THE CITY SLICKER’S GUIDE
TO WELFARE RANCHING
IN COLORADO

HOW THE RANCHING INDUSTRY ROBS
TAXPAYERS,
DEGRADES THE ENVIRONMENT, AND
CAUSES URBAN SPRAWL

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NEW WEST RESEARCH
2000
EXPLODING THE COWBOY MYTH

“The City Slicker’s Guide to Welfare Ranching in Colorado” documents how subsidized ranching robs taxpayers, degrades the environment, and creates urban sprawl in the state of Colorado. Like past reports we’ve published on welfare ranching in New Mexico and Arizona, this report looks behind the cowboy myth and exposes what the ranching industry is really all about.

It asks: Why should a handful of ranchers get to control millions of acres of public lands in Colorado? Why should struggling urban families pay more property taxes on their small homes than rich ranchers pay on their big spreads? Why should Colorado’s native ecosystems and species be sacrificed on the altar of the sacred cow? And what is so romantic about a man who wants you to pay him to brutalize animals?

Colorado’s ranchers are not icons of the Old West. They are shrewd businessmen who have enriched themselves by wrapping themselves in cowboy mythology. Ranchers represent a tiny fraction of one percent of the population of Colorado, yet they wield inordinate influence at all levels of government. They claim that ranching benefits wildlife, but demand the poisoning of prairie dogs and the aerial gunning of coyotes. They bellyache about “losing agricultural land” but join with developers to fight growth-control initiatives. They whine about government regulation, but enjoy all kinds of government subsidies that the rest of us aren’t privy to.

For decades, ranchers have dominated the political and geographic landscape of Colorado. They have been revered, coddled, and protected by legislators, bankers, and the media. Nevertheless, their public image is changing and their stranglehold on the state is loosening. Today, Coloradans are beginning to question rancher dominance and more and more are choosing twenty-first century realities over Old West fantasies.

THE BIG PICTURE

Colorado’s ranching industry is part of the global animal flesh trade. The worldwide number of animals killed for food in 1999 was 44.2 billion, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. USDA statistics show that over 9 billion animals will be raised and killed for food in the U.S, in 2000. This number includes 41.6 million cattle and calves, 111.7 million pigs, 5.4 million sheep, 312 million turkeys, 8,947 million broilers, 447 million laying hens and 25.6 million ducks.

That total includes nearly one billion farm animals who die from mistreatment before ever reaching the slaughterhouse, but not the millions of other animals killed to feed farm animals or the millions of birds and mammals poisoned, trapped, and shot by federal predator control agents.

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, the production of meat-the raising and killing of animals for human consumption-is the second most environmentally destructive activity on earth caused by humans. It is second in impact only to our petroleum-based transportation system. Of all foods produced and consumed, meat and poultry have the biggest impact on water pollution, water use, and land use. In terms of environmental impact, beef cattle pose the most serious problems, with chickens coming in second, and pigs third, says the Union of Concerned Scientists.
About 800 million acres, or 40 percent of all U.S. land area, is used for grazing livestock. About 60 million acres is used to grow grain for feeding livestock. Sixty-three percent of all Colorado farmland, or 21.3 million acres, is used as pastureland for livestock.

Livestock in Colorado consume 162 million gallons per day of ground water and surface water, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. In the Upper Colorado River basin states of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico, 90% of all water used is spread on land irrigated for crops, leaving 10% for urban and other uses. Of the 1.6 million acres irrigated in the upper basin, feed for livestock is raised on 88% of the irrigated land.

Eighteen percent of total consumptive water in the U.S. use goes to grow feed for livestock. Animal wastes are responsible for about 16% of water quality problems related to household consumption. Meat and poultry production generates two billion tons of wet manure each year, over ten times the amount of municipal solid waste generated each year in the U.S.

Meat eating is deadly, not just for the planet and the animals who are sacrificed, but for humans as well. Scientific and medical studies have repeatedly and irrefutably shown that meat eating is directly linked to degenerative illnesses, cardiovascular disease, and many cancers in humans. In addition, roughly 70% of all food poisoning cases are attributable to meat consumption. All of this sickness and death costs us billions of dollars a year for doctors, hospitals, increased insurance rates, and lost productivity.

Animal suffering caused by the meat industry is incalculable and so horrific that most of us would rather not even think about it. Animals used in this industry are treated like objects, not like sentient beings. Their lives are short and their deaths are brutal.

Cattle and sheep on the open range suffer just as factory farm animals do. All too many die from starvation, dehydration, and exposure to the elements. When livestock die due to drought, ranchers get extra subsidies. When livestock drown in floods, ranchers get extra subsidies. When livestock die in blizzards, ranchers get extra subsidies. Ranchers are rewarded for their negligence and animal abuse.

