

Wildlife, Ranchers Win With Grazing Deal

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GRAND TETON, Wyoming, August 4, 2003 (ENS) - Wildlife and ranchers look set to benefit from a deal brokered by conservationists to remove livestock grazing from some 74,000 acres of public land adjacent to Grand Teton National Park.

The land, inside the Bridger-Teton National Forest some 20 miles south of Yellowstone National Park, has experienced more conflicts between cattle and grizzly bears than any other grazing allotment in the Yellowstone ecosystem.

"This agreement is a triumph of common sense over conflict," said National Wildlife Federation (NWF) special projects coordinator Hank Fischer. "It is a pragmatic solution that honors the needs of wildlife while recognizing the legitimate economic concerns of the livestock producer."



Only three percent of U.S. livestock producers have federal grazing permits that allow them to raise cattle on federal public lands. (Photo courtesy Conservation Beef)

The livestock producer - the Walton family - has raised cattle on the 25 mile long, seven mile wide Blackrock/ Spread Creek grazing allotment for more than forty years.

But increasing conflicts between wildlife have plagued the family's livestock operations for the past decade. From 1992 to 1998, for example, grizzly bears killed or injured 108 cows - the family has chosen not to graze cattle on the allotment for the past four years.

The NWF raised some \$250,000 for the Walton family as an incentive payment to retire their grazing privileges.

Federal and state wildlife officials and public land managers supported the arrangement and the Forest Service closed 74,200 acres of the 87,500 acre allotment to grazing. The remaining 13,300 acres will be evaluated for livestock grazing suitability during forest plan revision, which is scheduled to begin in 2005.

"This agreement will allow the Walton Ranch to lease private replacement forage for a number of years," said Hank Phibbs, attorney for the Walton Ranch. The family has found private land in Idaho on which to raise its cattle.

The deal is the second of its kind forged by the NWF in the past few months. In April, the organization brokered a deal to end a decade long conflict between bison and cattle on the Horse Butte grazing allotment near West Yellowstone.

Grazing retirements are effective, says Fischer, because they center on market-based solutions. "Our objective is not to eliminate grazing," he said. "It is to make sure grazing occurs in places where it is compatible and sustainable."

"We seek situations where the rancher is as motivated to solve a problem as we are," Fischer added.

That is why this deal worked, added Steve Kilpatrick, a habitat biologist with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. The zero sum game some environmental groups take on the issue of grazing on public lands tends just to irk livestock interests, Kilpatrick says, and the result is that both sides lose.

This deal, however, "shows that people with different interests can come together," Kilpatrick told ENS. "It sets a good precedent."

Kilpatrick's department would have had responsibility for helping manage any potential wildlife/livestock conflicts had grazing continued on the land, conflicts that seemed certain to increase. "The level of wildlife activity in this area has made it a serious challenge to raise livestock there," Kilpatrick said.



Biologists estimate there are around 1,000 grizzly bears in the Lower 48 states. (Photo courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

There are four wildlife species that could conflict with livestock on the allotment - grizzly bears, wolves, elk, and bison.

Grizzly bears are on the rise in the area, good news for conservationists concerned with the fate of the species in the Lower 48 states - where grizzly bears have been considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1975.

As many as 25 radio collared grizzly bears have used the allotment as part of their range in recent years and a wolf pack recently established a den site immediately adjacent to the allotment.

The land is good habitat for elk and bison as well, two species that both can conflict with livestock, Kilpatrick explained. Concerns about possible transmission of brucellosis from elk and/or bison to livestock would likely force the state agency to remove some of these wild species to protect livestock.

The removal of potential conflict with livestock should afford these species the opportunity to continue to thrive in the allotment, which serves as an important wildlife corridor between Yellowstone National Park, the Teton Wilderness and Grand Teton National Park.

"The wildlife values for this piece of ground rival any found in the greater Yellowstone, even those within the national parks," Kilpatrick said. Other species that use this land for habitat include moose, pronghorn, peregrin falcons, bald eagles, wolverines and Canadian lynx.

Major partners on the project include the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Heritage Foundation of Wyoming, the Charles Engelhard Foundation, Vital Ground, the Cougar Fund, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, the Wiancko Family Fund, and the Arthur B. Schultz Foundation. ❖