MESSENGER

WESTERN WATERSHEDS PROJECT

Fall 2026 Vol. XXXVII

COVER STORY

TRUMP'S PUSH TO PUT MORE LIVESTOCK ON PUBLIC LANDS



Cattle on a public lands allotment, Idaho.
Erik Molvar/WWP

ALSO INSIDE

TAKING ON THE BLM'S GRAZING REGULATIONS—AGAIN

A NEW DIRECTION FOR PUBLIC LANDS

THE RENEWED FIGHT FOR UTAH'S MONUMENTS

westernwatersheds.org | P.O. Box 1770, Hailey, ID 8333, @westernwatersheds

STAFF

Erik Molvar.....Executive Director
Greta Anderson.....Deputy Director
Emily Qiu.....Staff Attorney
Ali Bronsdon.....Staff Attorney
Adam Bronstein.....Oregon Director
Laura Cunningham.....California Director
Patrick Kelly.....Washington and Montana Director
Grace Kuhn.....Digital Director
Greg LeDonne.....Idaho Director
Nancy Linscott.....Operations Director
Josh Osher.....Public Policy Director
Branden Rishel.....GIS Specialist
Delaney Rudy.....Colorado Director
Paul Ruprecht .....Nevada Director
Dagny Signorelli.....Utah and Wyoming Director
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Laura Welp.....Southern Utah Director

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STATE AND REGIONAL OFFICES

Idaho HQ: 219 S River Street, Ste. 203 Hailey, ID 83333
Mailing address: P.O. Box 1770 • Hailey, ID 83333
(208) 788-2290 • wwp@westernwatersheds.org

New Mexico/Arizona: 738 N. 5th Ave., Ste. 206 • Tucson, AZ 85705 • wwp@westernwatersheds.org

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

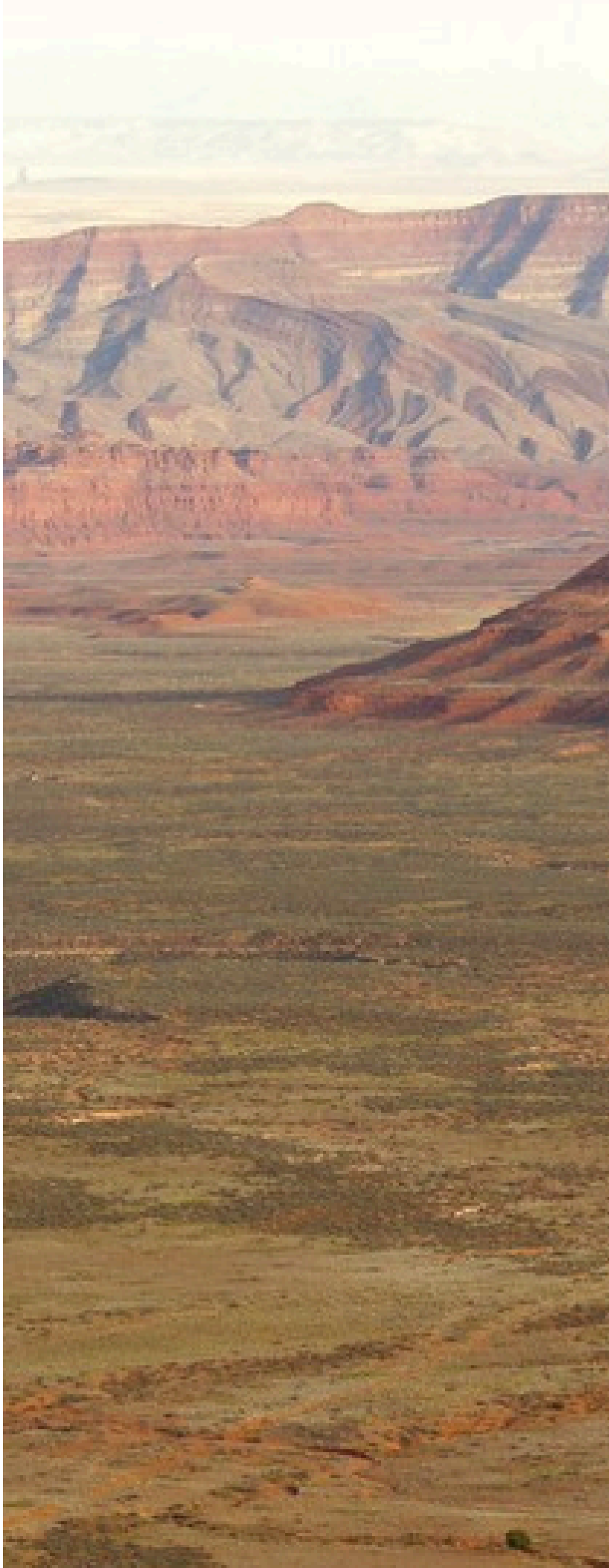
Colorado: P.O. Box 621 • Paonia, CO 81428
(970) 648-4241 • delaney@westernwatersheds.org

Wyoming/Utah: 5442 S 900 E. #155, Salt Lake City 84117
(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



