MESSENGER

WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT

FALL 2025 Vol. XXXIV



A WIN FOR BEAVERS

Oregon protects beavers from hunting and trapping on lands across the state

WOLVES GET A DECISIVE WIN IN COURT

WWP and allies win major victory to secure protections for Northern Rockies wolves

INSIDE THE 2025 HEALTHY PUBLIC LANDS CONFERENCE

Resisting exploitation and building foundations for restored landscapes and healthy public lands

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Photo: Max Saeling

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The Watershed Messenger is edited by Greta Anderson, Erik Molvar, and Nancy Linscott, and produced in-house by Grace Kuhn.

RANCHERS DODGE DOGE ON PUBLIC LANDS RANCHES



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Even as the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and Congress slash public benefits and fire thousands of public workers under the pretext of cutting costs, the many welfare programs that prop up public lands ranching have survived their review unscathed.

The public lands grazing fee—currently set at the legal minimum of $1.35/Animal Unit Month (AUM), lower than it was in 1981—is a familiar example of a handout to ranchers because it grossly undervalues the amount of vegetation that a cow/calf pair or five sheep would consume in a month. However, other ranching subsidies are not as well-known.

One of the seven U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) subsidy programs for livestock operators is the Pasture, Rangeland, and Forage (PRF) program. PRF is essentially rainfall insurance. It ran as a pilot program for several years before being expanded to its current scope in 2018. Ranchers purchase this coverage from a private insurance agent, and it is subsidized by the U.S. government. When at least 10% less rainfall than normal occurs, based on the past 70-year average for the area, ranchers receive an indemnity payment per acre enrolled (including acres on public lands allotments). Importantly, these payments are not based on actual production or losses, nor do they require reductions in AUMs during drought. PRF can also be combined with to other aid sources like USDA's Livestock and Forage Disaster relief (LFP).

One PRF broker, Redd Summit Advisors based in American Fork, UT, estimates an average of $2-$3 annual net gain per enrolled acre for many counties in the arid West when using their software to optimize choices about which acres to enroll for which months, and at what level of coverage.

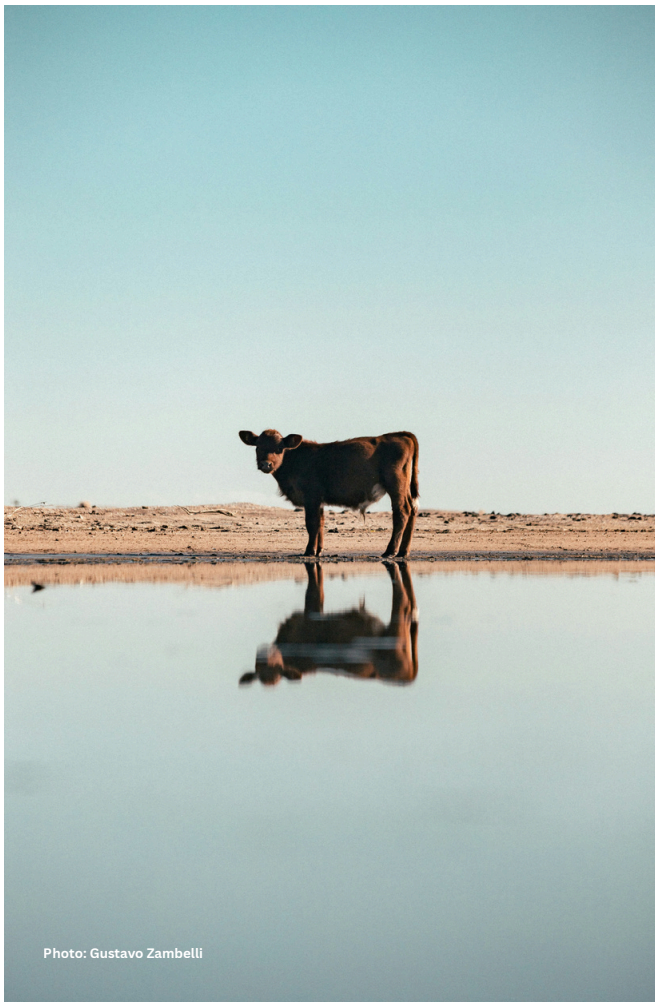


Photo: Gustavo Zambelli

For a large grazing allotment in a state like Nevada (where many allotments are well over 100,000 acres, and the largest is over 1.3 million acres), one can get a sense of how much taxpayer money a public lands rancher stands to get from grazing cows on fragile landscapes during this era of persistent drought and aridification caused by climate change.

In a true market, marginal grazing allotments with unreliable precipitation would be abandoned by ranchers due to their low earnings and volatility. Instead, income from PRF insurance has contributed to some permittees' decisions to decline buyout offers to retire their grazing permits. And some entities may even acquire grazing permits to cash in on PRF payments. Redd Summit Ranches, LLC, which has the same address as Redd Summit Advisors, holds grazing permits on multiple allotments in Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. One wonders if they are also banking on RFP payments to make these areas profitable.