SACRED COWS AT THE PUBLIC TROUGH

Numerous books have documented the environmental, economic, and social impacts of welfare ranching in the West. Two of the classics are “Sacred Cows at the Public Trough,” by Denzel and Nancy Ferguson (1983) and “Waste of the West,” by Lynn Jacobs (1991). One of the most impressive newspaper reports on the subject to date is “Cash Cows: The Giveaway of the West,” published in the San Jose Mercury News in November 1999. According to the “Cash Cows” report:

- In the 11 western states, there are currently about 26,300 livestock operators leasing 254 million acres of federal public land from the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to graze 3.5 million cattle and sheep.
- These ranchers are directly subsidized to the tune of $100 million in below-cost grazing fees, plus millions more for programs such as predator control, fencing, and water programs.
• Despite all the subsidies and all the millions of acres of land sacrificed for ranching, only 3 percent of the nation’s beef supply comes from western public lands.

• The top 10 percent of BLM grazing permit holders control 65 percent of all livestock grazed on BLM land. The bottom 50 percent of BLM grazing permit holders control just 7 percent of all livestock grazed on BLM land.

• The top 10 percent of Forest Service grazing permit holders control 49 percent of all livestock grazed on our national forests. The bottom 50 percent of Forest Service grazing permit holders control just 3 percent of the livestock grazed on national forests.

• In 1998, the Forest Service and the BLM lost more than twice as much money on grazing programs as they spent to restore endangered species. Together, the agencies spent $116 million to prop up grazing on public lands, and took in just $22 million in fees, a loss of $94 million, and that just covers direct subsidies.

• The fee ranchers pay to graze livestock on federal lands is lower today than at any time since 1975: only $1.35 per cow (or per five sheep) per month. Because so much land is needed to provide the forage for these animals, the actual fee is just pennies per acre. Half of the grazing fee paid by ranchers is returned to them to pay for fences, water tanks, and other equipment.

COLORADO’S LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY

“Years ago there were lots of Colorado sheepmen,” said sheep rancher Nick Theos in a 1999 interview with the Denver Post. “Today, we can practically hold our meetings in a phone booth.”

The Colorado Department of Agriculture reports that in 1997 there were 1,200 sheep operations, 9,500 beef cattle operations, 900 milk cow operations, and 174 cattle feedlots. The beef industry exaggerates a bit and claims there are 10,000 “beef producers” in Colorado.

The beef industry claims there are 15,049 “beef businesses” in Colorado, representing less than one percent (0.73) of beef businesses nationwide. According to industry statistics, Colorado has fewer beef businesses than do its neighboring states of New Mexico, Utah, Nebraska, Kansas, or Oklahoma, but more than Wyoming.

The sheep industry also exaggerates its numbers. The American Sheep Industry Association website says Colorado has 1,500 sheep operations and the website of the Colorado Wool Growers Association lists 1,300 sheep and wool operations in the state.

The number of ranchers in Colorado is miniscule when compared to numbers of employees in other businesses. Compare the 9,500 beef cattle operators and 1,200 sheep operators to the number of Colorado employees in these private companies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lockheed Martin</td>
<td>360,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US West/QWest</td>
<td>16,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centura Health Systems</td>
<td>13,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Soopers</td>
<td>13,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safeway, Inc.</td>
<td>10,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Airlines</td>
<td>8,282</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucent Technologies</td>
<td>6,382</td>
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<tr>
<td>Columbia HealthOne</td>
<td>9,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coors Brewing Co.</td>
<td>4,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Parcel Service</td>
<td>4,500</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Why don’t we hear the media drone on about the need to preserve the “way of life” of Lockheed Martin engineers or United Airlines flight attendants? And what about the need to protect the “customs and culture” of the state’s 45,000 registered nurses? The point is, you shouldn’t have to wear a cowboy hat and pointy-toed boots to get sympathy in the media or respect in the Statehouse.

COLORADO’S PUBLIC LANDS RANCHERS

One-third of Colorado, about 24 million acres, is federally owned public land and most of it is leased to ranchers at bargain-basement rates for livestock grazing. The U.S. Interior Department’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages 8.4 million surface acres of land in Colorado and leases 92 percent of it (7.7 million acres) to 1,473 grazing permittees. These livestock operators control a total of 1,700 permits covering 2,450 allotments. The ten biggest BLM permittees in Colorado control one-third of all permitted AUMs. They are:

Three Springs Ranch Corp. 47,692 AUMs
Raftopoulos Ranches 23,882 AUMs
Vermillion Ranch LTD Partnership 13,750 AUMs
Nottingham Land & Livestock Co. 12,023 AUMs
Twin Buttes Ranch Co. 11,143 AUMs
David H. & Sharon S. Farny 9,933 AUMs
Ival & Ed Young, Inc. 9,928 AUMs
Weimer Ranches/Mesa Creek 7,919 AUMs
Visintainer Sheep Co. 7,654 AUMs
Cripple Cowboy Cow Outfit 7,253 AUMs

Three Springs Ranch Corp. of Dinosaur, Colorado, is the sixth largest BLM permittee in the nation. It is run by executives of Polchow & Foster, a New Orleans trust management firm that handles client assets. Marianna Raftopoulos of the Raftopoulos ranching family is a Moffat County Commissioner and as a member of the Colorado Wildlife Commission, is known as an anti-wildlife extremist. Another BLM permittee is millionaire celebrity Ricky Shroeder, who plays cowboy at taxpayer expense on the Mesa Mood Ranch near Glade Park.