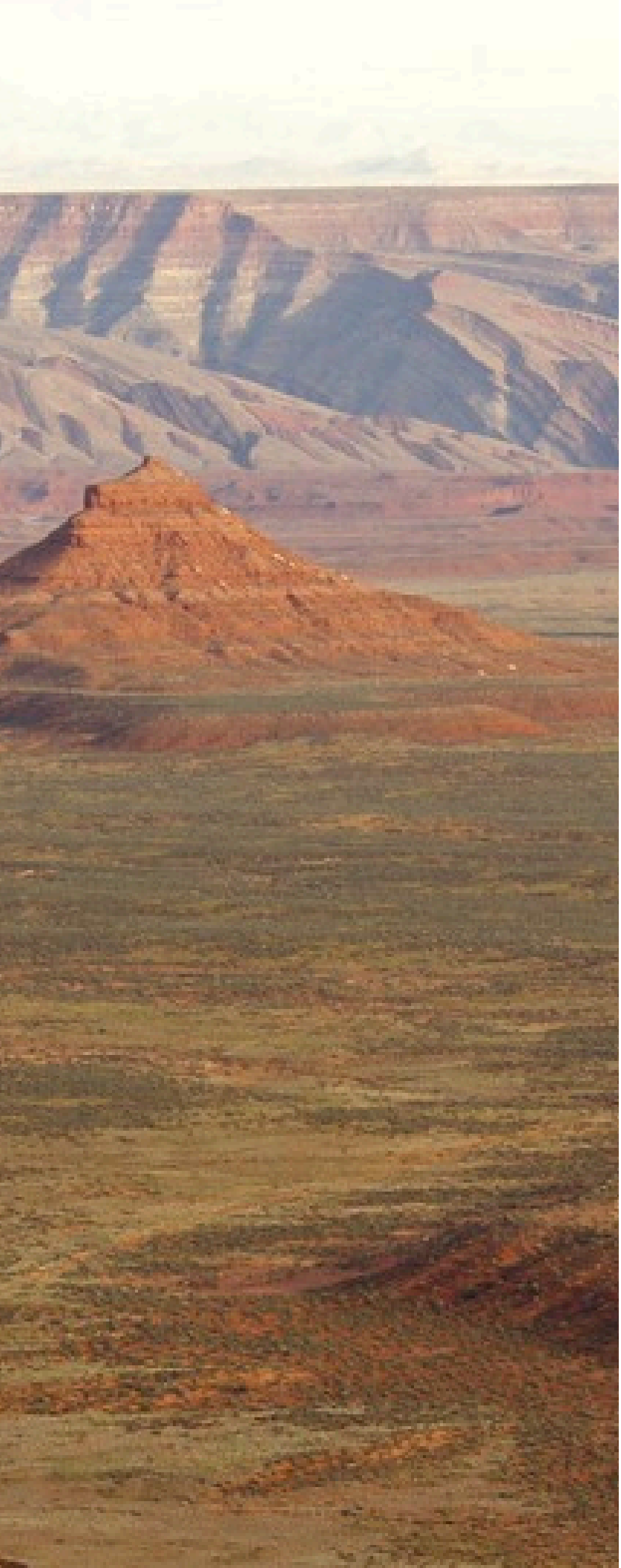


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Photo: View from Moki Dugway, Bears Ears National Monument. Erik Molvar/WWP

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



Cottonwood Canyon, Grand Staircase - Escalante National Monument. Erik Molvar/WWP

BEARS EARS AND GRAND STAIRCASE SUFFER ANOTHER ROUND OF TRUMP CUTS



Greta Anderson, Deputy Director
greta@westernwatersheds.org

When the protected acreages of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments of Utah were slashed by 90 percent in July 2026, we were not particularly surprised. It was only a matter of time before the second Trump administration tried again what it failed to do during its first tenure. The pendulum of protections has been swinging on these lands for years. This time, however, it swung farther towards exploitation than ever, leaving millions of acres of cliff dwellings, dinosaur tracks, pictographs and geologic history open to extractive uses like grazing, logging, and mining.

The big industries apparently didn't even have to wait for the July 13th announcement to start making their plans. The Canadian mining company, Energy Fuels, has been scheming for years to expand their operations within the original boundary of Bears Ears National Monument. Days after Trump's announcement opened up vast swaths of the monument, Energy Fuels announced a plan to further expand its Utah uranium processing plant, surely in anticipation of increased resource extraction in the White Canyon and Elk Ridge areas. (House Democrats have launched an investigation into potential insider trading at the firm that suggests advance knowledge of Trump's plans.) Since the July announcement, at least nine mining claims have been staked on lands removed from the monuments.

The geographic gutting of the monuments was also part of something much larger: The continued betrayal of Tribal communities by the United States government. Bears Ears National Monument was hailed as a Tribal co-management success story, with an unprecedented collaborative resource management plan completed in 2025 that used Traditional Indigenous Knowledge and western science together to manage the monument's resources. While the plan wasn't perfect (it still allowed some livestock grazing), it was a big advance in environmental justice, and WWP supported its implementation.

WWP has once again joined litigation efforts to oppose Trump's unlawful decimation of these two special places. We have reactivated our cases from 2017, when we ultimately blocked the first Trump Administration from making similar cuts to the monuments. (Biden re-established the monuments with larger boundaries in 2021, which stayed our earlier case but didn't moot it.) We're amending our original lawsuit to address this latest attack to defend the integrity of these monuments and stand up for Indigenous management of their ancestral lands.



Lower Hanks Creek in the Antelope Basin allotment outside of the Marys River Riparian Area, Nevada public lands. Olaf Radzins

TAKING ON THE BUREAU'S GRAZING REGULATIONS – AGAIN



Josh Osher, Policy Director
josh@westernwatersheds.org

Western Watersheds Project counts among our major organizational victories the lawsuit that struck down the Bush II Administration's 2006 Bureau of Land Management grazing regulations, blocking the implementation of bad rules that would have prevented public participation in public lands livestock decisions, given more authority to ranchers to self-manage, and undermined Endangered Species Act protections. We are proud to say that we have held on to this win for two decades, but, like all bad ideas, giving public lands ranching more control over our public lands is an idea that continues to resurface. In 2026, with cowboy lawyer Karen Budd-Falen sitting as third in power in the Department of Interior, it was perhaps inevitable that they'd take another run at changing the rules for administering grazing on 155 million acres of public land.

So when the Bureau announced its plan to revise the regulations last spring, WWP swung into action to educate, organize, and mobilize around the grazing regulations. We issued several press releases, spoke to reporters about the proposed changes, and carefully, line-by-line, deciphered not just what the rules said but what they would mean for western public lands based on our experience watchdogging grazing allotments. We provided this analysis to allies, and hosted a webinar with our partners to educate the public on the potential outcomes. We asked WWP members to take action through our online platforms, and we helped organize over 100,000 public comments on the proposed rule before the government's deadline. WWP's comments garnered sign-ons from 79 other conservation groups, amplifying our mission throughout the advocacy community.

The proposed changes would weaken safeguards for wildlife and water quality, set up roadblocks for the public to participate in decisions about public lands, reduce accountability when livestock damage public lands, and further entrench one industry's control over landscapes we all hold dear.