Sadly, schemes like the USDA's PRF insurance are prime examples of government waste, abuse, and fraud that DOGE claimed to be ferreting out but instead ignored.



TRANSPARENCY WINS: GOVERNOR REMOVES WOLF COMMISSIONER OVER RANCHER TIES



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Western Watersheds Project and Mexican gray wolves have New Mexico's Inspection of Public Records Act (IPRA) to thank for recently-uncovered evidence of New Mexico Game and Fish Commissioner Sabrina Pack working closely with Catron County commissioners and the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association. And, because of what we found in those emails, Dr. Pack was swiftly removed from the Commission by the governor just days before a critical meeting of the panel in Reserve, New Mexico where she might have pushed for action that could have been detrimental for wolf recovery. Score one for accidental transparency!

It all started when we noticed that Dr. Pack was included on emails between the Cattle Growers and the counties about a June 2025 meeting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She was the only commissioner included on that thread, which seemed odd, so that triggered another IPRA request by us for additional emails between commissioners and ranchers in recent months.

Lo and behold, Dr. Pack had an undisclosed conflict of interest because the advertising business for which she works was helping the ranchers promote the hardships that they attribute to the presence of Mexican gray wolves.

Pack apparently developed a campaign plan for an anti-wolf website and edited copy for fearmongering Public Service Announcements that were aired on the radio and circulated in schools. She was even provided a review copy of an op-ed that attacked WWP's deputy director, drafted by the ranchers but offered up for a Catron County commissioner to submit. (Fortunately, this seems to have never been published.)

Subsequent records revealed Pack had been providing copies of conservationists' communications with the commission by forwarding our emails to Catron County commissioners and the cattle growers since the summer of 2024.

While Dr. Pack claims there was no conflict of interest in working for the ranchers, Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham disagreed. The day after it was brought to her attention, Dr. Pack was removed from her seat on the commission "for cause."

WWP believes – and evidently the governor of New Mexico does, too – that commission members must adhere to the ethical standards of transparency and not be influenced by external interests with financial outcomes at stake when considering wildlife management policies.



Photo: Jody Confer

LOWERING THE BAR IN THE HIGH UINTAS WILDERNESS



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The Forest Service finally published the final environmental impact statement and draft decision for the long-awaited High Uintas Wilderness Domestic Sheep Analysis. This environmental review is a result of Western Watersheds Project's 2013 settlement with the Forest Service in which we sued over the agency's failure to address disease risk to bighorn sheep and damage to wilderness values from sheep use.

After more than a decade of study, the agency produced two options: grazing as-is or no grazing at all. Closing the highest risk allotments, reducing domestic sheep herd size, or moving livestock elsewhere were discarded as inconsistent with the project's "purpose and need," which was written around compliance with the settlement and "providing forage for permitted domestic livestock grazing." With a funnel like that, it's not surprising their decision authorizes continued summer grazing on all ten wilderness allotments and the 52-mile East Fork Sheep Driveway, a livestock trailing route.

Bighorn Sheep Viability

The 2012 Forest Planning Rule requires each forest plan to maintain viable populations of all Species of Conservation Concern (SCC). Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are listed as an SCC on the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest. One might expect the Forest Service to adjust grazing management to ensure the viability of bighorns in the High Uintas. Instead, the agency chose to amend its forest plan to evaluate bighorn sheep viability at the broad scale of the "North Slope Uintas" herd rather than within the actual project area. That action conveniently sidesteps the Hoop Lake herd which is the only bighorn population entirely inside the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache.

The Hoop Lake bighorn herd consists of about 20 animals and has struggled with low numbers and stagnant growth for over a decade, likely due to chronic disease exposure. It also happens to be the herd most overlapped by domestic sheep allotments, so the Forest Service's grazing program is a direct threat to this herd's survival. Rather than address that head-on (like how bighorn settle their disputes), the plan amendment effectively dilutes the issue by considering viability across all 150+ bighorns in the area.

In Idaho, the Payette National Forest responded to the same conflict by closing 70 percent of its sheep allotments in 2010 to protect bighorns.

The livestock industry sued, WWP intervened, and the Ninth Circuit upheld the closures in 2016. In the High Uintas, by contrast, the agency is now deciding not to close a single allotment and instead are plastering over their viability responsibility by redefining the standard. The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies recommends a maximum contact rate between bighorn and domestic sheep of one contact every ten years to keep herds safe. The Forest Service instead accepts a rate of three times as high. For a herd the size of Hoop Lake, a single outbreak of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* could wipe out a quarter of the herd and the resulting lamb losses could leave the population non-viable in just a few years. The Forest Service arrived at their acceptable contact rate by erasing approximately 80,000 GPS data points from collared bighorn sheep locations due to "missing attributes," ignoring domestic sheep strays left behind after bands moved - even though strays are a well-documented pathway for disease - and capping separation at nine miles even though the agency's own data show rams traveling over fourteen miles. Because of that, the risk of contact is likely even higher but is now obscured from the record.





