

American Lands Alliance - Center for Biological Diversity - Defenders of Wildlife
Earthjustice - Endangered Species Coalition - Forest Guardians
National Audubon Society - National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council - Oregon Natural Desert Association - Sierra Club
U.S. PIRG - Western Watersheds Project
September 21, 2004

REMOVE RIDER TO ELIMINATE PUBLIC INPUT on PUBLIC LANDS

The Senate Appropriations Committee has included a rider in the FY05 Interior Appropriations Act, S. 2804, that seeks to completely eliminate environmental and public review of grazing on millions of acres of land that belong to the American public. This rider, in Section 339, attempts to eliminate review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for three years and up to 900 grazing allotments on Forest Service land. This rider should be removed from the bill.

Livestock grazing is the largest commercial use of America's public lands and creates the most impact: Grazing takes places on 96 million acres of National Forest land. In addition to providing clean water for our farms and cities, these lands are also used for hunting, fishing, birdwatching, and camping. Americans want these lands preserved and protected -- to be passed on as a legacy to future generations.

For thirty years there has been no environmental review of thousands of allotments: Since NEPA was enacted, the Forest Service has neglected to conduct thousands of allotment reviews required by law. This means that there has not been any public review or input on grazing practices allowed by the Forest Service, and no agency accountability. While the rider indicates that environmental review is not necessary if monitoring data show that grazing practices are meeting management objectives, most monitoring rarely assesses water quality, soil erosion, the condition of riparian areas or wildlife habitat, or the impacts of grazing on cultural and recreational resources. Of the riparian areas that have been monitored in New Mexico and Arizona, more than half are in violation of utilization standards.

The Forest Service has already benefited from years of riders: For many years Congressional riders have allowed the Forest Service to delay legally required environmental reviews and thereby ignore laws that protect human health, wildlife, water quality, and archeological sites. In the FY 05 Senate Interior Appropriations Bill, the Committee Report finds that, "**The Committee is extremely concerned with the lack of progress the Agency has made in completing the environmental review of grazing allotments that are governed by the Rescissions Act.**" According to the Agency's own budget justification, the Forest Service does not complete half the work that it needs to do in order to keep up with the schedule mandated by the Act." We're concerned too! But the answer is to make the agency comply with the law and conduct environmental review, not to waive the law and reward the agency for failing to do its job.

Lands being grazed are suffering severe damage to natural resources: Many allotments are suffering from the combined effects of drought and harmful grazing practices. Streams in the arid Southwest are in the "worst shape in history," according to the EPA, as the result of grazing. On thousands of acres, water sources are severely contaminated, wildlife habitat has been lost, and riparian areas damaged -- even in national monuments and wilderness areas -- but this provision assumes that grazing is not a problem. These conditions not only endanger human health, but also wildlife. Species that have become threatened or endangered due to damaging livestock grazing include bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, bull trout and sockeye salmon. In all, grazing has contributed to the decline of 22% of endangered species. This rider will allow damage to continue for many years to come.

This rider is part of a broader attempt to undermine NEPA: Opponents of NEPA are promoting other measures to weaken NEPA review for hazardous waste projects, complex transportation projects, and oil and gas drilling. This rider is one more effort to weaken NEPA, the Magna Carta of environmental laws.

For more information, please contact:

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