There are 863 permittees leasing grazing allotments on Colorado lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, with some holding more than one grazing permit. Region 2 Forest Service officials report there are 1,045 active Forest Service grazing allotments covering 9,199,460 acres in Colorado, and 154 vacant allotments covering 1,842,605 acres. Seventy-nine percent of all Forest Service lands are designated as livestock grazing lands in Colorado.

According to Cathy Carlson of the National Wildlife Federation, the largest Forest Service permittees in Colorado, based on animal months, are:

Crow Valley Livestock Co-op 19,931 cow animal months
Pawnee Grazing Association 17,684 cow animal months
James Craig Bair Ranch Co. 5,440 sheep animal months
LaGrand Bair Ranch Co.  5,227 sheep animal months
Harold Cherry        4,575 sheep animal months
Lee and Joe Sperry   4,373 sheep animal months
Elmer and Warren Roberts 4280 sheep animal months
Crown G-T Ranches   3,880 sheep animal months
C.B. Montcrief       3,821 cattle animal months
Samuel and Cheri Robinson 3,593 sheep animal months

LIVESTOCK GRAZING ON STATE TRUST LAND

The State Land Board manages 3 million acres of land in Colorado, the majority of which is leased to ranchers and farmers. Income from the land goes to eight trusts, the largest of which helps to fund public schools.

Approximately 89% (2,369,756 acres) of Colorado’s trust land is leased for grazing livestock. This grazing occurs under 2,167 different grazing leases, with some livestock operators holding more than one lease. The State Land Board does not keep data concerning how many leases are for cattle vs. sheep or other livestock.

According to the board’s Field Operations Manager, Susan McCannon, “predator control on state trust lands is not under our jurisdiction, therefore, it is allowed/disallowed in accordance with regulations that apply to private land.” Actually, the State Land Board does have the authority to regulate or prohibit predator control on land it oversees, just as any other state does. New Mexico State Land Commissioner Jim Baca, for example, kicked federal wildlife killers off all state trust land in New Mexico before he left office to head the federal BLM.

The largest contiguous block of state trust land is located about 30 miles south of Colorado Springs. This 86,000-acre parcel of land, known as the Chico Basin Ranch, is considered by ecologists to be one of the largest remaining intact shortgrass prairie/sandsage ecosystems in the nation. In 1999, the state leased the land for 25 years to a private beef business that will graze cattle and indoctrinate bussed-in school children about the glories of cattle ranching at its “Ranch Heritage Nature Center.”

Grazing fees charged by the State Land Board are higher than those charged on federal public lands, but still 35% lower than fees charged for private grazing land. Based on AUMs (animal unit months), these subsidized fees vary according to region of the state as follows: southwest: $6.86; northwest: $7.31; east central: $8.58; northeast: $9.18; and southeast: $8.29.

During the last fiscal year, livestock grazing generated $5.1 million for the state trust or about 25% of total trust land revenues, not a very good return considering that 89% of all state trust lands are grazed. The Land Board could generate more revenue for public schools and better protect the ecological value of the land if it opened up these “grazing lands” to competitive bidding for non-ranching, non-extractive conservation purposes. After all, the Land Board’s mission is to help fund schools and protect the land, not to subsidize ranchers.
RANCHERS have been waging a genocidal war on Colorado’s native wildlife since the turn of the century. Their war against wildlife has been so vicious and violent that some refer to it as “rancho-terrorism.”

Taxpayers have been forced to finance the slaughter of wildlife through USDA’s “Wildlife Services” program, a $54 million per year boondoggle formerly known as Animal Damage Control. The name was changed in 1996, to give the killing program a “more positive public image.” Using poisons, traps, snares, and guns, these federal assassins kill black bears, beavers, bobcats, coyotes, mountain lions, and other species targeted by the ranching industry. In FY 1997, federal agents shot 2,091 coyotes from aircraft and killed another 997 coyotes on the ground with poisons, traps, and bullets. The killing program employs 17 people and costs over one million dollars, mostly taxpayer dollars, in Colorado alone.

Copies of the agency’s annual report can be obtained by writing to the Colorado Wildlife Services office at 12345 West Alameda Parkway, Suite 210, Lakewood, CO 80228. Their phone number is 303-969-5775. The director, Craig Coolahan, and his staff, do their best to shroud their killing program under a veil of secrecy, but records are available through the Freedom of Information Act. The regional headquarters of Wildlife Services is also located in Colorado. It is in the same building, but in Suite 204. The Western Regional Director may be contacted at 303-969-6565.

The research arm of Wildlife Services, the National Wildlife Research Center, is also located in Colorado. Its address is 1201 Oakridge Drive, Fort Collins CO, 80525, and its main phone number is 970-223-1588. The NWRC is funded by taxpayers to the tune of $10 million. In the name of science, NWRC tortures animals in bizarre experiments as it attempts to develop and test ever-more sinister killing devices and behavior modification methods.

The federal predator control program, so exalted by ranchers, has a long, sordid history of operating illegally and negligently. An example of the agency’s lawlessness and negligence was seen in Colorado on March 3, 1999. That was the day Paul Wright took a walk on his rural Colorado property with his three-year-old daughter, Meaghan, and Bob, a boxer-golden retriever mix. Unbeknownst to the Wright family, federal agents had recently planted deadly M-44 sodium cyanide poison devices on the property, without their consent. Bob the dog found one of the M-44’s, was poisoned, and died a horrible death in front of those who loved him.

