the conservation of millions of acres of public and private land each year. Congressional lawmaking is insufficient to attain 30x30 in Oregon, underscoring the urgent need for sweeping executive action. Adam's presentation covered what constitutes "conserved" so that lands will indeed be primarily managed for biological diversity, and not extractive uses like livestock grazing and timber harvest. Adam was joined by Andy Kerr of the Larch Company, and Linda Perrine, an independent environmental advocate. ■

WHERE THE BUFFALO (AND GRIZZLY BEARS?!) ROAM

A visit to Montana's American Prairie Reserve showcases the significant ecological benefits of bison restoration and the controversy it sparks among local ranchers and state officials.

By Patrick Kelly, Washington/Montana Director

It was a chilly fall morning when I arrived at the American Prairie (“AP”) National Discovery Center in Lewistown, Montana. I was scheduled to meet with Scott Heidebrink, AP’s Director of Bison Restoration, for a daylong tour of their sprawling preserve lands and adjacent federal bison grazing allotments. Scott greeted me at the door and, as he walked me back to the office area, I could sense excitement in his voice. The other staff members were also abuzz. It turns out that wildlife cameras set up on AP property had, that very morning, turned up their very first grizzly bear.

This was likely some of the first evidence of grizzly bears in the Missouri Breaks country in over 100 years. This intrepid bear had wandered over 200 miles eastward from the Rocky Mountain Front and out onto the plains, somehow managing to safely navigate a tangled mess of roads, barbed wire, grazing cattle, and hostile ranchers. This was a wonderfully wild omen to mark my first visit to Montana’s shortgrass prairie.

As we cruised backroads on the way to American Prairie’s Sun Prairie property, Scott and I talked bison. Scott told me how nutrients from decomposing bison carcasses create miniature ecosystems made up of unique plant communities, how bison fur provides nesting material for a host of prairie species, and how recent studies have shown that bison grazing increases biodiversity in riparian zones when compared to cattle (which often degrade these areas).

I thought about how, much like salmon carcasses once fertilized entire forests on the Pacific coast, millions of dead bison must have provided a similarly incredible infusion of nutrients into these prairie grasslands.

This thought was interrupted when Scott drew my attention to what would be one of many signs posted along the road urging us to “Save The Cowboy: Stop American Prairie.”

American Prairie’s mission to connect and rewild 3.2 million acres of private and federal prairie grassland, through strategic property acquisition and bison reintroduction, rubs a particular contingent of people the wrong way.

This contingent has recently included not only livestock operators and ranchers but also Montana’s governor and various state agencies, all of whom appealed a BLM decision granting American Prairie’s request to convert several federal grazing allotments from cattle to bison.

WWP filed a motion to intervene on behalf of American Prairie but was unfortunately denied. Luckily, it appears unlikely that the appellants will prevail. This is due simply to the fact that both American Prairie and the BLM followed the grazing permit process exactly as required.

It is difficult to ignore the hypocrisy of state agencies and the various stockgrowers who have appealed this decision. Regarding the aggrieved stockgrowers, their sense of entitlement has blinded them to the fact that just like them, AP worked through the very same federal permit system to acquire their leases. They met the base property requirements and jumped through various other required hoops, including completion of a full environmental assessment – which is notably something the agency has yet to do for thousands of cattle permits across the West. To oppose AP based solely on an irrational fear of bison is not a good look for these ranchers.

Regarding the state of Montana, it is rather remarkable to see the attorney general argue in his appeal that bison are “not livestock” and therefore not eligible for federal grazing permits. Elsewhere in Montana, most notably around Yellowstone National Park, the state has no problem treating bison as livestock and allows them to be managed as such by the Montana Department of Livestock. Seizing upon the unfounded hysteria over brucellosis transmission from bison to cattle – something that has never once been documented – the department hazes and harasses bison, often employing lethal measures to keep them bottled up inside the Park. It is quite clear that when it comes to bison, Montana’s government will affix whatever label suits their narrow agenda, consistency and science be damned.