Among their many changes is the elimination of the regulatory provision allowing grazing permits for native species like bison. Instead, grazing permits would be limited to "production-oriented livestock," reinforcing the idea that public lands exist primarily to support commercial livestock production rather than broader conservation purposes. We disagree, and have challenged in federal court the Bureau's decision to apply this new standard to American Prairie's bison grazing leases. (See Spring 2026 Messenger for more information.)

The proposed regulations also would gut the requirement for the Bureau to help meet water quality standards. Livestock grazing is one of the leading causes of degraded streams, contaminated waters, and damaged riparian habitat across the West. Cattle trample streambanks, remove streamside vegetation, increase erosion, and contribute pathogens to waterways. Healthy streams are critical for native fish, amphibians, birds, and the communities downstream that depend on clean water.

The proposed changes also weaken accountability when grazing harms public lands. Under current regulations, if livestock are found to be causing an allotment to fail land health standards, the BLM must take corrective action before the next grazing season. The proposed rule replaces that direct connection with a broader framework that evaluates all possible causes of landscape conditions before action is considered. The agency would be permitted to take up to three years to come to a decision as to what to do. And even when livestock are identified as a significant cause of degradation, permit modifications would no longer be *required* if the rancher is complying with the *terms* of the permit.

In other words, the land can be deteriorating, wildlife can be suffering, all while the grazing that's causing the damage continues unchanged.

At the same time, the proposal would make it harder for the public to participate in decisions about lands they own. Current regulations broadly recognize members of the "interested public." The proposed rule narrows that definition, making a general interest in public lands, wildlife, or healthy ecosystems insufficient for participation. Conservation groups, local communities, hunters, anglers, and other public land users could find themselves excluded from decisions that directly affect landscapes they care deeply about.

Our comments carefully described these and other problems with the proposed regulations and the potential for adverse and uncertain environmental impacts, necessitating the need for the Trump Administration to complete a full environmental analysis of the proposed changes. As of this writing, the Bureau has not completed its process, so it remains unclear what the next steps will be. However, it is abundantly clear that WWP won't be giving up without a fight or ceding the ecological health of western public lands to the livestock industry's profits.



The Marys River Riparian Management Area (RMA) which has been livestock-free for 35 years. Paul Ruprecht/WWP.



The Deeth grazing allotment, Hanks Creek outside of the Marys River RMA. Paul Ruprecht/WWP

STAFF UPDATES



In September, we welcomed Emily Qiu as our Tenth Circuit Attorney. She previously represented WWP on our Successful Arctic grayling and Idaho wolf/grizzly trapping cases when she worked at Earthjustice, so she's quite familiar with our commitment to science-based decision making, and we're thrilled that she's joining us as full-time staff. Emily is based in Montana, where she enjoys spending time on public lands with her rescued animals. Emily is replacing Megan Backsen, who moved north to join Trustees for Alaska. Thank you for all your hard work, Megan! Say hi to the polar bears for us!

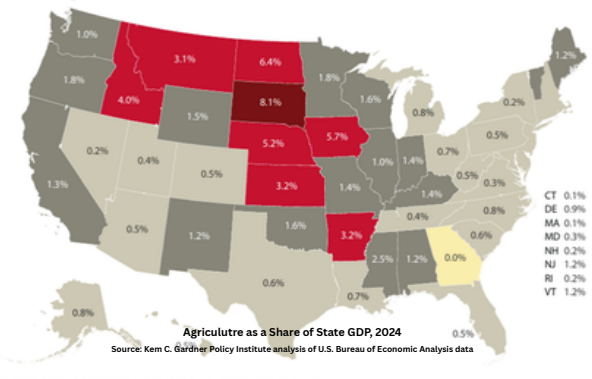
This fall, we also said goodbye to Arizona/New Mexico Director Cyndi Tuell, who is joining the Tohono O'odham Nation as an attorney. Thank you for eight years with WWP, Cyndi and all the best in your new role!

THE ECONOMIC AND WATER FOOTPRINTS OF AGRICULTURE IN THE WEST



Dagny Signorelli, Wyoming & Northern Utah Director
dagny@westernwatersheds.org

U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data from 2024 shows that agriculture accounts for a relatively small share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in much of the West. We are inundated with the concept that western states live or die by agriculture as an economic powerhouse. In reality, modern western economies are much more diverse. Outdoor recreation, health care, construction, services, technology, and other sectors now account for much larger shares of jobs and output. In Utah, for example, outdoor recreation generated 3.3 percent of state GDP in 2024, more than seven times agriculture's share.



Agriculutre as a Share of State GDP, 2024
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data

Why should a relatively small economic sector continue to receive such disproportionate claims on public water, public land, and political attention, especially in states facing intensifying drought, ecological stress, and shrinking water supplies? In both Utah and Wyoming, for example, agriculture occupies an outsized place in politics, identity, and land use. It is often treated as an economic backbone, and proposals to reduce agricultural water use are routinely framed as an attack on rural economies. But in economic terms, agriculture is a small sector in both states. For example, in 2024 in Utah, the sector accounted for about 0.34 percent of covered payroll jobs. In Wyoming, it accounted for about 1 percent of covered payroll jobs, and beef cattle ranching and farming alone accounted for only about 0.6 percent of statewide covered employment. And yet in both states, agriculture commands an extremely dominant share of one of the West's most limited resources: water.

Utah's own agricultural water report says agriculture has historically represented about 80 percent of the state's total diverted water use. In Wyoming, irrigated agriculture similarly dominates water use, and the state's irrigated acreage is overwhelmingly devoted to forage and pasture. In Utah, USDA's 2023 irrigation survey found that about 85 percent of irrigated acreage was planted in alfalfa, other hay, or pasture. In Wyoming, the comparable figure was even higher, about 87 percent. In other words, much of the irrigated agricultural footprint in both states is tied not to fruits, vegetables, or staple foods for direct human consumption, but to forage for livestock.

There is quite the mismatch between economic contribution and resource consumption of agriculture in the West. A sector that accounts for a fraction of one percent of Utah's GDP and about 1.5% of Wyoming's GDP consumes an enormous share of land and water in both states. That is a structural imbalance with real consequences for rivers, aquifers, wildlife, recreation, public health, and resiliency in the face of climate change.