An investigation into the incident revealed that federal Wildlife Services agent Gary Hanson trespassed onto the Wright’s property and broke several federal laws when he illegally placed the devices there. Hanson apologized and offered to buy the Wrights a new dog, as if Bob was just another thing that could be replaced. There will be no jail time for Hanson or anyone else responsible for this crime, but hopefully the Wright’s civil suit against the government will be successful.

For the last three years, fiscally responsible members of Congress have tried to pass an amendment to the agriculture appropriations bill to cut federal funding for the “Wildlife Services” killing program, but the amendment has always lost, due to heavy lobbying by the ranching industry. The two Colorado congressmen who voted against the
amendment were Rep. McInnis and Rep. Schaffer, both stalwart supporters of ranching industry subsidies.

In addition to the legal wildlife killing being conducted in Colorado, ranchers also sometimes use illegal methods. A 1991 undercover sting operation by U.S. Fish and Wildlife law enforcement agents revealed that endangered bald eagles were being illegally poisoned on sheep ranches in northwestern Colorado. Ranchers’ persecution of wildlife continues at a fever-pitch even though most livestock losses are due to starvation, dehydration, exposure to the elements, disease, injury, and negligence—not predators.

The alternative to scapegoating wildlife for livestock losses is rancher responsibility and better animal husbandry. The use of guard dogs, for example, has been proven to be an effective solution to alleged predator problems. A Colorado State University report on 180 producers using guard dogs showed they on average lost just 0.4 percent of their ewes and 1.2 percent of their lambs to coyotes. Eighty-five percent of the producers rated their dogs’ overall predator control performance as excellent or good, 12 percent as fair, and 3 percent as poor.

Ranchers should not leave domestic, defenseless sheep and cattle out on the range and expect no losses. In fact, to do so should be considered cruelty to animals.

RANCHERS VS. ENDANGERED SPECIES

Ranchers and their agents wiped out Colorado’s grizzly bears, gray wolves, and bison long ago to make room for livestock. Today, numerous other native species are on the brink of extinction, due to overgrazing and persecution by ranchers. The Colorado Cattlemen’s Association and other ranching industry groups are vocal opponents of wilderness designations and the Endangered Species Act. They are currently fighting protections for the state’s last remaining lynx, wolverines, and black-tailed prairie dogs.

Black-tailed prairie dogs once occupied an estimated 7 million acres in Colorado, but today 99 percent of their population is gone. Ranchers began poisoning them at the turn of the twentieth century and today still consider them to be “destructive rodent pests.” In 1999, the ranching industry succeeded in getting a bill passed into state law that prohibits the translocation of prairie dogs and other wildlife species between counties without the consent of the county’s commissions.

Under Colorado law, prairie dogs are considered “small game” and may be shot in unlimited numbers by anyone holding a hunting license. On private land, no hunting license is needed. Prairie dogs are also targeted by shooters in “contest hunts.”

Wildlife advocates have been pushing to have the black-tailed prairie dog listed as a federally threatened species, but that effort has been vigorously fought by ranchers. To avoid the listing, the Colorado Wildlife Commission recently voted to prohibit the sport killing of black tailed prairie dogs in eastern Colorado, effective September 1, 2001. The regulation is meaningless because it exempts ranchers (all they have to do is claim the prairie dogs are causing damage to their property) and does not stop the poisoning of prairie dogs. Also, the regulation does not apply to the sport killing of Gunnison’s, Richardson’s or white-tailed prairie dogs.

In a 2/4/2000 press release, the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association warned: “the issue is not about the prairie dog, this is an attempt to stop growth in Colorado and other states.” Ironically, the cattlemen also threatened in that press release that “the wide-open
spaces many cattle ranches reside on may be sold as a result of the listing, and the land will likely be sub-divided, resulting in more development.”

**ECONOMIC REALITIES**

Colorado is a fast-growing state with 4.1 million residents at last count. Of the state’s nearly 3 million jobs, only 3.6 percent are held by people in farm and farm related jobs, such as production, farm inputs, processing, and marketing. Livestock products--meat, dairy, poultry and eggs--make up 66 percent of all cash receipts for agricultural commodities produced in Colorado, but about half of that amount comes from highly-subsidized cattle and calf businesses. If it weren’t for taxpayer subsidies, the beef industry in Colorado would be no more important than worm farming. Colorado farmers and ranchers received $167 million in government payments in 1995, and ranked 16th among states in government payments.

Dr. Thomas Powers of the University of Montana’s Department of Economics has analyzed the economic importance of livestock grazing on federal public lands and found its contribution to be virtually non-existent in Colorado as well as in other western states. According to Dr. Powers, only 0.06 percent of total employment in the eleven western states is due to livestock grazing on public lands.

A 1989 survey of Colorado county economies by USDA’s Economic Research Service found that in only 17 of 63 counties in the state could be defined as “farming dependent.” In those 17 counties, farming contributed a weighted annual average of 20 percent or more of total labor and proprietor income over the 3 years from 1987 to 1989.