Upon reaching AP Sun Prairie property, we slowed the truck to a crawl and, after cresting a tiny bump of a hill, there they were. A small herd of around 30 bison were off to my right, grazing in thigh-high grass. The place was so quiet you could hear them chewing. In all directions, clear to the horizon, there were no fences, no buildings, nor any other visible human-made structures. Where possible, one of the first things American Prairie does when it acquires a parcel of private property or a federal grazing lease is to remove the tangled mess of pasture fencing that impedes the movement of wildlife.

The effects of this fence removal were made abundantly clear when, later that day, I witnessed the single largest herd of pronghorn antelope I’ve ever seen spill out across the prairie in front of me. Scott and I would spend nearly 8 hours slowly making our way across just a tiny fraction of the region that American Prairie is restoring and rewilding. The abundance of wildlife, even on a chilly November day, was incredible. I lost track of how many different raptor species I saw. Throughout the afternoon I saw sage grouse, porcupines, mule deer, prairie dogs, and a wide variety of grassland birds.

As dusk approached, we stopped the truck. A herd of around 80 bison was on the move about 100 yards in front of us. With the truck engine silenced, I was astonished that I could actually hear the sound of rustling grass against bison fur as the group appeared to float like ghosts across the prairie in front of us. Then I heard a sound that made the hair stand up on my arms – a series of deep, guttural grunts reached us just as the herd began disappearing into a small draw. Though I have heard my share of buck snorts and elk bugles, and had more than my fill of mooing cattle, I had never heard anything like that before. It was wild and it was ancient and I was unexpectedly overcome with an incredible sense of gratitude for what I was witnessing. In that moment I had the good fortune to glimpse a time and a place that I assumed had been lost. It was unforgettable.

As the remarkable work of American Prairie continues to show, the wisdom of restoring bison to their native range is clear. The fauna and flora of the plains evolved alongside bison and their influence on this quickly disappearing, largely unprotected ecosystem is remarkable. Bison move through these landscapes differently than cattle do, and as they move, they create a mosaic of habitats that support a vast array of prairie species.

As the hysterical reactions to American Prairie by both ranchers and the state of Montana have shown, they are simply running out of good, ecologically justifiable reasons to continue grazing cattle on publicly owned prairie lands, especially when the option to graze a native keystone species like bison is readily available. This fact should give us all a bit of hope.



Photo: Bears Ears National Monument / Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

BEARS EARS NATIONAL MONUMENT DRAFT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN RELEASED

By Laura Welp, *Ecosystem Specialist*

The highly anticipated Bears Ears National Monument Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) was released to the public in mid-March 2024. Right now, and until a final management plan is adopted, these lands are still being administered according to the old, industry-forward field office management plans. Some would be happy to see that continue for as long as possible. This new effort is our chance to create a science-based RMP that will guide the Bears Ears NM management for the next decade or more.

This plan is also an important measure of progress for the five Tribes that conceived of this monument designation and have worked tirelessly for decades to see their vision realized. The upcoming RMP is the first time these Tribes' voices will be codified in a land use management plan through co-management, and we look forward to seeing how this cooperation between Tribes and agencies will manage resources on the ground for long-term ecosystem sustainability.

There are two sentences in the draft plan that could bring significant improvement to grazing management: "In accordance with Presidential Proclamation 10285, if grazing permits or leases are voluntarily relinquished by the existing holders, the lands covered by such permits or leases would be retired from livestock grazing.

Forage would not be reallocated for livestock grazing purposes unless the Secretaries specifically find that such reallocation would advance the purposes of the Monument designation." These words sound arcane and bureaucratic, but they enable managers to permanently retire grazing permits. This is a big, important change, and something for which WWP has strongly advocated.

Alternative E is identified as the "preferred alternative" in the draft plan.

Livestock management in Alternative E is frankly a mixed bag. It proposes to close about 163,000 acres to grazing, which is 28,000 acres more than the current plan. But most of these closures are in areas that are already closed, so the MMP has little practical effect on current levels of grazing. Right now, over 1.2 million acres are open to livestock grazing on the Monument, and all alternatives keep a majority of that available.

However, Alternative E does emphasize proper grazing management. Along with promising to adhere to grazing regulations, the alternative would incorporate Tribal Ecological Knowledge.