Not using land for this purpose is framed as a binary choice between preserving agriculture exactly as it exists now or surrendering everything to sprawl and development. That is a view held by a profoundly limited and biased imagination. Land can be more than a subdivision or an irrigated forage field. It can be wildlife habitat, open space, restored wetlands, community green space, recreation space, native plant habitat, or simply less intensively managed land that supports ecological function. Water can also support more than one vision of the future.



Lower Hanks Creek in the Antelope Basin allotment outside of the Marys River Riparian Area, Nevada public lands. Olaf Radzins

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION PUSHES MORE CATTLE ONTO PUBLIC LANDS



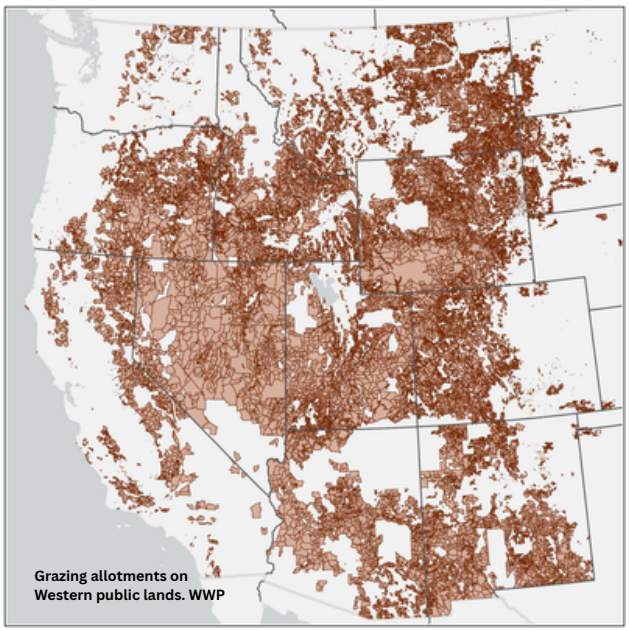
Paul Ruprecht, paul@westernwatersheds.org
paul@westernwatersheds.org

During the past year, the Trump Administration has been focusing intensely on the size of the U.S. cattle herd, consumed with the fact that there are fewer animals using less public-land forage than ever. And it's true—between long-term drought, environmental protection, public oversight, and the thin economic margins of ranching in arid lands – there are fewer livestock grazing the West than there once were, even if only marginally so. Deeming this a crisis, the USDA and the Department of Interior have made several policy adjustments to facilitate greater livestock exploitation of public lands.

The USDA ordered the Forest Service to override regulations and "red tape" like the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)—a key environmental law that ensures a transparent public process around environmental decisions—to open vacant allotments and "restore at least 500,000 Head Months across the National Forest system." The Bureau of Land

Management (BLM) has proposed new grazing regulations (See Taking on the Bureau's Grazing Regulations – Again, in this issue, pages 2-3) that would require "production-oriented" grazing as an attack on conservation herds of native bison leasing public lands, and streamline issuance of grazing permits for vacant or temporarily unused grazing allotments, with a goal of re-stocking every legally-available vacant allotment with cattle or sheep. The BLM even launched a map to help connect ranchers to vacant grazing allotments.

But in reality, there is no additional capacity for livestock use on public lands; there are very few places where cows and sheep are not already grazing, and that use is already harming the ecological health of most public lands.



Grazing allotments on Western public lands. WWP

One way to evaluate the current push to expand livestock grazing on public lands is through the frame of "carrying capacity." The seminal Rangeland Management textbook by New Mexico State University Professor Jerry Holechek defines carrying capacity as "the maximum stocking rate possible year after year without causing damage to vegetation or related resources." Inherent in this concept, which ecologists also use to describe population limits for wild species, is sustainability. If a population is harming its environment, it is too big.

About 54 million acres of BLM lands are failing land health standards, with livestock causing the failures in most of those acres. That is a strong indicator that there are already too many livestock on those allotments.

Additionally, there are 41 million acres that BLM has not even assessed. Because of loopholes, most BLM grazing allotments are now authorized without NEPA or rangeland health analyses. In Nevada, 89% of allotments were authorized with no NEPA analysis in 2025. The Forest Service has no coherent program to track land health, and 91% of Forest Service lands do not have a current NEPA assessment.



These arborglyphs carved into aspen trees in the Toquima and Monitor ranges in Nevada are likely the names of Basque sheepherders from an era of unregulated grazing prior to the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. Paul Ruprecht/WWP

Perhaps the real crises, then, are the federal government's inability or unwillingness to reduce livestock on public lands to sustainable levels, and its goal of maximizing livestock production without having any idea about conditions on the land. Unfortunately, this has been a problem from the beginning.

Most of the BLM-managed lands in the West are public today because they are inherently unproductive for agriculture. The National Forests were "reserved" from the public domain altogether, and the most suitable lands for farming and livestock were quickly claimed by homesteaders and privatized during the disposal era. What was left eventually became BLM land.

After unregulated grazing was ended following the Dust Bowl, high levels of livestock use were grandfathered in during the Taylor Grazing Act adjudications that began in 1938 and continued into the 1960s. While overall numbers of livestock were reduced, under the Grazing Service's Federal Range Code, one of the criteria for determining an individual grazing permittee's "preference" (i.e., the number of livestock the permittee could graze—now called permitted use) was proving their past use at those levels before the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act. By using the old levels of grazing, the adjudicated preference generally exceeded available forage in each location, perpetuating overgrazed conditions.

In the 1960s, public outcry such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* made it harder for BLM to continue its massive program of livestock "improvements" like sagebrush eradication and exotic grass seedings meant to expand livestock capacity on public lands, and environmental laws including NEPA were passed, placing greater scrutiny on grazing districts through Environmental Impact Statements.

After passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), BLM undertook comprehensive inventories, surveys, and rangeland program summaries and eventually set livestock allocations in land use plans. Again, livestock reductions did occur in some places during this time. However, as Congress noted in the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978, "vast segments of the public rangelands . . . [remain] in unsatisfactory condition," presenting "a high risk of soil loss, desertification, and a resultant underproductivity for large acreages of the public lands."

