



## Facts For Your Files

### Grazing

#### Introduction

Many people are uninformed -- or have misconceptions about -- cattle grazing and its effects on the environment.

Today's cattle producer realizes the need to maintain the land. While overgrazing may have been an issue in the distant past, economic, altruistic and family considerations make it a rare occurrence today.

This fact sheet is intended to provide you with the most pertinent information on grazing. We hope you will find it helpful.

#### At Issue: Grazing

In this fact sheet, the broad term "rangeland" refers to regions of native vegetation grazed by wild or domestic animals. The technical definition is: "Land on which the native vegetation is predominantly grasses, grass-like plants, forbs or shrubs and is managed as a natural ecosystem."<sup>(1)</sup> Rangelands constitute nearly half of the world's land surface and provide more than three-fourths of the feed for its livestock.

Thus, although rangelands have less potential for intensive cultivation than do most regions developed for agriculture, they remain of great importance to life on Earth. In addition to food for grazing animals, rangelands yield plant, mineral and water resources as well as the less tangible resources of recreational opportunity, solitude and aesthetic pleasure. This is why proper management constitutes a vital part of the conservation efforts of any nation. This is especially true in the United States, where rangelands are abundant.<sup>(2)</sup>

#### The Role of Grazing

Proper grazing is an extremely efficient use of a sustainable and renewable resource. Ruminant animals such as cattle convert grass from pastures and grassland unsuitable for crop production into human food. Cattle can also "recycle" the corn stalks and other remnants from crop production left after harvest. By consuming materials inedible by humans, ruminant animals, such as cattle, are able to transform plant cell carbohydrates, or cellulose, which humans cannot easily digest, into high-quality protein (beef).

Grazing of indigenous rangelands is the most sustainable form of agriculture known to man. Native animals grazed the land for nourishment long before human civilization evolved. In the U.S., much of the land grazed by cattle cannot be used for crop production, such as forestland, desert regions and mountainous areas. Cattle also graze on harvested cropland and uncultivated cropland. Grazing cattle turn grasses and weeds that humans cannot eat into high-protein meat for human consumption.

Compared with harvested or purchased feeds, ranges and pastures provide a relatively inexpensive and energy-efficient feed source for ruminant livestock production. When properly managed, grazing cattle can be ecologically useful in precisely the same way their forbearers, the buffalo, were. They aerate the soil with their hooves, scatter seeds, and trim wild grasses. Wildfires have a harder time taking hold on short, cropped grass than on longer vegetation.

### **Cattle Grazing on Federal Lands**

Around the time of the Civil War, the U.S. Congress passed the Homestead Act to encourage people to move west in exchange for free land. While homesteading succeeded in the arable lands in the broad Mississippi valley, it failed in the arid high plains and the Rocky Mountains where farming is difficult.

Much of the land that was not homesteaded became today's federal lands. Federal lands, which cover 50 percent of the western United States, include 270 million acres managed by the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) U.S. Forest Service (USFS).

Cattle producers pay fees to graze their cattle on federal lands, which often intersect the private lands they own. The grazing fee is set annually using a market-driven formula that measures beef prices, private lease rates and costs of production in Western states. In 1991, the U.S. government received more than \$29 million in grazing receipts from ranchers whose cattle graze on public land.(3) In addition to paying the grazing fee, cattle producers also must maintain the land and the infrastructure on which their cattle graze.

Grazing fees fund repairs to schools and roads, supplement the Range Betterment Fund or go directly into the U.S. Treasury. If ranchers were no longer allowed to graze their cattle on public lands, the government would lose significant revenue from grazing fees.(4)

### **Current Environmental Practices**

It is often assumed that cattle producers overgraze their land in an effort to increase production and profits. Western rangelands were heavily overgrazed in the late 1800's. Also, the "Dust Bowl," which occurred in Oklahoma and Texas during the 1930s, was caused by severe drought, combined with overgrazing and overfarming by some ranchers and farmers. The combined effects allowed the wind to strip hundreds of thousands of tons of dirt from land that had no grass cover.

Ranchers and farmers have learned much since that period. The overall condition of national rangelands has improved significantly because of proper management. It takes decades -- even lifetimes -- to restore some rangelands. According to a 1990 report by the Bureau of Land Management, public rangelands at the end of the 1980s were in better condition than at any time this century. More than 87 percent of U.S. rangeland in the study was ranked as stable to improving.(5)

Like all good business persons, ranchers and farmers realize natural resources must be properly maintained if they wish to get the most from the land, and have it continue to produce for years to come. After all, one of the greatest economic values of grazing land is its ability to

regenerate feed, annually and continually. It is in a cattle producer's best interest to ensure that management practices promote the regeneration of those resources.

Economics is only part of the story. Historically, cattle production has been a family business. Cattle producers must be environmentally responsible if they plan to pass their businesses on to the next generation. In addition, cattle producers -- as much as anybody -- recognize their crucial role as stewards of land and water to assure an environment that benefits wildlife, plant life, the earth and our society.

### **Facts-at-a-Glance**

- Cellulose is the most abundant component of plants, and it is the most abundant organic compound on earth. It is very difficult for humans to digest, but from 30 to 80 percent of the cellulosic material eaten by ruminants, such as cattle, is digested.(6)
- More than 1.2 billion acres of land are classified by the government as agricultural land, used either for growing crops or for grazing -- roughly one-half of the entire land area in the United States.(7)
- Grazing supplies an estimated 57 percent of the feed energy consumed by beef cattle. Most of the area is pasture that cannot support crops. However, livestock enable this land to make a significant contribution to the food supply of the United States.(8)

### **For More Information**

**Public Lands Council**  
1-202-347-5355

**National Cattlemen's Beef Association**  
1-303-694-0305  
[www.beef.org](http://www.beef.org)

### **References**

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