Photos at top and bottom: Trailing thousands of sheep through the High Uintas Wilderness domestic sheep highway.

Capability Analysis

Dr. John Carter, a former WWP board member and Utah State Director, prepared an analysis of the agency's data that shows that only about 11.9 percent of the East Fork Blacks Fork allotment remains capable of supporting grazing, less than the agency's proposed 31 percent. Dr. Carter's monitoring shows that along the East Fork sheep driveway, topsoil depth is down to less than two inches compared to more than ten inches on untrampled ground. Alpine soils take centuries to form through weathering and small inputs of organic matter. Because plant growth and decomposition are so limited in the High Uintas, even a few inches of topsoil can represent hundreds of years of accumulation. In contrast, the Fall Creek allotment, closed since the 1970s, shows full vegetative cover and stabilized erosion features.

Alpine Plant Communities

The endemic Uinta poppy, beavertip draba, and Utah Ivesia have only been documented at three locations, including one within the sheep allotments. These species depend on snowbed and talus habitats that occur widely in the project area. The Forest Service insisted such habitats are naturally "protected" by steep slopes, but sheep are trailed directly across them.

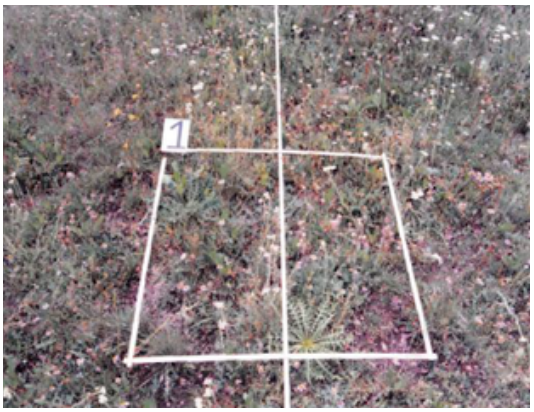
The near absence of these plants inside grazed allotments strongly suggests they have already been lost from much of their suitable habitat due to decades of grazing and trampling.

Wilderness character

Wilderness character is supposed to be central in a wilderness analysis, but here, too, the Forest Service minimized the problem. The Final EIS claims only 27 acres of the sheep driveway in the High Uintas Wilderness are in "unsatisfactory condition, but some plots that they derived this data from were placed hundreds of feet off the driveway. On the Big Meadow allotment, range staff recorded 15% bare ground in 2013 while the photo of that plot shows closer to half the surface bare, and a 1998 image of the same site shows near-complete cover.

Why it matters

The Forest Service did all this analysis to preserve grazing on these allotments. Narrowing the purpose, amending the forest plan to change the standard, and structuring the science to downplay risk built a record that points in one direction: keep the sheep. This decision is designed to withstand the appearance of compliance while sidestepping the real issues of bighorn viability, decimated alpine soils and plants, and protection of wilderness character. Lowering the bar in the High Uintas is no way to protect wilderness.





Top: Big Meadow site showing diverse ground cover with little bare soil, taken in 1998. Bottom: Big Meadow site claiming 15% bare soil, taken in 2013.



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WWP BOARD AND STAFF UPDATES



HELENA EDELSON



TOM RIBE



NANCY ROTH



JOHN PERSELL

WWP has had four new members join our Board of Directors in recent months, and we're grateful for their willingness to help ensure the organization is continuing to move in the right direct and making progress toward meeting our mission.

First, we're pleased to welcome Helena Edelson to our board. She lives in the Greater Yellowstone area and is the founder of the Large Carnivore Fund and the International Community for Landscapes, Agriculture, Animals and Wildlife (ICLAAW), which are both efforts to reduce conflict with carnivores by supporting habitat preservation, scientific research, and community-based initiatives. Helena has been a passionate voice for sustainable ecosystems both in academics and professional practice since the late 80s and has also spent 25 years as a software engineer.

Next, Tom Ribe got roped into/volunteered for Board service at the annual member's meeting this past May following the Healthy Public Lands Conference. After decades of advocating to protect the Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico from livestock grazing, and as a long-time supporter of WWP, Tom comes with a deep knowledge of how intractable some grazing issues can be.

Nancy Roth also joined our Board this past summer and brings a unique perspective as a pediatric nurse. She sees a connection between public health and public lands and has been engaged with WWP's work since the summer of 2024, when she began using WWP's Cow Pie Pal phone app to record cattle feces, number of cattle, damaged fences, vegetation damage, soil erosion and compaction, and damage to cultural sites and pictographs in the Fishlake and Dixie National Forests. Nancy also volunteers with SUWA and attends many conservation events and agency town halls throughout Utah.