Counties identified by USDA as “farming-dependent” included Baca, Cheyenne, Conejos, Costilla, Crowley, Dolores, Elbert, Jackson, Kiowa, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Phillips, Prowers, Saguache, Sedgwick, Washington, and Yuma. Agricultural dependence has not helped the overall economies of these rural counties. According to 1995 census data, all except Elbert County had lower than average median household incomes than for Colorado as a whole.

Gunnison County is not economically dependent on ranching yet the county’s website proclaims that agriculture is “our heritage and a key to our future” and that “the ranchers here were truly the first environmentalists.” The website goes on to warn non-ranchers in the most arrogant way not to interfere with or complain about ranching traditions. Here are a few classic lines:

“Colorado has an open range law. This means if you do not want cattle, sheep, or other livestock on your property, it is your responsibility to fence them out, and not the rancher’s to keep the livestock off your property. Agriculture is a major economic contributor to Gunnison County. If you choose to live among and next to ranching operations, you may be affected by them; you have the opportunity to help keep the ranching operation viable by learning how you can be a good neighbor to this important part of our community....

“If you’re traveling on dirt and graveled roads adjacent to ranch lands, drive slowly and with care: An excess of dust can affect both the health of the cattle and the quality of hay in the fields. Occasionally cattle may get out on the road; avoiding hitting an animal is healthy for both you and the animal.
Ranchers occasionally burn their ditches to keep them clean of debris, weeds, and other obstructions. This burning may bother you momentarily, but it is not a regular occurrence. Chemicals are one tool which may be used to control weeds and remove vegetation that impedes the flow of irrigation ditches.

Livestock may cause odors and noise, which are objectionable to some people. If you find them annoying, you may want to find a parcel in another area of the county.

PROPERTY TAX PERKS

Landowners who run livestock on their private lands in Colorado get an enormous property tax subsidy. These low property taxes allow landowners to cheaply control large parcels of private property until the time is ripe for development.

In Denver County, you can get a tax break for grazing cattle on your land, but not for horse boarding operations, mushroom farms, greenhouses, or bee farms, according to the County Assessor’s Office. In El Paso County, “the approximate amount of tax on grazing land can vary, but is normally about 50 cents per acre,” The assessor’s office says. The Jefferson County Assessor’s Office reports that a rancher would pay about $40 a year in property taxes on 40 acres of land used for cattle grazing. In Arapahoe County, 150,816 acres of land were classified as “grazing land” and valued at $798,270.00 in 1999.

Information on property taxes paid by Colorado ranchers is open to the public and can be found at County Assessors’ offices. Citizens who want to investigate property tax subsidies in their local county might ask (in writing) who the biggest landowners in the county are and then look at how their land is classified and how much property tax is paid on it. Another way to research is to ask how many parcels of land are designated as grazing land and then find out who owns those properties. In many cases, the owners will be land speculators and corporations who use “rent-a-cow” schemes to keep their taxes low. This system of taxation is unfair to other property owners and cheats Colorado public schools and local governments out of millions of dollars every year.

LIVESTOCK DANGERS ON THE ROAD

Colorado is an “open range” state, so if you crash into a cow on the road, it’s your fault, not the rancher’s. The Colorado State Patrol reports there were 11,550 crashes involving injuries or fatalities in 1999 and that 3,636 (or 10.4%) of them were “animal caused.” The Patrol does not keep statistics that specify whether the animal involved was livestock or wildlife, but in the neighboring “open range” state of New Mexico, livestock on roadways are to blame in about 40 percent of animal-caused accidents. Perhaps if the Colorado State Patrol did track the numbers of accidents, injuries, and fatalities caused by vehicle collisions with livestock, and reported them to the public, open range laws would change.

Sometimes cattle “accidentally” get on to public roads, despite fencing. Such was the case on the foggy morning of October 10, 2000, when 218 steers broke through a fence and attempted to liberate themselves from John and Joan Schlagel’s farm. The steers stampeded down Colorado Highway 119, the main drag between Longmont and Boulder just as morning rush hour set in. Between 4:44 a.m. and 7:14 a.m., several
vehicles collided with the animals, causing heavy damage to both cars and steers. The Colorado State Patrol told the Boulder newspaper that “no one appears to be at fault” for the accidents.

WELFARE RANCHING LEADS TO URBAN SPRAWL

Colorado ranchers, like other ranchers in the West, frequently use scare tactics to stave off ranching reform and reductions in their subsidies. One of their favorite scare tactics is the “cows vs. condos” threat: “Give us what we want or we’ll sell our ranches to developers!” This threat has been especially effective in Colorado, where uncontrolled growth is the public’s number one concern.

The reality, however, is that the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, Colorado Farm Bureau, Colorado Livestock Association, and Colorado’s Agriculture Commission have all fiercely fought citizen and legislative efforts to control growth and curb urban sprawl. Most recently, ranchers joined with developers in the 2000 election to defeat Colorado’s Amendment 24, a growth-control initiative endorsed by planners, environmentalists, and the League of Women Voters.

