VISION FOR RANGELANDS IN THE WEST

OUR VISION

Opportunities for rangeland stewardship and partnerships are necessary; rangeland and soil conservation may be most effective if agencies fund and utilize a full suite of approaches, including promoting the social and economic wellbeing of working ranches. Success will require a coordinated, collaborative, “all lands” approach to management and conservation between ranchers, agencies, community-based organizations and other stakeholders. Specifically, ranchers who rely on public lands to stay in business offer a distinct opportunity for multi-jurisdictional collaboration. Rather than solely looking to the number and class of livestock or season of use, federal land management agency resources should also seek to expand opportunities to integrate ranchers’ existing practices, their ability to adapt to environmental conditions, and their expertise to leverage conservation efforts.

OUR PRIORITIES

To sustain the multiple values that our private and public rangelands provide, we envision a balanced, collaborative, conservation-based approach to rangeland management that:

1. Commits to scientifically-sound management, sustainable ecological principles, resilient economies, and social and cultural diversity
2. Recognizes and supports working ranches as opportunities to promote rangeland health and productivity across public and private lands, and
3. Leverages robust partnerships with community-based organizations to develop solutions reflective of local conditions and learn from on-the-ground experiences.

HEALTHY AND RESILIENT RANGELANDS — which include deserts, grasslands, and riparian areas—provide ecological, social, and economic values, and should be stewarded as an anchor for multiple uses on a landscape scale. Rangelands and their associated soils are sources of water quality and quantity, mineral and energy resources, forage for livestock, prime fish and wildlife habitat, and opportunities for recreation and hunting. Occupying roughly half the world’s land area, rangelands are significant sinks for the atmospheric carbon dioxide contributing to a warming climate. Rangelands also provide less tangible products such as natural beauty, open spaces, and cultural heritage.
RANGELAND CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

Challenges facing rangelands span multiple social and ecological scales; these challenges are interrelated and create positive feedback loops. For example, invasive annual grasses in the Great Basin, such as cheatgrass, have proliferated due to climate change and land use conversion. Cheatgrass invasion degrades wildlife habitat, diminishes native species, and increases the risk of catastrophic wildfires. Annual grass invasion and hotter, more frequent wildfires have cascading economic and social consequences for rangeland communities and ecosystems. Other challenges include:

- **Responding to ecological variability:** many Western ranches rely on a network of private landholdings and state and federal grazing allotments for their annual forage needs. These public allotments and permits mandate grazing practice and restrictions, and are often assigned fixed carrying capacities. Yet they are infrequently adjusted—sometimes in decade intervals. This inflexibility limits rapid responses to variations in precipitation, unexpected fuel loads, or annual grass or weed invasion.

- **Competing land uses:** conversion of rangelands to other uses that do not prioritize land stewardship leads to fragmentation and loss of continuous, intact landscapes and habitats. Other land uses become positive feedback loops for more invasive species and wildfires. For example, a 2002 study in Colorado found rangeland conversion to exurban development and nature preserves was associated with increased density and abundance of invasive species—and, in turn, heightened wildfire risk—on both privately-owned parcels and adjacent public lands.

- **Economic realities:** working ranches are facing rising costs and razor-thin margins. Ranchers are motivated and live where they work, but often lack available resources for rangeland conservation. In the absence of financial assistance, they bear the cost of maintaining infrastructure on their allotments. By maintaining large, contiguous tracts of land, they are also protecting rangelands for wildlife, recreationalists, and those who seek open space. Thus, loss of working ranches contributes to a net loss of native rangeland resources, including motivated partners for developing and maintaining desired conservation on the ground.

- **Negotiating and balancing values and uses:** Federal agencies are charged with ensuring recovery of threatened and endangered species, managing wild horses and burros, offering access for recreationalists, managing oil and gas leasing and energy development, and issuing grazing permits. Lack of agency capacity (time, money, and collaborative efforts) to resolve ongoing conflicts over rangeland management can lead to appeals and litigation, further straining the capacity of all stakeholders.

- **Modernizing rangeland policy:** Many of the statutes that govern rangeland management are near 50 years old, if not older. Similarly, agency administrative bureaucratic structures are rooted in old assumptions and ways of doing business. This combination leads to a disconnect between modern, diversified social and economic demands on rangelands and the administrative and policy architecture that governs them.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) must have adequate staffing and funding to fulfill their mission to steward public rangelands. They must also be accountable for achieving their management responsibilities and have flexibility to innovate and learn from on-the-ground experiences.

BLM, USFS, and Congress should support and promote existing and new collaborative efforts in public rangeland restoration and management. Specifically, RVCC urges:

1. **Agency leadership to provide direction and resources to agency staff to support existing and new collaborative efforts.**
2. **Expanded outcome-based land management (OBM) beyond grazing permit authorizations and establishment of a uniform process for landowners and agency staff to propose OBM projects.**
3. **Coordinated research, funding, and knowledge-sharing on treating invasive annual grasses and new pathways for scaling-up projects and efforts.**
4. **Funding and support for rangeland community-based organizations.**

BLM and USFS should prioritize development and use of capacity-building programs that support collaboration, foster agreement, and ameliorate conflict. Specifically, RVCC urges:

1. **Support for and expansion of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations, which exemplify leveraging wildfire response capacity through collaborative partnerships.**
2. **Greater cooperation and coordination between state and federal agencies through utilization of such tools as cooperative agreements and greater experimentation with the Good Neighbor Authority.**
3. **Greater utilization of stewardship contracting authority on rangelands to promote local economic benefit and flexible “end-result” contracting.**

BLM, USFS, and Congress should support improved rangeland monitoring that incorporates relevant metrics that contribute to informed decisions and increased accountability. Specifically, RVCC urges:

1. **BLM, USFS, and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to expand use of Cooperative Monitoring Agreements for data collection by landowners, community-based organization, and contractors.**
2. **Comprehensive rangeland monitoring using metrics based on mutually-agreed-upon objectives that are appropriate and locally relevant.**

Greater recognition of incentives and risk-management for private and public rangeland conservation and stewardship. Specifically, RVCC urges:

1. **Congress to fully fund NRCS delivery of Farm Bill programs including technical assistance, partnership building, landowner outreach and education, and conservation planning.**
2. **NRCS to offer programmatic access to funding through cooperative agreements with local entities, rather than individual contracts.**
3. **Congress and agencies to fund risk management for conservation innovation or other mechanisms for individual ranchers, without financial flexibility, to undertake new practices.**
4. **Congress and agencies to design programs to promote and support ecosystem service markets, ranching systems, and other forms of land management that increase soil organic matter, carbon content, aggregate stability, microbiology, and water retention to improve overall health and profitability of rangelands.**
ABOUT RVCC
RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities.

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