By 1984, BLM's grazing regulations contained an express mandate that "the authorized livestock grazing use shall not exceed the livestock grazing capacity." 43 C.F.R. § 4130.6-1 (1984). Under the 1995 regulations, this language was changed slightly to state that grazing "shall not exceed the livestock carrying capacity of the allotment." 43 C.F.R. § 4130.3-1 (2005). However, despite this requirement, BLM has continued to rely on a "stock and monitor" approach, adjusting from past grazing levels, rather than determining livestock grazing levels based on how much forage is available to begin with. As the rulemaking for the 1984 regulations explained:

"The [Bureau's] approach to determining livestock grazing capacity is premised on establishing management objectives for an allotment. [...] Following this, a monitoring program is implemented to determine the extent to which these goals and objectives are being attained under existing management and levels of use." 49 Fed. Reg. 6440, 6447 (Feb. 21, 1984).

While grazing levels on public lands have fallen since the 1950s, the average weight of a nursing cow increased by more than 40%, and it is also apparent that if the federal agencies undertook comprehensive analyses of current livestock carrying capacity on federal lands, the number of livestock authorized would need to be reduced much further.

For example, in 2022, BLM performed rangeland health analyses on two large vacant BLM grazing allotments in Nevada's Tonopah Field Office: The Monitor and Ralston grazing allotments. Both the Monitor and Ralston allotments were formerly permitted to sagebrush rebel E. Wayne Hage. BLM cancelled Hage's permits for both allotments due to his noncompliance with permit terms in 1993, although he (and his son after his death in 2006) continued to illegally graze there until around 2016 when U.S. District Court for the District of Nevada finally ordered their permanent removal. At 87,894 acres and 378,286 acres, respectively, these are the two largest allotments in Nevada and now are advertised as available for grazing on BLM's vacant allotments map.



A portion of the Monitor allotment.
Paul Ruprecht/WWP

The Tonopah Field Office's 1997 Resource Management Plan (RMP) allocated 3,862 cattle Animal Unit Months (AUMs) to the Monitor allotment and 14,695 cattle AUMs to the Ralston allotment.

The 2022 carrying capacity analyses for these allotments calculated current forage production based on both expected vegetation (Ecological Site Descriptions) and actual clipping-and-weighing of vegetation in field verifications. BLM determined slope and adjusted to account for areas that were too steep for livestock to graze. And it factored in water availability to livestock, noting that cattle would not be able to graze farther than 3 miles from a water source. Importantly, the analyses also considered drought and determined amounts of available forage for both "unfavorable" and "normal" years.

The results are an important glimpse into BLM's past and current management. The agency determined that the forage available on the Monitor allotment was between 704 and 1,271 AUMs, depending on yearly precipitation. This is only 18% to 32% of what the RMP allocated. On the Ralston allotment, between 6,575 and 12,797 AUMs were available, or 51 to 87% of what the RMP allocated. That either means that BLM had earlier overestimated allowable grazing levels on the allotments by 13% to 82% or that the allotments had lost that amount of vegetation over the preceding 25 years.

The results also call into question the wisdom of grazing these arid landscapes at all. Shockingly, on the Monitor allotment it would take 124 acres of land to feed a single cow for a month during a drought year. On the Ralston allotment, it would take 58 acres. According to the BLM, drought has occurred on these allotments in 62% of the years between 1990 and 2022.

Analyses like these are the exception, not the norm, because BLM continues to avoid meaningful, science-based land management. But they illustrate that the federal agencies likely do not have an accurate accounting of how many livestock the land can sustainably support at this time for most allotments.

And that confirms that the current effort to ramp up grazing on public lands is a reckless policy, and one that benefits special interests while damaging public resources—exactly what we would expect from the Trump administration.



A rainbow over the Owyhee Canyonlands in Oregon.
Adam Bronstein/WWP

INTRODUCING THE NEW DIRECTION FOR PUBLIC LANDS – OUR VISION FOR A NEW ERA OF CONSERVATION



Adam Bronstein, Oregon Director
adam@westernwatersheds.org

The laws that govern public lands and wildlife management on our federally-managed lands have been mostly in place since the 1960s and 1970s, laws that were enacted after a nationwide awakening and reckoning with extinction, pollution, and unchecked extraction. They were put in place in the spirit of turning over a new leaf. The Wilderness Act passed in 1964. We celebrated our first Earth Day in 1970. The Endangered Species Act was signed into law in 1973. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* inspired the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and more. The concept of "multiple use" emerged as a way to elevate conservation and non-consumptive uses of the public lands.

In the decades that have passed, it has become obvious that these foundational environmental laws are riddled with extraction loopholes, and are themselves insufficient to protect ecosystems and species.

Industry, and their partners in the land management agencies, universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Congress have taken great advantage of the weaknesses in our governing laws and exploited the concept of multiple use. Ecosystems have been devastated by domestic livestock. Forests are degraded and compromised by selective "modern forestry" practices. Unchecked oil, gas, and mining is polluting and scarring landscapes. Species extinctions and local extirpations abound. The current legal and political frameworks on the public lands are failing those of us who aren't reaping a profit from this excessive extraction.

On a trip to the majestic sequoia groves of California in June, 2025, I accompanied The John Muir Project to witness and document logging happening inside these "protected" forests. Experiencing this logging in the name of "restoration" felt like the pinnacle of betrayal under a system that we entrust to steward and protect

our shared natural heritage. Feeling the cumulative weight of past decades of mismanagement and ecocide on our public lands, something broke inside of me.

As is customary among colleagues, we talked about the failures of mainstream conservation and the corruption that is the Land Management-Industrial Complex. A system and paradigm broken by ineffectual laws, unchecked industry influences, misaligned incentives, a do-nothing Congress, and a mainstream conservation establishment that doesn't fundamentally recognize the problems at hand, or in some cases, is directly complicit in propping up the machinery of the system itself. So, we started hatching a plan for a "New Deal" for public lands and wildlife. What if we organized the grassroots across the country and started demanding what is necessary instead of what is politically acceptable to the establishment? What if we can reach members of the public and inspire them to take action? What if we crowdsourced a set of policies that would address the root causes of ecosystem degradation and destruction? What if staving off species extinction was no longer the ceiling of our aspirations, but the floor? We came to the realization that if we don't take action and organize the grassroots, then who will? The "New Direction for Public Lands" was born.