Finally, we welcomed John Persell back into the fold, but this time as board member. Though John is currently a senior staff attorney for Oregon Wild, he previously served as WWP's Tenth Circuit staff attorney until 2022. A Minnesota native, John developed a love for public lands and wildlife as a kid, inspired by family trips to places like Yellowstone and the Black Hills.

Thanks to each of them for taking on these active roles supporting WWP!

Also, thanks are due to Dr. John Carter, who left the board at the end of his term in June, and to Jaimie Park, who left her position as Ninth Circuit staff attorney at the end of summer in 2025. Best of luck to you both in your future endeavors.



Photo: Adam Nir

A WIN FOR BEAVERS IN OREGON



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Oregon Governor Tina Kotek signed House Bill 3932 into law on June 26, 2025, ushering in a landmark policy that protects beavers from hunting and trapping on many federal public lands across the state. To the best of our knowledge, when the law takes effect in 2026, it will mark the first time in U.S. history that a state has passed legislation explicitly protecting beavers for their ecological function. The law targets rivers, streams, and watersheds listed as "impaired" under the federal Clean Water Act and closes them to beaver hunting and trapping. As more waters are assessed and added to Oregon's list of impaired waterways, protections will expand.

Oregon contains over 310,000 miles of rivers and streams, yet only about 46% of those waterways have been evaluated for water quality. Of the assessed streams, more than 106,000 miles on public lands fail to meet water quality standards established by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. These Category 4 and 5 waters—many of which are degraded by agricultural runoff, sedimentation, elevated temperatures, and nutrient loading—are precisely the kinds of systems where beavers can help the most. Allowing beavers to persist in these watersheds will enable natural recovery processes to take hold. In effect, the law positions beavers as cost-free ecosystem restoration partners.

Beavers are well-documented ecosystem engineers. Their dams slow streamflow, which causes sediment and pollutants to settle out of the water column. These dams create ponds that promote groundwater recharge and buffer seasonal flows, helping maintain streamflow through dry summers.

The resulting wetlands act as biological filters that remove nutrients, trap heavy metals, and stabilize streambanks while providing critical shade and cool water refugia by deepening channels and increasing interaction with the hyporheic zone, where the surface flows of the stream expand outward to fill the shallow aquifer beneath the bottomlands.



Beaver defense from the 2020 Mullen fire in Wyoming. Photo: Emily Fairfax

These functions are especially important in the face of climate change, as stream temperatures across the West continue to rise, threatening cold-water fishes such as salmon, steelhead, and bull trout.

The benefits of beaver activity extend far beyond water quality. Beaver wetlands store water on the landscape and reduce the intensity and speed of peak runoff events, mitigating downstream flood damage. Their influence on the water table can convert dry meadows and seasonal streams into perennial wetlands that support vegetation growth, wildlife habitat, and natural firebreaks. Following wildfires, beaver complexes can trap ash, debris, and eroding soil from the surrounding hillslopes, helping protect downstream water supplies from contamination. These post-fire filtering functions are especially relevant in Oregon, where increasingly intensive climate-driven wildfires have polluted drinking water reservoirs and fisheries.

Beaver wetlands offer profound habitat value. They support an incredible diversity of life—more than any other freshwater habitat type in the West. Fish, amphibians, waterfowl, insects, songbirds, large mammals, and even predators like black bears and cougars benefit from the habitat complexity and resources beavers provide. Many species identified in the Oregon Conservation Strategy rely on or benefit from beaver-created habitats, including the western pond turtle, Oregon spotted frog, willow flycatcher, and numerous native fish. Protecting beavers is a direct investment in wildlife recovery and biodiversity.

The passage of HB 3932 reflects decades of grassroots and scientific advocacy. Conservationists, researchers, tribal governments, landowners, and restoration specialists have long made the case that beavers should be viewed not as nuisances but rather as allies. For too long, beavers have been hunted and killed without consideration of the ecological costs or the lost services they provide. “Taking” beavers in impaired watersheds is not only counterproductive, but it also runs directly against taxpayer-funded restoration goals and the public’s interest in clean water, healthy fisheries, and wildfire refuge for wildlife. Oregon might finally be living up to its nickname—the Beaver State—and setting a bold example for the rest of the nation.



THE VALUE OF A GRIZZLY

Photo: Dennis Olsen



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As the Operations Director for WWP, I'm the one who works to keep the organization's metaphorical trains running on time. Though not on the front lines of the fight to save public lands, I often field questions directed to our headquarters in Hailey, Idaho about various conservation issues.

