

Natural Resources



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Federal Lands Grazing Permits Managing Rangeland Resources

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Situation

During the 1800s the rich grazing resources of the prairies, mountains, and deserts of the American West were discovered by the expanding population of the United States. Individuals looking to carve out a new life recognized the potential of the seemingly endless oceans of grass. “Green Gold” was a term often used to describe the potential prosperity that could be accumulated from livestock grazing.

In his book *Look to the Mountains: Southeastern Utah and the LaSal National Forest* (1975), Dr. Charles Peterson observed that in 1879 cattle could be purchased in the Utah settlements for \$10 per head and sold in Colorado for \$25-30 per head. Another early operation purchased cattle in Texas for \$3.75, grazed them for the winter without cost on the ranges of the Great Basin, and sold them for \$24 in the spring (Walker, 1964).

Extensive publicity of the enormous profits caused millions of dollars from the eastern U.S. and Europe to be invested in western cattle grazing operations. This boom caused huge increases in cattle numbers during the 1870s (Holechek, Pieper, & Herbel, 2011).

Grazing was not regulated and was free to the livestock that arrived on the scene first. By 1890

the last western open range was fully stocked. It is estimated that there were over 26 million cattle and 20 million sheep in the 17 western states (McGinty, Baldwin, & Banner, 2009). Grazing resources, though renewable, could not support the massive number of grazing animals. Due to economic greed, overgrazing became a problem and its ramifications would extend into the next two centuries.

Grazing Becomes Regulated

An act of Congress in June 1897 officially gave the federal government the legal authority to administer grazing. Another bill, in 1905, organized the Forest Service (USFS) within the Department of Agriculture. Grazing permits were structured and allotted on the basis of prior use of forest lands, ownership of base property, and the need for forage to satisfy the feed requirements of a sound ranching program. These permits became a valuable asset, and forest permits came to have a market value on the basis of the available forage and the number of animals it could support (Roberts & Gardner, 1964).

When the grazing on federal forest lands was organized, a need became apparent for a management system on western lands located outside the forest reserves. The Taylor Grazing Act was passed in 1934 which allowed for the establishment of the Department of the Interior, and the Grazing Office to manage grazing on non-Forest

Service lands. In 1946, the Grazing Office was combined with the General Land Office, which had overseen the sale of western federal lands since 1849, to become the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). BLM grazing permits were initiated under much the same format as those of the Forest Service.

Federal Lands Grazing Permits

The owner of a grazing permit is known as a *Permittee*. A permittee must own *base property* and *livestock* to be eligible for a term grazing permit. Base property is private land owned or controlled by the permittee that serves as a location where livestock can be moved if they need to vacate the grazing permit for some reason. Today, acquiring a permit to graze livestock on federal lands is not a simple process. All public lands eligible to be grazed by livestock are already obligated under existing permits.

Most all livestock operations in the West use federal lands under the stipulations of a *Term Grazing Permit*. There are other types of permits used for special considerations such as guides and outfitters who may have horses and mules that graze while the owners operate on federal lands.

Structure of a Term Grazing Permit

Most of the lower elevation federal grazing lands are managed by the BLM, and the upper, mountainous areas are the responsibility of the USFS. In general, livestock grazing occurs on BLM lands in the late fall, winter, and spring. Livestock are moved to the USFS lands for summer and early fall grazing. This can vary depending on the location of a grazing permit.

Each grazing permit can have one or more **allotment**. An allotment is a geographical area of, generally, contiguous land that can be divided into smaller units called **pastures**. Pastures can be made up of thousands of acres. The pastures are divided from each other by fences or physical land formations such as canyons or cliffs that are impassable for livestock.

Grazing Systems

The science of range management has developed grazing systems that manage the movement of animals to coincide with the growing cycle of plant communities. The pastures are the key components

of the grazing system for each allotment. The key to successful grazing is season, timing, and numbers.

A simple type of grazing procedure is the Rest-Rotation system. If the allotment consisted of three pastures, one of them would receive 12 months of rest each season. The other two pastures would carry the grazing load under a schedule of rotation. For example, livestock would be in Pasture A for the first part of the grazing season, and moved into Pasture B to finish the period of use. Pasture C would be rested. The next year livestock might begin the season in Pasture C and move into A at a later time, with Pasture B receiving rest.

Administration

Currently, grazing permits are issued for a term of 10 years to qualified livestock operations. The permits are administered by local BLM and USFS offices. At the beginning of each grazing season the permittee will receive a document that states the name of the allotment, the time period of the grazing season, the system for use of the different pastures, and the number of AUMs available. An AUM is defined as the amount of forage it takes to support a cow and her calf for 1 month. Typically, this involves the consumption of 600 pounds of dry forage by a 1000 pound cow (Holechek, Pieper, & Herbel, 2011).

A grazing permit will have a preferred number of AUMs. Due to drought conditions or other situations the available forage may not be enough for the preferred number. In this case a number is calculated by using data from the allotment that is collected by a BLM or USFS range conservationist. A lower number of AUMs is assigned, or the season of use may be changed, or both. If there is a conflict with the allotment document the permittee can meet with local federal land managers to work out any problems. The permittee then signs the document and it goes on file in the local office.

Documentation will include the following:

- The information on the livestock operation that owns the permit.
- The number and kind of livestock.
- The period(s) of use for the allotment.
- The amount of use in animal unit months (AUMs).

At least once a year, or as often as possible, a range conservationist will visit each allotment and

measure utilization of plants by grazing animals. Also, every so many years data is collected that evaluates the trend of the plant communities. One difference between land management agencies is that BLM permits can be sub-leased to another livestock operator, USFS permits cannot.

Cost

The annually determined grazing fee is computed by using a 1966 base value of \$1.23 per AUM. The figure is then calculated according to three factors—current private grazing land lease rates, beef cattle prices, and the cost of livestock production. In effect, the fee rises, falls, or stays the same based on market conditions, with livestock operators paying more when conditions are better and less when conditions have declined.

However under a Presidential Executive Order issued in 1986, the grazing fee cannot fall below \$1.35 per AUM, and any increase or decrease cannot exceed 25 percent of the previous year's level.

Many organizations complain that federal grazing fees are too low when compared with grazing on private lands. This is like comparing apples and oranges. They are two different situations. On a federal lands grazing allotment the permittee must provide everything for the needs of the animals. This includes development of water resources, fence maintenance, herding of the animals, veterinary care, and salt licks. On most private lands, the livestock owner drops off the animals, and the owner or manager of the lands takes care of everything, including animal health. The rancher returns to pick up the animals at the end of the grazing season.

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Information

For more information on grazing permits visit the websites of the Bureau of Land Management <http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/grazing.html> and the United States Forest Service <http://www.fs.fed.us/rangelands/uses/permits.shtml>.

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