According to Elise Jones of the Colorado Environmental Coalition, the Amendment 24 Responsible Growth Initiative proposed a bottom-up, local control approach requiring Colorado’s larger cities and counties to draw maps of where they want new development to occur. The maps were then to be submitted to local voters for approval. The new growth areas were to be limited to where local governments could afford to provide roads and sewers in a 10-year period. Localities were required to tell voters how new development would be paid for, and what its impacts would be on things like schools, traffic, affordable housing and open space.

Ranchers said they opposed Amendment 24 for two reasons: they felt it placed limits on their private property rights to develop their land when and as they see fit, and they didn’t want any new barriers to stop the construction of industrial-scale factory farms and feed lots known as concentrated animal feeding operations. Ranchers profit immensely when they sell their land to developers because their cost of holding on to grazing land, until it’s ripe for development, is so small, thanks to ridiculously low property taxes.

The rancher-developer coalition poured more than $6 million into false and misleading advertising to defeat Amendment 24. According to Denver Post columnist Joanne Ditmer, ads denouncing Amendment 24 claimed that “no more schools would be built, so classrooms would be jammed; land prices would rise so high that affordable housing would be eliminated, farmers and ranchers would lose their land and no longer be able to determine its fate.” The smear campaign caused the approval rate for Amendment 24 to drop in polls from 72 percent to 30 percent in a few short months.

Leading the rancher-developer coalition was Chris Paulson, a lawyer and former Republican legislator who led a 1992 battle against a proposed tax increase for schools and a 1994 battle to defeat campaign finance limits proposed by Colorado Common Cause and the League of Women Voters.

Between 1987 and 1997 in Colorado, 1.3 million agricultural acres were converted to other uses – an average of 130,000 acres a year, according to Agriculture Department data. It is estimated that about one-third of all private ranchland in Colorado
is up for sale. Colorado newspaper headlines bemoan the loss of agricultural land and claim that development is “squeezing out ranchers.” but the truth is ranchers are willing sellers making handsome profits, not helpless victims being forced off the land. Colorado farmers and ranchers have over $17 billion in real estate assets. Those who don’t want their private lands developed can sell or donate their development rights to land trusts or other conservancy organizations and reap huge tax benefits in the process.

The “cows vs. condos” lie is being perpetuated to maintain welfare ranching, not to protect open space. Grazing activist George Wuerthner explodes the myth with these compelling arguments:

1. **Condos and sprawl, as bad as they are, aren’t worse than the impacts of livestock production in the West when you consider the tremendous geographical scale of land affected and the full ecological costs of livestock production.**

   *Livestock production is the number one source of non-point water pollution in the West. This has degraded many high quality watersheds, affecting aquatic ecosystems, and adding immensely to the cost of water purification for domestic use.*

   *Livestock are one of the major factors in the spread of exotic weeds. The soil disturbance caused by hooves and trampling has created ideal colonization habitat for weeds. The continued grazing of desirable native plant species weakens their ability to compete with exotics for water, space and food. Cattle also often assist in the spread of weeds by carrying seeds in their fur or excreting them with their manure.*

   *Livestock consumption of grass and other fine fuels has altered natural fire regimes and by eliminating or weakening grass plants, has given trees and shrubs a competitive advantage that has led to overstocked forests and shrub invasion of former grasslands.*

   *Livestock are the number cause of riparian degradation in the West. Riparian areas are the thin green lines of water-dependent vegetation found along waterways. Because they are highly productive areas, with shade, water, and cover, some 70-80% of the West's wildlife depends upon riparian zones for part or all of their basic needs. The decline in riparian habitat quality has severely impacted many of the West's wildlife species.*

   *Livestock directly compete with native species for forage. Every blade of grass going into a cow is that much less available for native species from grasshoppers to grizzlies. But the effects can be less obvious than this. For instance, a cow directly consumes about twice the forage as an elk. Since the majority of forage in the West, even on public lands, is allotted to cows, this significantly reduces the amount of elk, deer, and other big game biomass. This has substantially reduced the carrying capacity of all our lands for native predators and scavengers. Fewer elk, for instance, means less food for grizzlies and wolves. It means less carrion for ravens and coyotes.*

   *Livestock also affect wildlife through social displacement. Elk, for instance, will avoid area actively being grazed by cows. This could preclude use of the best habitat by these native species—all to benefit an exotic species.*

   *Livestock are also one of the major vectors for diseases transmitted to native wildlife. From mad cow disease that causes deer and elk brains to turn to mush to pink eye that causes bighorns to go blind, the transmission of disease from domestic animals*
to wild animals often has disastrous consequences.

Because livestock are vulnerable to predators, ranchers have essentially eliminated predators from the West. They are the major reason why grizzlies and wolves are restricted to a few small relict populations.

Pest control in the name of the livestock industry has devastated prairie dogs and their associated wildlife species. To appease the livestock industry, government agencies regularly spray to kill grasshoppers directly reducing the food available for many species from gulls to ground squirrels—all of whom prey upon grasshoppers. Livestock production is the number one consumer of water in the West. Even in California with its huge urban population, more than 80% of the water used in the state is consumed by agriculture, with the largest percentage of agricultural water use going for livestock production. In less populous states, the figure is even more skewed. In arid Nevada, 90% of the water consumed in the state goes to agriculture. In Montana the figure is 97% of the state's water consumption going to agriculture. The dewatering of rivers, combined with dams constructed for irrigation water storage, has severely impacted and fragmented the West's aquatic ecosystems. This has lead to the near extinction of numerous species from snails to trout.