A friend of mine, concerned about an article he had just read in our local weekly newspaper, recently approached me with one such question about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's upcoming release of a draft grizzly bear reintroduction plan. Central Idaho's vast wilderness areas, which together comprise the largest roadless area in the lower 48 states, are key to linking grizzly populations in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to those in northwest Montana and points beyond. The region was once home to grizzlies before they were hunted to near extinction across their vast range.

My friend's question about grizzly reintroduction went something like this: "Hey, I'm totally behind protecting endangered species like wolves and grizzly bears – I get it - but I admit that I'm a bit nervous about hiking in an area where there might be grizzly bears. It's kind of nice to not have to worry about, you know, being eaten. So, like, what value do they have in the environment?"

Before I dive into answering that, now is a good time to provide a disclaimer. First, I am not a wildlife biologist. I am a retired geologist, so unless that bear is lithified, I am not an expert on bears.

But I have read a lot about bears and other large predators, mostly in order to stay safe when traveling in the wild. Also, some of my colleagues during my geologizing days were wildlife biologists, and one in particular was a grizzly bear expert. His water cooler stories about grizzlies were both fascinating and hair-raising. And his tips on how to manage oneself in the event of a close encounter of the grizzly kind came in mighty handy, and was possibly even lifesaving, when I had my own encounter with a grizzly that ran straight toward me while I was backpacking in Banff National Park back in 1999. So, I have a personal reason to share my inquiring friend's concern about being a bit of a notch down on the food chain while in grizzly-occupied terrain.

However, our fears shouldn't budge the scales against the heftier reasons to welcome grizzly bears home to their historic range. Grizzly bears are both an "umbrella species," meaning that the act of protecting habitat for a bear benefits many other species besides just the bear; and a keystone species, meaning that bears perform ecological services that benefit the overall health and vitality of an ecosystem. For instance, bears help keep the herbivore populations in check, ensuring a sustainable distribution of grazers on the landscape. They dig for roots and insects, and in so doing, add nitrogen, aerate the soil and distribute seeds from nearby native plants. In fact, their value as ecosystem gardeners is crucial to the food web on a landscape scale.

Their poop contains a rich amalgam of plant and animal nutrients, and particularly in the northwest where bears feed on anadromous fish, they fertilize the landscape with critical marine-derived nutrients that other animals and plants require for survival.

Then there are the economic, or rather, 'human' benefits. The possibility of seeing (from a safe distance) a grizzly or a wolf—our toothiest and most charismatic if not controversial national treasures – drives tourism. Tourism in the western states is a multi-billion dollar per year industry and is highly dependent on pristine landscapes (humans are another beneficiary of the umbrella species concept). People come from around the world with the hope of catching a glimpse of a grizzly. Research economists at the U.S. Geological Survey sought to put a value on tourism specifically related to grizzly and black bear sightings in Yellowstone. They found that "an individual grizzly bear sighting is worth approximately $16 while an individual black bear sighting is worth approximately $14. Aggregating across all visitors and sightings, grizzly bears and black bears generate about $6.9 and $9.7 million per year, respectively, in sighting value." One can weigh these data against cost-defined metrics (like livestock predation) and still come out in favor of the bear. Dollars notwithstanding, an ecosystem missing its keystone species cannot function at its highest potential, and the losses are real and measurable. That is the value and the reason to endorse allowing grizzlies to repopulate the wilds of central Idaho.

As for safety tips for hikers in grizzly country, first and foremost, carry bear spray and know how to use it! Sing a song, clap hands, or talk loudly to make your presence known because bears do not like surprises. If a bear smells or hears you first, there's a good chance it will leave. Travel in groups, and avoid taking a dog into bear country. If you must bring Fido, keep him on a leash. A dog being chased by a bear will come back to you and then things could really get hairy.

If you're traveling in a national park, always check in with park rangers about locations of recent bear activity if you plan to hike or backpack. Unless you're in a vehicle, avoid that area, particularly in spring when cubs may be involved. Never camp in bear country without storing food in bear-proof containers and away from sleeping areas. Wash anything that comes in contact with food (including your hands).

If you do encounter a grizzly bear, remain calm. Be ready to deploy the bear spray, BUT, try to be aware of the wind direction so you don't spray yourself. Unlike encounters with mountain lions or even black bears, do NOT attempt to make yourself appear bigger and threatening. You cannot outrun a bear, so don't even entertain the idea. In fact, running, or any other reaction on your part that appears to mimic frantic prey (like screaming and screeching), will invite being preyed upon. So, look down at your feet, only side-eye the bear in a submissive, almost apologetic way, speak softly if at all, and begin to back away slowly, keeping your hand on the spray lever and an eye on the bear's response. The objective is to use body language to convey to the bear that you are neither a meal or a threat. If all goes well, these actions will give you a great story at the end of the day from the safety of home.

