

Applegate public land grazing in need of environmental review: Part Two

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

Every public land grazing allotment in the Applegate employs “summer-fall passive continuous grazing,” in which grazing allotment permittees place their cattle on public land July-October. Typically, rotation of cattle among the various pastures of an allotment doesn’t occur. According to the National Riparian Service Team, when an area is grazed throughout the summer and fall with “little or no effort to control the amount, duration, or distribution of livestock use in particular areas, ... riparian areas will usually be overgrazed.” Long-term studies and vegetation monitoring across national forests indicate that grazing is progressively drying out wetlands and damaging the sponge-like water-holding capacity of headwater basins. This degradation happens when poorly managed cattle and other livestock trample wetlands year after year. Modern, active grazing management, especially rest-rotation grazing and regular herding, prevents unacceptable levels of degradation of water quality, riparian areas, and wetlands and protects special-status native species. “Rest-rotation” consists of cessation of grazing in areas where grazing is having negative impacts in order to allow the area to recover. Regular herding helps move the livestock around the allotment to prevent their congregating in one area for so long that excessive damage occurs there.

The US Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM’s) publication, *Riparian Area Management*, has a section on “Grazing Management for Riparian-Wetland Areas” that includes “Cardinal Rules for Planning and Managing Livestock Grazing in Riparian Areas,” including:

- Identify and implement alternatives to passive, continuous grazing
- Employ rest or deferment from livestock grazing whenever appropriate
- Implement frequent (sometimes daily) supervision by the parties involved once management is in progress, so that

adverse impacts (e.g., trampling damage and excessive utilization) can be foreseen and avoided.

In the dry portions of headwater meadow ecosystems, passive continuous grazing also devastates native bunchgrasses that are particularly sensitive to repeated grazing during a single grazing season. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recommends deferred rotation, rest rotation, and intensive deferred rotation as grazing systems appropriate for native bunchgrasses, and passive continuous grazing as inappropriate because it results in the elimination of native bunchgrasses from the preferred locations where unherded livestock remain for long periods (NRCS Grazing Management Guidelines for Native Bunchgrasses: efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/WA/WA-RANGE-TN34_1109.pdf).

In areas where native bunchgrasses have been largely eliminated, soil erosion has taken place, and young, flammable conifers have replaced native bunchgrasses, increasing fuel loads and impacting habitat. According to *Effects of Livestock Grazing on Stand Dynamics and Soils in Upland Forests of the Interior West*, (fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_gtr292/1997_belsky.pdf), livestock also alter forest dynamics by reducing the biomass and density of understory grasses and sedges, which otherwise outcompete conifer seedlings and prevent dense tree recruitment. Grazing by domestic livestock has thereby contributed to increasingly dense western forests and to changes in tree species composition.

The federal livestock grazing program is heavily subsidized. In 2015 resource economists studied the cost of livestock grazing on public lands. They found that the federal lands grazing program generated \$125 million less than what the federal government spent on the program in 2014. Further, they found that federal



Livestock on US Forest Service land in the Applegate that congregate in headwater spring-fed meadows can impact water quality, hydrology, and native plant composition and reproduction.

grazing fees are 93 percent less than fees charged for nonirrigated western private grazing land, or just \$1.69 per cow and calf pair per month. (It costs more to feed a house cat.)

Bringing public land grazing in the Applegate into the 21st century begins with the Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District completing an environmental impact statement for all grazing allotments in the Applegate, utilizing the best available modern science and research. USFS managers should adopt and implement site-specific best management practices (BMPs) for each grazing allotment, along with publicly available annual operating instructions (AOIs).

To prevent riparian and wetland degradation and unacceptable levels of water quality, site-specific BMPs for grazing permit holders include:

- Instructions on rotating grazing among the pastures and the frequency and type of herding needed to avoid unacceptable levels of degradation
- The number of times and time periods that USFS staff will check each allotment to verify that the required grazing management actions specified in the AOI are being adequately implemented.
- A year of rest for watersheds and basins listed as “impaired” due to sediment, water temperature, or nutrient conditions and in which the annual multiple indicator monitoring reading finds bank disturbance equal to or greater than 10 percent.

Suzie Savoie
 Conservation Chair
 Siskiyou Chapter NPSO
klamathsiskiyou@gmail.com



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OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE ARE HERE. PLEASE CONTACT US FOR MORE INFORMATION.
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