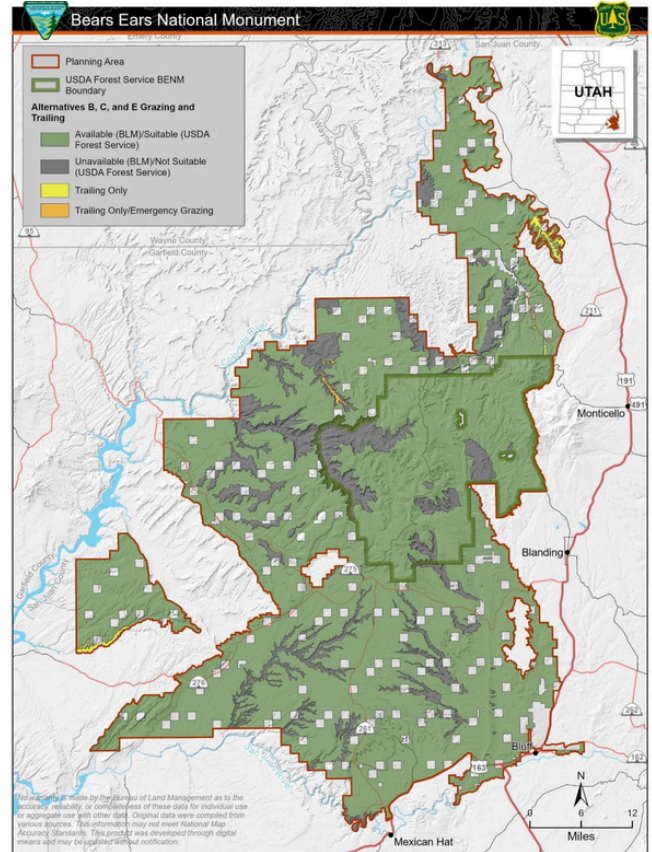
The BLM and US Forest Service would coordinate with the Bears Ears Coalition to make grazing decisions. The Alternative would:

- Prioritize the review and processing of grazing permits and leases, including compliance monitoring and resource assessments, to protect Monument objects.
- Incorporate Traditional Indigenous Knowledge into all parts of the livestock grazing decision-making processes.
- Coordinate with the BEC on opportunities for joint data collection and/or analysis.
- Identify subareas in allotments necessary for closure (year-round or seasonal).
- Reassess stocking levels, seasons of use, and management approach.
- Identify resource thresholds, monitoring, and automatic responses related to land health and/or impacts to cultural and sacred resources.
- Noncompliance with the terms and condition of a livestock grazing permit or lease would be addressed immediately, in accordance with applicable law and policy, and could include withholding issuance of the permit/lease, suspending the permit/lease, or cancelling the permit/lease.

Draft Bears Ears National Monument Management Plan, page 2-125

If these measures are consistently upheld, it would result in improved grazing management on Bears Ears.

WWP is following this issue closely and will share more information as it becomes available. The public has an opportunity to comment on which alternative, or combination of alternatives, it would like the managers to choose. The Bears Ears Monument Management Plan is at the QR Code at right. ■



Map: Areas open to grazing in the Bears Ears National Monument under the Bureau's preferred alternative / BLM

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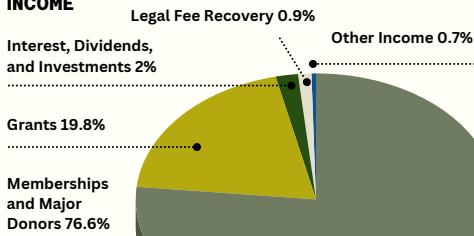
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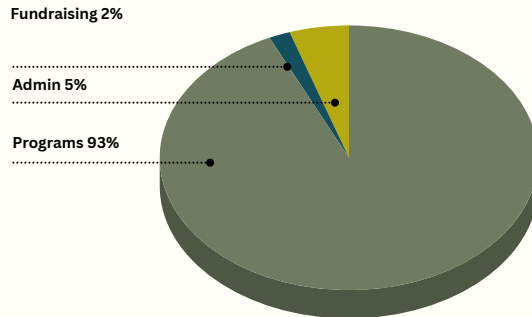
2023 Income.....\$1,711,418
2023 Expenses.....\$1,556,433
Net Income.....\$154,985

2023 Budgeted Expenses.....\$1,639,496
2024 Budgeted Expenses.....\$2,030,816
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