If all doesn't go well, and the bear charges, be ready to deploy the bear spray. Hopefully, you made note of how to deploy the bear spray before heading out. Cannonballing is the last resort if the bear is almost on you. If this becomes the unfortunate situation, keep your pack on and try to lie on your stomach to protect your vital organs. Hopefully, it'll just be a warning charge, but if not, it's probably going to come down to luck.


Photo: Janko Ferlic





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A long-time champion for biological soil crusts, Roger Rosentreter is WWP's 2025 Sagebrush Sentinel awardee.

Biological soil crusts are an essential component of cold-desert sagebrush steppe and Colorado Plateau plant communities in the intermountain basins between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada. Soil crusts – made up of lichens, tiny mosses, and blue-green algae – increase water retention, pump nitrogen from the atmosphere into nutrient-poor soils, and discourage the germination of cheatgrass and other invasive weeds. They are quite fragile and easily destroyed by trampling or vehicle traffic. One study showed that trampling by livestock could cause major disturbance to soil crusts which would take thirty years or more to recover. As a result of widespread livestock activity, biological soil crusts have disappeared from the vast majority of sagebrush steppe soils, surviving only as remnants beneath mature sagebrush plants where livestock cannot trample them.

Roger got his PhD in Botany from the University of Montana and went on to specialize in the ecology of biological soil crusts throughout his career. Roger worked as a botanist for the Bureau of Land Management in Idaho from 1978 to 2014.

While there, Roger taught interagency courses to land managers on rare plant monitoring, biological soil crusts, the Endangered Species Act, and sagebrush ecology. He has also held an adjunct faculty position with Boise State University, teaching courses in wildlife biology, aquatic ecology, and botany.

Roger has directly assisted with WWP's conservation efforts in a variety of ways. In 2022, he taught a Soil Crusts Workshop for WWP staff in northeastern Nevada, illustrating the types of soil crust species present in the area, and the impacts of livestock. Roger also was a co-author of WWP's comprehensive literature review of cheatgrass science, titled Cheatgrass invasions: History, causes, consequences, and solutions. This literature review was undertaken to combat efforts to mischaracterize cheatgrass invasions as due to fire, and validated a century's worth of scientific findings linking cheatgrass invasions to livestock overgrazing.

Roger is an Idaho Weed Hall of Fame inductee. He has authored dozens of scientific papers on biological soil crusts, on the interactions between soil crusts and invasive annual grasses and has even discovered a xeric subspecies of big sagebrush. We are delighted to award him this year's Sagebrush Sentinel Award.

DEFENDING THE WEST: INSIDE THE 2025 HEALTHY PUBLIC LANDS CONFERENCE



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The Healthy Public Lands Project (HPLP) staffed primarily by Western Watersheds Project, hosted the second Healthy Public Lands Conference at the University of Utah Law School in Salt Lake City this past May. The conference drew advocates, attorneys, scientists, and organizers together under the theme "Together for Tomorrow: Resisting Exploitation, Restoring the Landscape." Over three days, the event became a rallying point for those committed to challenging the ecological harms of livestock grazing on federal lands and advancing a vision of healthier watersheds, restored habitats, and more equitable land stewardship.

The HPLP began in 2019 following a meeting in Washington, D.C. that brought together regional and national conservation groups to confront the scale of damage caused by public lands grazing. Since then, HPLP has coordinated working groups to build advocacy tools, analyze agency data, defend against legislative rollbacks, and shape media strategies. The conference has become the project's centerpiece: a place where ideas sharpen, connections deepen, and strategies emerge.

The 2025 conference owed much to the people who made it possible. WWP's Wyoming Director, Dagny Signorelli, provided steady leadership in shaping the event and guiding the coalition's strategy session.



Photo: Adam Bronstein

Tenth Circuit attorney Megan Backsen lent vital support in organizing the program, while WWP's Digital Director Grace Kuhn helped keep the conference moving as emcee. These efforts, along with the panel moderators and many others behind the scenes, ensured that the gathering lived up to its theme of cooperation and renewal.

The conference agenda reflected the breadth of the challenges facing public lands livestock grazing reform—and the determination to confront them. Panels explored what restored landscapes look like after livestock removal, highlighted underrepresented species harmed by grazing, and questioned the assumptions behind pinyon-juniper "treatments." Discussions also traced the history of federal grazing policy, unpacked the cultural and ecological importance of native plant communities, and examined the entrenched agency culture that prevents reform.

Not all panelists reflected unanimity on certain issues. The wild horse panel, in particular, featured opposing views that sparked dialogue rather than consensus, demonstrating the value of the conference as a space for hard but necessary conversations. Indigenous perspectives were also central, with panelists linking land and water policy to histories of sovereignty and dispossession, and offering visions of stewardship rooted in ecological integrity and cultural knowledge.