Soon after returning from the sequoias we got to work. Western Watersheds Project and The John Muir Project dedicated staff time and resources to bootstrap the campaign. We started laying out our vision and mission. We developed our guiding principles. We made lists of allies and set up meetings. We presented our vision to hundreds of grassroots advocates and Indigenous people across the country. We listened to their concerns. Took careful notes. Deliberated. We arrived at a common set of policy goals. And we started recruiting allies.

Collectively, we aim to overhaul the land management agencies and place strict sideboards on their activities, including removing commercial livestock grazing and logging as codified "multiple uses" of the public lands. We want to reform public participation in agency decision-making. We seek to honor Indigenous cultural practices and treaty rights, and create a new system of "rewilding" areas where ecosystems can heal. We aspire to reform wildlife management and stop the killing of native predators, and designate more parts and Wilderness areas. The list goes on and these ideas will guide the development of our policy platform.



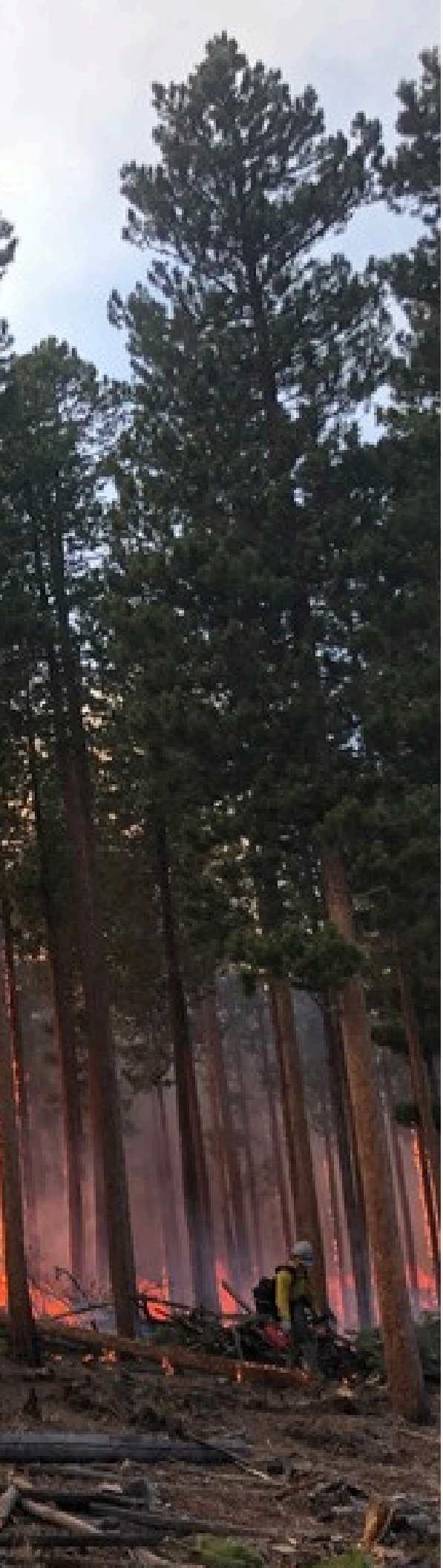
Sequoias in a California forest, James Williams/Pexels

Despite the dark situation we find ourselves in today, there is much to celebrate about public lands. We still have wild places and remnant intact ecosystems where we can experience native wildlife and all of the wonders and glories of the natural world. And impaired lands that can fully recover. Public lands are landscapes of hope. Of what could be. Of what we can have more of. We aim to unleash their full ecological, biological, and human potential.

We are expecting to roll out the New Direction for Public Lands by the end of October 2026, perhaps even by the time you read this article. You can find us online at ND4PL.org. Please sign up for the email list on the website to get our notifications to learn more about what we're up to and how you can get involved. We can indeed make a difference together as the grassroots. We need all hands on deck—so please join with us.



A prescribed burn. Delaney Rudy/WWP



DISTURBANCE, PLANT COMMUNITIES, AND OUR VALUES-AT-RISK



Delaney Rudy, Colorado Director
delaney@westernwatersheds.org

I started thinking about fire ecology when I was working on a trail crew in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana. I had just gotten my “red card,” the certification to respond to wildland fires, and was spending two weeks at a time in a landscape that has been allowed to burn somewhat naturally since the early 1980s.

I spent hours riding and packing mules through overlapping burn scars decades old, and saw how the forest responds ten, twenty, or thirty years after burning, or where the landscape had burned multiple times. I pondered the alchemy of wildfire as I pulled a crosscut saw through fallen trees blocking the trail, many in fire scars with a “bark” of charcoal that would dull our saws with its carbonization. This all remained in my mind when I went on to fight fire for the Forest Service as my primary job, and working directly with fire on the landscape fed my curiosity and reverence for this powerful ecological force.

Disturbance is a natural and integral part of ecosystems across the globe. In Hawaii and other volcanic islands, lava flows incinerate plant communities and restart primary succession. In the Southern Ocean, Antarctic ice sheets and glaciers scour the ocean floor, creating opportunities for new benthic communities to get established. In the American West, fires, floods, ungulates, and mass movements like landslides introduce disturbance and create dynamic ecosystems. These disturbances clear or consume dominant plants, freeing up vital nutrients, light, and space. Disturbance shakes things up and prevents any single species from monopolizing all resources, which helps maintain high overall biodiversity.

Fire and Our Values-At-Risk

Wildfire is a natural disturbance process and an inherent part of healthy ecosystem dynamics in most of North America. People say wildfire is "bad" because it threatens human infrastructure, homes, and safety. When I worked as a wildland firefighter, one of the first steps of sizing up a fire was to determine the "values-at-risk,” which are categorized within a hierarchy. The highest priority is the safety of the public and responding firefighters, followed by property and infrastructure, and then natural and cultural resources. There are times when fire can threaten sensitive wildlife habitat, like the spread of cheatgrass into Gunnison sage grouse habitat, but for the most part values-at-risk are about minimizing fire's impacts on humans and our stuff.