Bear in mind that these ecological impacts are occurring on hundreds of millions of acres of both public and private rangelands in the West. The amount of land affected by urbanization pales by comparison.

Despite all of the above impacts, perhaps the least obvious, yet one of the most significant negative effects of livestock production, is the linkage between farming and livestock. The vast majority of our agricultural lands are not used to grow foods consumed directly by humans, but to grow food to support livestock, in particular cattle. The hundreds of millions of acres in the Midwest devoted to the production of feeder corn, soybeans and other crops ultimately consumed by cattle is responsible for serious soil erosion, water pollution and the virtual loss of the entire tall and mid-grass prairie ecosystems.

Livestock production affects 65% of the total U.S. land area excluding Alaska. By comparison, all the vegetables grown in the nation occupies 0.15% of the US coterminous land base. Though admittedly people eat more than vegetables, this still doesn’t negate the fact that the magnitude of land devoted to the production of meat is astounding. If a fraction of this farmland were abandoned and re-wilded, it would add immensely to the effort to preserve biodiversity across the nation and would also provide dyed-in-the-wool meat eaters more game to hunt and consume.

By comparison the amount of land affected by sprawl and development, while significant, is minuscule by comparison. For instance, less than 5% of California, the most heavily populated state in the West is affected by urbanization, including all highways, malls, subdivisions, and factories. Furthermore most of that human population is concentrated in a few large urban centers like San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento.

Agriculture is far more pervasive and affects by a conservative estimate some 70% of the state if you count both farmed lands, along with rangelands and pasture grazed by cattle.

Other less populous western states are even more skewed. Urbanization affects less than 0.21% of Nevada, while practically the rest of the entire state is devoted to livestock
production. In Montana, according to recent figures compiled by the Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, some 95% of the state has less than 4 people per square mile, qualifying it as "frontier" according to the old 1890 census bureau standards. Yet despite the fact that most of the state is essentially uninhabited, numerous native species are imperiled or significantly reduced in numbers primarily because of agriculture—in particular livestock production. These species include bison, wolf, grizzly bear, swift fox, blackfooted ferret, Columbia sharptail grouse, sage grouse, and a host of other species. What is particularly disturbing about the above litany of species is that all were once widespread and abundant in Montana. They are not animals having specialized habitat requirements.

There is no doubt that where subdivisions occur, the effects upon native plant and animal communities are serious, and generally negative. But the amount of land directly affected by sprawl and development is so small, the overall consequences for most western states is inconsequential. Indeed, if farming, ranching, and logging were all eliminated from the West, there would likely be few, if any endangered species outside of California.

Because the impacts of livestock production are so pervasive, and affect such a large percentage of the land and its native plant and animal communities, it is easily the single most detrimental human activity. These impacts are in effect a huge subsidy to the industry. For if the livestock industry were to produce meat in a manner that didn't require dewatering rivers, killing off the majority of predators, trampling the West's riparian areas, and eliminated most of the other impacts enumerated above, the cost of a pound of beef, particularly western beef would be astronomically high and few if any Americans could or would buy it. And this cost doesn't even begin to address the huge health associated costs of meat consumption including heart disease, colon cancer, high blood pressure, obesity, and many other health risks and costs associated with the heavy meat diet of Americans.

2. Livestock production in the West is not economically viable, due to the rising price of land, the scarcity of water, changing dietary habits, and growing global competition.

Now we go to the second issue. Even if one were inclined to disagree with my conclusion that livestock production is an ecological disaster for the country's native species and ecosystems, that doesn't mean that ranching can preserve open space and protect ecosystem values. The problem is complex, but ranching can't and doesn't prevent subdivisions. If that were true there would not be any sprawl in the West at all. Subdivisions are driven by demand, not the availability of land. There are literally tens of millions of acres of land for sale in North Dakota and none is under threat of subdivision. The reason? No one wants to live in North Dakota except the people already there. There is no demand.

Low demand has several effects. First, it keeps land prices low. Low land price means that another rancher or farmer can afford to purchase the land of his or her neighbor and pay off the mortgage by running cows on it.

When land prices rise—as they have done in some of the more scenic parts of the West—it simply makes it impossible to ranch it profitably. As a consequence only wealthy
sport ranchers can afford to purchase a ranch or the land is subdivided into smaller, more affordable parcels. High land prices also affect the ability of ranchers to pass on a ranch to the next generation. For example, an old friend of mine grew up on a ranch. Her Dad decided to retire and wanted to pass on the ranch to his son. But due to the rising price of land, the old ranch was worth millions of dollars. The father couldn’t see how he could give an asset worth several million to one son, and exclude all the other siblings from any wealth. And the son interested in keeping the ranch couldn't afford to borrow the money to pay off his sisters and brothers and make enough money running cows to repay the bank. In the end, the father subdivided the ranch so he could split the profits with all the children.