The keynote speakers set the tone. John Leshy, one of the nation's foremost public lands scholars, traced the arc of grazing management through the lens of law and history, reminding us that reform has always required persistence from outside the agencies. Christopher Lant, Professor of Environment and Society at Utah State University, delivered a sobering assessment of the Great Salt Lake's decline, showing how water overuse for livestock feed threatens ecological collapse and public health, and whether legal reforms can come in time to stave off disaster.

On the final day, the conference shifted from the lecture hall to the field. Participants traveled to public lands allotments in Utah, where the abstract concepts of land health and management became tangible and visible. At one stop, WWP Southern Utah Director Laura Welp led a discussion on the difference between native plant communities and the non-native grasses seeded by the Bureau of Land Management to benefit livestock.

At another, Tristan Meek demonstrated how to test for *E. coli* in streams flowing through grazed allotments, underscoring the connection between management decisions and water quality. WWP's Colorado Director Delaney Rudy then offered a hands-on tutorial with the Cow Pie Pal app, showing how accessible online tools can empower advocates to track conditions on the ground.

Equally important were the conversations that unfolded between sessions and during evening gatherings—moments of connection that built trust, strengthened alliances, and sketched out new campaigns to come.

The Healthy Public Lands Conference once again affirmed the urgency of WWP's mission and the vitality of the community behind it. It was a reminder that while the obstacles remain steep—entrenched agency culture, political headwinds, and the constant push of industry—the coalition continues to grow stronger, more coordinated, and more determined. Together, we are resisting exploitation and building the foundations for restored landscapes and healthy public lands.



Keynote speaker John Leshy. Photo: Adam Bronstein


Audeince Q & A. Photo: Adam Bronstein


WWP Staff and Board

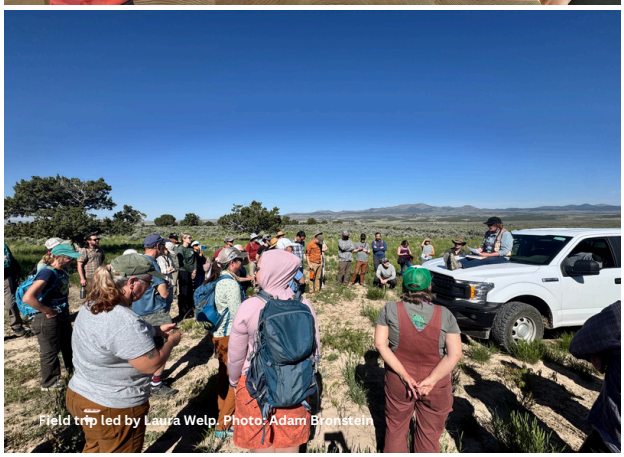

Field trip led by Laura Welp. Photo: Adam Bronstein



Photo: Daisy Schopman

WOLVES GET A DECISIVE WIN IN COURT!



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This July, WWP and allies won a major victory on the way to securing Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections for wolves in the three states where they face the most brutal assaults – Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. In the ruling, the judge castigated the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision not to list wolves in these states (plus portions of northeast Utah, eastern Washington, and eastern Oregon where they currently lack federal protections) because it failed to base the decision on the best available science. The decision was vacated, which forces the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to issue a new decision on our 2022 wolf listing petition.

This latest fight to secure ESA protection for wolves began with a pair of petitions to list the gray wolf that addressed the current gaps in protection, which are the legacy of a congressional rider. Senator John Tester (D-MT) and Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID) attached the rider to the federal budget in 2011 requiring the Service to delist the wolves in the Northern Rockies within 60 days and preclude judicial review of that decision.

The first petition was an emergency listing petition, seeking the establishment of a Northern Rockies Distinct Population Segment (DPS) and immediate protections. WWP recognized that this petition could use some buttressing for three strategic reasons: (1) emergency listing is entirely up to the agency's discretion, so there is no way to compel this outcome through the courts; (2) the emergency petition didn't incorporate much of the available science demonstrating that listing is necessary; and (3) the petition was submitted by only three groups, so it didn't represent – or demonstrate – the broad consensus among environmental and animal groups that ESA listing was required. So WWP undertook a much more comprehensive, conventional listing petition seeking a West-wide DPS that would be legally actionable, and when we submitted it a few months later, it had been co-signed by 70 conservation and animal groups.

In its initial 90-day Finding on both petitions, the Service determined that, collectively, we had presented substantial scientific information that protecting the wolves throughout the West might be warranted. The scientific evidence was definitive: There was really no way for the Service to dispute the "inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms" in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Idaho allows year-round wolf killing, Montana and Idaho allow aerial gunning and hunting at night with night-vision equipment, and Wyoming permits unlimited slaughter of wolves across 85% of the state with no pretense of management or regulations.

