

FLYING IN THE FACE OF TRUTH

A nameless bunch claim public lands rip-off. By Chance Gowan

As an aquatic biologist for the U.S. Forest Service, my principle responsibility is to ensure that streams and riparian areas are properly managed, while still providing for reasonable livestock grazing. I firmly believe livestock grazing, healthy streams and riparian systems can and do coexist, often with astonishing results.

In my studies throughout the West, I find that the positive impacts of progressive livestock management consistently outweigh the negative impacts that we occasionally incur. What we shoot for is a balance between acceptable levels of impact, appropriate resource protection, and reasonable opportunity for the rancher.

Recently I received a flyer entitled, "Public Lands Rip-off." Its origin is unknown. So of course the anonymity gives the author the opportunity to make any type of statement and represent it as absolute fact, with complete impunity. Flyers such as this have been turning up all over. Many of these "fact sheets" are used by folks in the "anti-cow/anti-grazing" community as empirical justification to cease grazing on public lands.

Space will not allow me to discuss all the statements in these flyers. And, in fairness, a few of their statements are true—if sometimes out of context. Let's start by calling a spade a spade. Livestock grazing does have an impact on the land. Anybody who says differently isn't being truthful. Sometimes the impact is positive, sometimes neutral, and sometimes negative. Let me just address a few of the myths or misrepresentations currently circulating throughout the embattled West.

In the flyer in question the author says: "Livestock have destroyed more riparian areas than any other land use." That statement, which is central to the anti-grazing cause, is so inaccurate and malicious that it essentially slanders those who live with and manage livestock. Riparian areas are incredibly resilient and with few exceptions (e.g., mechanized alteration, like channelization fortified with large riprap or concrete) cannot really be destroyed. They may function differently for a while but the riparian area is always there and, with time, regardless of the causative

agent, will nearly always become functional again.

There is no question that livestock can have harmful impacts on riparian areas. But in reality, those impacts are almost always isolated and minor in relation to the overall watershed, the functionality of the stream as a whole, or the viability of a population. This is especially true when we consider the sophistication of modern livestock management, our rapidly expanding knowledge of range-riparian ecology, and our ability to actively manage the dynamic interactions between livestock use and riparian viability.

The big-ticket items that have acutely damaged or caused long-term and widespread alteration of riparian communities are:

- Roads that confine and straighten stream courses. This seriously and nearly permanently degrades the riparian area. Roads serve as significant pathways to funnel huge amounts of sediment to streams, which acutely degrades riparian areas and negatively impacts fish and watershed dynamics. Roads, in my opinion, are the single largest destructive force affecting riparian areas in the West.

- Old mining practices, such as those that used large floating dredges, resulted in large-scale riparian degradation that will persist for hundreds of years; mining practices have improved markedly, but the legacy remains.

- Channelizing, straightening, placing barbs, and riprapping rivers in a misguided effort to attain flood control has been causative for hugely significant, widespread riparian degradation that will persist for decades.

- The loss of our family farms and ranches, which invariably wind up being partitioned, with mini-"ranchettes" sitting next to streams, ultimately causes a litany of severe problems. These subdivisions almost always result in the permanent alteration of the landscape and often result in the near complete destruction of riparian functionality—not to mention water pollution, loss of important wildlife habitat, and the eventual channelization of the stream in an effort to control floods or prevent stream-bank migration into

adjacent estates.

Groups that oppose grazing on public lands willingly overlook the hugely positive role that family farms and ranches play in maintaining the ecosystem. When these outfits are pushed out of business, they are most often subdivided. The resulting outcome is the permanent and irreconcilable loss of wildlife habitat, riparian functionality, and overall watershed continuity. The impacts of this alone are far greater than all the cumulative effects of livestock grazing.

Compared to these and other man-caused impacts, the effect of livestock on riparian systems is so minute as to be nearly immeasurable.

Incredibly and enigmatically, the flyer goes on to state that, more than any other land use in the world, livestock use of public lands has: "been responsible for more environmental damage from developments than any other land use...caused more ruinous flooding than any other land use...caused more soil erosion and soil damage than any other land use...eliminated more beneficial natural fire than any other land use...[and] destroyed more native vegetation than any other land use."

These are direct quotes. They are so flawed and inaccurate as to be laughable—except that their defamatory and malicious substance is portrayed to many, otherwise well-meaning people, as absolute and undeniable fact.

There will always be debate regarding the various uses of public lands. And there should be. For in America, unlike any place else in the world, there are vast tracts of land that still belong to everyone. Depending upon your principle use of these lands, you may believe that the emphasis should be on recreational uses, or wildlife habitat, or commodity production, or a litany of other interests. Everyone's opinion is important and everyone's voice should be heard.

The bottom line is this: National Forests were set aside with a multiple-use mandate. They are not parks or preserves. They were meant to be used and enjoyed by everyone. They are also mandated to provide commodities, such as timber, livestock production, and mineral extraction. These uses of public lands are just as valid as those who wish to camp, hunt, fish, or sightsee. The trick is to provide for all these activities without one precluding the opportunities for the other.

When one narrowly focused faction decides that their interest is more important



LEFT: Photo taken several years after high-water event. Grazing practices (before and after the flood) had further impacted stream recovery and the riparian area was now in a degraded condition. Willow growth had been significantly impeded. The banks were bare and there was no other riparian vegetation. The stream channel was overwide and shallow. **RIGHT:** Exact spot five years later. The allotment was still being grazed. In fact the grazing season had been extended due to markedly improved conditions. The riparian area, with active grazing, had recovered to a fully functioning late-seral condition with relatively minor changes in livestock use patterns and distribution. The stream is now deeper, well shaded, meandering, and provides quality bulltrout habitat.

than another's, difficulties soon develop. But when that narrowly focused faction chooses to blatantly misrepresent fact, spread propaganda, and slander those who are trying to properly use our forests in an effort to push their agenda above all others, we begin to wonder who these lands really belong to.

It's time for all of us who manage, use, and enjoy national forests to stand together and speak proudly of this legacy and the benefits it brings to mankind. That legacy remains viable today as a result of honest effort, heartfelt love for the land, and reasonable productive use of it. Those attributes are the very foundation upon which this great country of ours was built. Small groups, whose foundation is built upon deceit and lies, will eventually crumble. Truth always seems to find its way to the surface, and the truth about the efforts of stockmen and the deceit of others will

find its way here as well.

Stockmen should be proud of their achievements and all the virtues they bring to vibrant and proud rural communities, strong families, and ecological protection. These are the very things that are rapidly fading from our society. Cowboys and sheepherders have never been very good at blowing their own horns. Hell, most of America doesn't even know that cowboys still exist—outside of the movies.

The family farm and ranch, whether on public or private lands, is still an honorable profession that results in long-term and healthful stewardship of the land, and of those creatures and environs that are dependent upon it. ■

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LEFT: Photo shows a stream that is overwide and too shallow with the riparian vegetation, including willows, in a suppressed condition due to a high-water event and excessive livestock use. In this condition, the stream provides relatively poor-quality aquatic habitat. **RIGHT:** Exact spot five years later and the entire character of the stream has changed. The channel has narrowed, willows and other riparian vegetation are in excellent condition, and the aquatic habitat has markedly improved. Here too, the rancher enjoys a longer grazing season and has been rewarded with abundant water for his livestock. (This was a drought year!)