A growing problem for the livestock industry is simply the higher costs of doing business. For generations ranchers have externalized many of their operational costs—primarily to the environment and often to the taxpayer who have subsidized ranching interests. Whether we are talking about subsidized grazing fees on public lands, subsidized irrigation projects used to grow hay and other livestock feed, special programs like the emergency livestock feed program or the numerous environmental costs like water pollution that others suffer as a consequence of livestock production, all of these subsidies lower the production cost to the individual rancher.

Increasingly, ranchers are being asked to pay these full costs, and given the marginal nature of most western livestock operations, this will only hasten the demise of the western livestock industry. Relying on ranching to preserve open space also assumes that there will be a similar demand for western beef in future years. Yet there is every indication that food preferences are changing, and the demand for beef is in decline. Plus beef production is increasingly shifting to areas where the landscape is more favorable for cattle growing, including the South and Midwest as well as overseas areas. All of these changes will increasingly stress the western livestock producer, making it even more likely that he or she will sell the ranch off to the highest bidder. Those who argue that ranching can preserve the West's open spaces seldom consider these global and cultural changes.

The geographical occurrence of subdivisions is also a factor. Most subdivisions occur in or near existing urban areas and resort communities like Jackson or Vail. This is because people need jobs. They demand access to hospitals, schools, cultural amenities and other urban pleasures. As a consequence most of the West's ranchland isn't under threat of subdivision. When land outside of the urban influence comes up for sale, developers do not buy it. Other ranchers or wealthy individuals who don't need to subdivide buy it and generally keep the land intact in larger parcels.

3. Even if cows were better than condos, there are more proven, cost-effective ways to preserve open space without having to subject the land to cattle and their multiple impacts.

The third problem is the false dichotomy of condos or cows. In fact, this need not be the only choice. There are a whole toolbox of time-tested mechanisms for preserving open space that don't require that we pulverize that open space with cattle hooves. This includes zoning and planning. In Oregon, for instance, all development must occur within urban growth boundaries. This automatically protects open space outside of the urban
limits. There are fee mechanisms. Lands deemed especially important for wildlife, scenic or recreational values can be purchased using the Land and Water Conservation Fund or development rights can be purchased. In either case, the protection against sprawl and subdivisions is far more secure if the land or its development rights are bought than leaving protection to the vagary of ranchers. Remember, since development is not a real threat over most of the West, we don't have to buy all of the private ranch land to afford reasonable protection against condos or subdivisions.

Those who suggest that we don't have the money to buy up most of the West forget that we currently bestow billions of dollars upon the agricultural community in subsidies and supports. Just taking a fraction of this money and spending it on the outright purchase of land would protect most of the vulnerable land in the West permanently.

The condos vs cow myth needs debunking. It's a false cause and effect. Cattle ranches don't prevent subdivisions, nor do we need to tolerate, much less continue to subsidize western cattle interests to preserve open space.

If open space is important, let's protect it by buying it or the development rights, not by trampling it, and pounding it under the hooves of the cow and the cowboy myth.

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

The time has come to end livestock grazing on federal public lands. Livestock grazing on wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, and in riparian areas should be immediately halted. When other current federal grazing leases should be allowed to expire. Ranchers who want to immediately sell out should be given the opportunity to do so. In the meantime, the lease conditions should be strictly enforced.

All Colorado state trust land grazing leases should be opened to competitive bidding so that non-ranching entities can bid on the land now leased to ranchers for open space and conservation purposes. Remaining trust land ranchers should pay fees comparable to private land grazing fees, in order to generate more money for Colorado’s public schools. The State Land Board must put the interests of public schools and other beneficiaries above ranching interests.

All taxpayer-funded poisoning, trapping, shooting, and aerial gunning of wildlife on federal public lands and state trust lands should be immediately halted. The “Wildlife Services” program should be defunded and abolished. Colorado should be the site of a new National Wildlife Holocaust Museum, where the true story of the government’s genocidal war on wildlife can be told.

The State Agriculture Department should stop promoting the beef industry and other unhealthy, environmentally destructive, water-wasting, and inhumane animal agriculture industries. Instead it should focus its attention on small organic farmers who are producing the foods America needs as it moves to a more healthy organic plant-based diet. The government’s practice of pushing unhealthy meat products onto school children and low-income people must end.

Coloradans interested in preserving open space and controlling growth should join forces with organizations working to restore native ecosystems and remove livestock from public land. Landowners should be encouraged to preserve their land for wildlife, open space, and sustainable development – not for livestock. Buying into the “cows vs.
condos” myth only gives the rancher-developer coalition more power to block growth control initiatives in the future.

Politically, we must support campaign finance reform efforts and get big money out of politics. We must vote ranchers and their sympathizers out of office and if necessary, run for public office ourselves at the local and state level to focus attention on welfare ranching abuses.

Finally, we must tear down the “Bovine Curtain” that is keeping the truth about welfare ranching from the public. We must work with investigative and alternative journalists to help get the word out about the ranching industry’s brutality to animals, tax scams, intimidation tactics, and environmental abuses.

Working together, working strategically, we will win this battle and end the scourge of welfare ranching in Colorado and the West.

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Colorado Environmental Coalition (www.ourcolorado.org)
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