WWP had also worked with Dr. Scott Creel of Montana State University to produce a scientific analysis of the two wolf population models used by Montana and Idaho to estimate their statewide populations. He found that the Idaho model violated the assumptions of camera-trap sampling by choosing rendezvous sites and game trail locations to maximize the chances of spotting wolves, instead of taking a random sample of wolf presence. In Montana, the population model relying on hunter reports compounded reporting biases and errors to provide an unreliable estimate. Both models, according to the Creel analysis, badly overestimate the number of wolves that are out there on the land, and both models are far inferior to the population census methods used in the past. In the months that followed the 90-day finding, Creel's findings on the problems with state population estimators were validated by a peer-reviewed study by Dr. Robert Crabtree, and later a new population genetics study by Dr. Bridgette vonHoldt determined that the present populations in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming were steadily losing their genetic diversity because they were too small to maintain long-term viability. WWP had submitted these late-breaking studies to the Service so they would be considered in the final decision.

The Service stated that a Northern Rockies DPS wasn't well-based in science, but a West-wide DPS was scientifically appropriate. This mirrored our petition's analysis. But somewhere inside the Biden administration, something went sideways, and the Service issued a final determination denying the West-wide DPS of wolves the federal protections of the Endangered Species Act, despite the mountains of scientific evidence that listing was clearly warranted. So we took them to court.


Photo: Yannick Menard

The judge ruled that the Service failed to use the legally-required best available science when it issued a negative 12-month listing determination. The agency ignored the lack of habitat connectivity for these wolves, connectivity that is threatened by wolf hunters and poachers as they try to cross open valleys. The court recognized that the agency improperly relied on state population estimations that were based on models known to be faulty, which means their entire management effort (and wolf-killing quotas) were based on rosy overestimates of how many wolves exist in the wild.

The Service also relied on an obsolete standard for population viability, basing its analysis on studies from 1980s that placed the minimum number of effective breeders at 50 wolves for genetic viability and 500 for long-term viability, when this standard was superseded in 2014 by a new study that found that 100 breeders were required to prevent inbreeding and 1,000 total wolves were required to maintain long-term viability for wolf populations. That's problematic because Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho are all aiming to manage wolf populations to 150 individuals (not breeding pairs, but wolves of all ages including non-reproducing pack members). If the states are successful in reducing wolves down to this minimum level, the regional population will be well below the population viability threshold.

Importantly, the judge also ruled that the agency's decision to examine wolf populations and management only within currently-occupied habitats – ignoring the much larger historic range of wolves in the West – was arbitrary and illegal. This is a key ruling because the agency in recent years has arbitrarily classified the entire state of Nevada (known to be inhabited by wolves under natural conditions) as "unsuitable" for wolves, largely because the livestock industry is pushing this outcome. It also turns the spotlight on the State of Utah, which has no wolves because a state statute requires all wolves to be trapped and removed from the state until they are no longer protected under the ESA.

And in other states where wolf populations are expanding to re-occupy their historic habitats, the agency will now need to consider the welfare and management of wolves across all potential wolf habitats, not just the minority of habitats that are presently occupied. This is a major legal precedent that could have significant positive effects in the future for other rare species with contracted ranges, from sage grouse and lesser prairie chickens to Lahontan cutthroat trout and black-footed ferrets.

The recent ruling further criticized the Fish and Wildlife Service's 'not warranted' finding for wolves because it failed to address the inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms at the state level. The judge recognized that human-caused mortality was the biggest threat to wolves, and that states' regulation of this were in many respects inadequate. The agency did not account for the fact that the wolf issue is actively being politicized – often by the very states charged with managing un-listed wolf populations, and that state management plans failed to curb shifts in anti-wolf biases among the general populace. The ruling stated that the agency did not consider the absence of federal wolf-habitat protections on public lands, stating, "Nor does the Service address the fact that '[l]ivestock grazing will likely continue on Forest Service, BLM, and other lands (including private lands) resulting in wolf-livestock conflicts. These conflicts will likely continue to result in wolf control efforts in an attempt to reduce the number of livestock killed by wolves.'"

Because state wolf management in Montana and Idaho relies on inaccurate population models, the judge found these state regulatory mechanisms to be inadequate.


Photo: Briana R. via Unsplash

Having concluded that the decision to withhold ESA protections from wolves West-wide was illegal, the judge ordered a remand of the decision and sent it back to the Fish and Wildlife Service. That doesn't automatically put wolves under protected status, unfortunately, but it does give the real scientists another opportunity to dig even deeper into the loss of genetic diversity in the Yellowstone wolf population. It's a major win, and one we're proud of leading.

HELP KEEP THE WINS COMING!

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT!

Every day the public lands, streams and wildlife throughout the West benefit because of the work done by the dedicated staff of Western Watersheds Project. Everything WWP does to influence the protection and restoration of public lands is based on a vision that western North America may be one of the only places on earth where enough of the native landscape and wildlife still exists to make possible the preservation of a wild natural world. None of this work would be possible without your generosity and shared passion.

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