

Grazing buyout a win-win

The recent successful effort by the National Wildlife Federation to buy out most of the grazing rights from a rancher operating east of Jackson is a good example of conservationists taking action. By securing the rights on a willing-buyer, willing-seller basis, conservationists have shown that they are able to back up their words with deeds and real money. The effort will go a long way toward improving habitat for wildlife and allowing a more natural ecological system to balance itself along the banks of the Gros Ventre River.

At issue was the Bacon Creek/Fish Creek grazing allotment in Bridger-Teton National Forest. It is located mainly north of the Gros Ventre River east of Jackson Hole. There, stockmen have been grazing cattle across 178,000 acres of rolling hills for decades. Tucked in the rain shadow of the Tetons, the area experiences less snow than other parts of Jackson Hole, which contributes to its value as winter range for elk and other animals. South-facing slopes also make much of the country ideal for wintering wildlife.

In the years the area has been used for grazing stock, ranchers have seen increasing conflicts with predators. With the growth of the grizzly population, bears have become more common and their consumption of beef more prolific. Wolves also range up and down the valley, to the consternation of stock growers. Meanwhile, the Stanko family, which grazes cattle in the area, has been dogged by conflicts with elk, as well, and the mingling of their cows with wapiti raised fears the domestic animals might contract brucellosis. In addition, the Gros Ventre drainage holds the promise of a natural wintering ground for elk, where they might be able to spend much of the cold months on their own rather than being fed in groups, as is the practice of the state Game and Fish Department today. Some biologists hope this open range, untrammelled by cattle, could some day allow elk to winter by spreading out to feed naturally. Such a scenario, some believe, is the best hope of fending off chronic wasting disease, a devastating relative of mad cow disease believed to be headed toward area feed grounds.

The Wildlife Federation's drive also is encouraging because those who believe in the cause could join by purchasing back grazing rights, one acre at a time. The Stanko operation was not a local endeavor that helped keep Jackson Hole ranchland open by providing an income here, so its loss will not be missed.