Fire is not "bad." It's natural and even essential, but its destructive nature is inconvenient for our homes, infrastructure, and industries. Our forests and grasslands evolved with the dynamic pressure of fire. Native plants evolved with these disturbances, and some even require fire to thrive. Our wildlife evolved with it. Our soils and vegetative communities were shaped by it. I've seen native bunchgrasses burn right down to their crowns and two weeks later have green shoots out of the top. Our western ecosystems are in relationship with fire, and our colonial values interrupted and strained that relationship. Now, after more than a century of trying to suppress it, we are discovering just how difficult and dangerous it is to remove an essential ecological process once we build homes and businesses in fire-dependent ecosystems.

Grieving What Burns

Emphasizing the ecological importance of fire is not meant to invalidate the grief we feel when the places we love burn. Even if fire is an essential part of these dynamic ecosystems, it is destructive. It kills much in its path and alters the character of a place immensely. Disturbance hits refresh on ecological succession, and the effects are immensely varied. Earlier-succession ecosystems can look like lovely parky meadows and mosaics of forest and open space. Or they can look like "dog-hair" lodgepole forests, where one pulse of fire releases innumerable serotinous seeds that grow packed together into an impenetrable wall of pine. All of these ecosystems have a natural advancement of succession, and all of that succession is in relationship with disturbance.

For us humans, and for many species, late-succession forests are incredibly charming: deep and dark, full of shade and water, dominated by mature spruces and firs. Especially with so much old growth lost to logging, losing pockets of these relic forests to fire can be devastating and a source of great grief.

Grazing Cannot Replace Fire

Disturbance ecology has long been promoted by the livestock industry as a justification for livestock grazing on public lands. The industry claims that cows mimic the natural disturbance once provided by herds of bison. They don't. Bison and cows have wholly different grazing behaviors. Bison spend much less of their time foraging,


Delaney Rudy/WWP

move significantly farther and faster, return to the same place much less often, and, critically, lack cattle's affinity for loafing around in water. Because of these differences in scale, pattern, and return interval, bison and cattle exert significantly different disturbance pressure on vegetative communities.

Bison also likely weren't historically present on many modern grazing allotments, and they certainly weren't spending as much time there as cattle do. As for elk, deer, bighorn sheep, and antelope, livestock grazing differs greatly in pattern and pressure from the grazing of these native ungulates. Not to mention the difference in size, and therefore in consumption, soil compression, and overall impact, between a cow and, say, a mule deer.

Regardless of claims about the ecological integrity of livestock grazing pressure, grazing can't replace the role of fire in these dynamic ecosystems. It simply does not have the same effects as wildfire. Grazing consumes biomass selectively, taking live green plant matter in preference to dead and dry, and it does not provide the same nutrient cycling and soil chemistry effects. Grazing also pairs vegetation removal with soil disturbance, disrupting root systems and biological soil crusts that can survive low- and moderate-intensity fires and facilitate succession and recovery. The disturbance pressure and vegetative community effects of grazing and fire are not analogous, and they should not be treated as such in policy.

The Cheatgrass Caveat

A caveat to this ecological perspective on "good" fire is that fire can facilitate nonnative species and lead to negative ecological consequences. The proliferation of cheatgrass after fire is a key example. Cheatgrass is an early-sprouting annual grass that, like many invasive plants, is disturbance-adapted and does particularly well on bare ground and disturbed soils. Of course, we have the livestock industry to thank for the spread of cheatgrass across the West, and we all pay the price.

On the bright side, we can use our understanding of disturbance ecology to our advantage. If disturbance is the special condition that allows cheatgrass to outcompete native grasses, excluding disturbance takes away its upper hand. We know that if left alone and protected from disturbance, native bunchgrasses can eventually outcompete cheatgrass. Cattle disturbance is particularly important to exclude, because hoof action hinders the development of biocrust and symbiotic soil microorganisms, which are critical for community succession and for bunchgrasses' competitive advantage. A study published this spring shows that in summer-wet systems like the Colorado Front Range, cheatgrass populations naturally decline and native plants recover over time if ranching and overgrazing disturbances are simply removed (Brakenridge and Seastedt 2026).

Conclusion

Disturbance is not the enemy of healthy ecosystems. It is one of the forces that makes them healthy. But not all disturbance is equal, and the difference matters for how we manage public lands. Fire is an ancient, essential process that our ecosystems evolved with, and it evokes fear and awe for good reason. But the livestock industry wants to exploit our fear for their own gain. Grazing cannot do fire's ecological work, and grazing cannot protect our homes and communities from wildfire, despite the claims of the livestock lobby.
Climate change and more than a century of logging, grazing, development, and complete fire suppression have put us in a sticky situation. Only by rigorously engaging with disturbance ecology and the sacred relationship between fire and the land can we find our way out. We should start by ensuring that our policies reflect what disturbance actually does on the land rather than what is convenient for our values at risk.



In 2003, the Medicine Bow NF's Gramm Fire burned right across the clearcuts and kept on going. Erik Molvar/WWP

LOG IT, GRAZE IT, AND THEN WATCH IT BURN

The West is burning, including grasslands heavily grazed by cattle and sheep and forests that have already been logged. Yet industries continue to use these fires to push for more of the same, cynically rebranding their exploitation of public lands as fire prevention. The crisis is real—for communities, wildlife, and the land. So is the effort to profit from it.

Read the companion piece by WWP Executive Director Erik Molvar on our Substack for a closer look at the false narratives driving this sales pitch.

Scan the QR code to read the full piece on our Substack.



The Sawtooth Mountains, where in part well over half a million acres of grazing areas were retired from livestock grazing during Floyd's tenure with the SHCF. Unsplash

IN MEMORIAM: AN OIL AND GAS EXECUTIVE TURNED ENVIRONMENTAL HERO



Erik Molvar, Executive Director
emolvar@westernwatersheds.org

The Western Watersheds Project family has lost one of our own, Floyd Robertson, a 12-year Board Member of the Sagebrush Habitat Conservation Fund and integral part of numerous voluntary buyouts of public land grazing permits.

