

PUBLIC LANDS

BLM explores 'flexibility' for ranchers on grazing permits

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The Bureau of Land Management wants to give ranchers more "flexibility" in how they manage cattle and sheep grazing on federal lands. BLM

The Bureau of Land Management wants to adjust how compliance is gauged on grazing permits across the West, drawing praise from the livestock industry and concern from conservationists.

The goal of the "demonstration program" BLM unveiled today is to get land managers who oversee more than 18,000 livestock grazing permits in 13 states to work more closely with ranchers and to ultimately set ecological goals for improving and maintaining rangeland health.

BLM is trying to identify as many as a dozen "outcome based" demonstration projects that, if successful, could be used by ranchers to meet ecological rangeland health goals.

As long as the yet-to-be-developed standards are met, ranchers would be granted "more flexibility" in how they graze livestock on federal allotments, said BLM public affairs specialist Brian Lombard.

This would include allowing ranchers "to make adjustments in response to changing conditions such as drought or wildland fire," the agency said today in a statement.

"Farmers and ranchers know the wildlife and the land they work better than anyone, it only makes sense that we would enlist them in conservation efforts," Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said in a statement.

"One of my top goals is for the government to be a better neighbor, land manager, and partner," Zinke said. "I think it's a great step in that direction."

BLM is accepting demonstration project proposals from ranchers through Oct. 27, Lombard said.

The Interior Department and BLM have targeted livestock grazing regulations as part of President Trump's deregulation agenda.

A "BLM Priority Work" list developed by the agency in April calls for, among other things, prioritizing the streamlining of "the grazing permit process" in an effort to "provide more flexibility to the American rancher" ([Greenwire](#), April 10).

The latest proposal is supported by the livestock industry, which has long argued that no one works harder to protect rangeland health than ranchers, whose livelihoods depend on a healthy landscape.

They've also argued that well-managed grazing activity can keep grasses at heights that shield and protect wildlife while reducing invasive plant species like cheatgrass, which burns easily and can help spread wildfires rapidly.

"We're extremely excited that the BLM is looking for some of these new innovative ways to manage the permitting process and provide some of the flexibility that both permittees and the land management agencies recognize is needed in the process," said Ethan Lane, executive director of the Public Lands Council and the executive director for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's federal lands program. "We look forward to participating."

The proposal comes less than a year after [data](#) compiled by Interior on the nearly 155 million acres on which grazing occurs showed that at least a quarter of federal rangelands don't meet land health standards ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 7, 2016).

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility circulated the data last year.

Among other things, the data show that in 2015, grazing may have damaged 29 million acres, which are now classified as "not meeting all standards" for rangeland health and not making significant progress. Another 11.6 million acres also do not meet the standards, but BLM attributes that to reasons other than livestock grazing.

The data also reveal that BLM had never assessed 59 million acres, meaning the agency has not taken samples in those areas to see whether livestock grazing has damaged the land.

Some environmental groups are concerned about the new effort.

Erik Molvar, executive director of the Hailey, Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, said the latest proposal appears to be part of a broader effort by the Trump administration "to move away from measurable standards and enforceable regulations and toward a free-for-all approach to industrial and commercial uses of our public lands."

He added: "This is bad news for land health and wildlife populations that are going to be subjected to even worse overgrazing conditions. If you abandon the already minimal standards in place today, you will end up with much worse problems with overgrazing, cheatgrass and habitat degradation."

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