Before he ever heard of Western Watersheds Project, Floyd worked for the El Paso Corporation, headquartered in Houston, planning natural gas pipelines and acquiring rights-of-way across private and public lands. The Ruby Pipeline was what brought Floyd into the Sagebrush Habitat Conservation Fund. El Paso wanted to build a gas pipeline across almost a thousand miles of sagebrush habitats from southwest Wyoming to southern Oregon through Utah and northern Nevada. Western Watersheds Project raised concerns about the project's impacts on sage grouse and public lands.

There were considerations of a lawsuit, and lengthy negotiations between WWP and the pipeline company. In 2010, the El Paso Corporation signed a settlement where $15 million would be conveyed to WWP over ten years to provide compensatory mitigation for the damage the pipeline would create to lands and wildlife habitats. In return WWP agreed not to litigate the Ruby Pipeline.

The Sagebrush Habitat Conservation Fund was formed under the terms of this settlement, with one Board Member appointed by the El Paso Corporation, one by WWP, and a third to be appointed by a consensus of the first two Board Members. The Fund was tasked with using the funds to buy out federal cattle and sheep grazing permits on public lands for permanent retirement. It turns out that while you can spend money to buy property or conservation easements and keep conditions the same, removing cattle and sheep is one of the few ways you can use fiscal expenditures to move the needle in a positive direction, actually improving wildlife habitat quality and population numbers.

But Floyd didn't join the Sagebrush Fund at its inception. The first El Paso representative was El Paso Executive VP Jim Cleary, who resigned from the Fund Board in 2012. In the meantime, the El Paso Corporation was acquired by Kinder-Morgan, one of the two largest natural gas pipeline corporations in the United States. The gas industry giant appointed an attorney from Jackson, Mike Brennan, to replace Cleary, but Brennan ran into some family crises and by the end of 2013 he had resigned. Floyd Robertson, who had been in charge of all real estate rights-of-way for the Ruby Pipeline for El Paso,

became the third industry person to serve on the Sagebrush Fund's board, joining in early 2014.

That year, Kinder-Morgan approached WWP with an offer to pay off the long-term settlement contract with a lump-sum payment at a discounted rate. Floyd Robertson brought forward the proposal, and WWP agreed to adjust the total payment down to $13.5 million to be paid immediately on signing, and taking over full responsibility for approving the appointment of Sagebrush Fund board members. But Floyd was already an environmentalist, unusual in the oil and gas industry, and immediately understood the conservation value of eliminating livestock use on large tracts of the American West. He was proving his expertise in negotiating grazing permit retirements, so similar to the right-of-way easements he acquired in his day job. So WWP kept him on, a move that paid huge dividends over the years, and yielded a congenial and productive partnership that lasted for the rest of Floyd Robertson's life.

It quickly became clear that Floyd was happy to join the Sagebrush Fund position because its mission was one he personally supported. He became a very wise choice because he was so knowledgeable about negotiating transactions with western ranchers. He had multiple skills that would help the Fund, and he supported the Fund's mission without question.

His term on the board encompassed retirements of well over half a million acres of grazing allotments in the Idaho mountains, including buyouts in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, in the Copper Basin, and four large sheep allotments belonging to the Lava Lake Livestock Company where proximity to bighorn sheep populations posed a major disease transmission risk. He assisted in negotiating more than 100,000 acres of grazing permit buyouts in Wyoming from willing sellers, including some of the Yellowstone ecosystem lands that WWP is today defending in court from re-stocking with cattle. He helped us buy out the largest remaining livestock leases in Capitol Reef National Park and Dinosaur National Monument.

Floyd was already familiar with the 10,000-acre Vya Ranch, which was adjacent to the Ruby Pipeline in Washoe County, Nevada. The Sagebrush Fund acquired it in 2011 and he fully supported the retirement of its cattle grazing operation. This was part of a broader strategy by WWP and the Sagebrush Fund to add to the conservation landscape around the nearby Hart Mountain and Sheldon National Wildlife Refuges. Floyd's knowledge and personal connections helped secure conservation funding to restore the Vya Ranch, rehabilitate its damaged riparian habitats, and plant native seeds on lands that had burned during the 2019 Coleman Fire and this year's S-2 Fire.



Floyd's main choice of vacationing from his home in Colorado Springs was to play golf, and to visit brew pubs. Floyd enjoyed his IPAs, and had visited more than 500 brew pubs all told. He retired from Kinder-Morgan in 2021 and helped found a brew pub: Fossil Craft Beer in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

And then, suddenly, on August 13th of this year, he was gone. A family man, he left behind his wife Terri, two children, Megan and Brett, and three grandchildren.

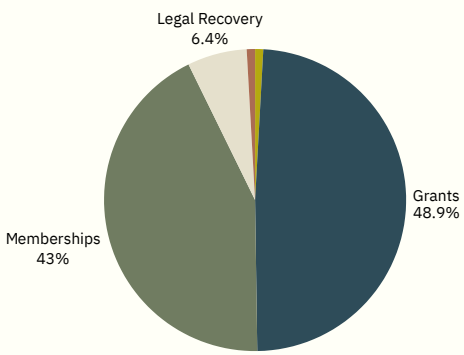
All that initial supposition about Floyd's suitability proved to be right. Every year he came to Hailey for the Sagebrush Fund's annual meeting and trekked out to the Vya Ranch half a dozen times, showing his commitment to the Sagebrush Fund's work. He served on the Board for 12 years. We enjoyed his company immensely, and he will be missed.

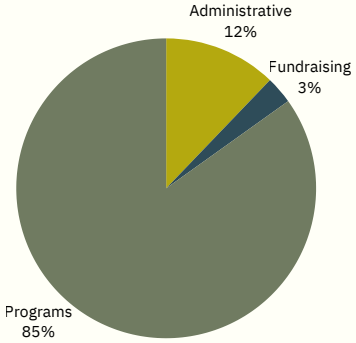
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WWP 2025 ANNUAL FINANCIAL REPORT

Income.....$2,073,326
Expenses.....$1,990,502
Net Income..... $82,824

2025 Budgeted Expenses.....$1,963,754
2026 Budgeted Expenses.....$2,185,480
*All figures rounded.





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