

# To Whom it Should Concern:

An open letter to Congress. By Sierra D. Stoneberg Holt, Ph.D.

We all eat. Agriculture is indispensable if we want future generations to enjoy security, health and abundance. For the same reasons, our agriculture must exist in harmony with the land, rather than exhausting and destroying it.

Native-range ranching is a great example of harmonious agriculture. An April 2010 *Smithsonian* article states: "It isn't like pork or poultry. Commercial pigs and chickens live their whole lives in industrial-size barns.... You need land to grow calves.... That land is divided among many owners. Beef production...is the largest single segment of American agriculture, a \$76 billion industry, and yet more than 97 percent of U.S. cattle ranches are family-owned and -operated." That has important environmental consequences. Each family manages its livestock differently, so each ranch offers different habitats. The resulting patchwork of diversity supports a stunning array of life.

Native-range ranching is almost the only form of agriculture that can productively operate in harmony with the existing plant

community. A well-managed range produces healthful, grass-fed beef, enhances watershed function, and sequesters carbon. Native-range ranching requires fewer fossil fuels and antibiotics than raising animals in confinement. The October 2007 issue of *Rangelands* included two scholarly articles [29: 28–38] on the key role of native-range ranching in reducing dependence on fossil fuels, protecting the environment, and improving national security.

Plenty of places can produce more food with less space. Those places cannot rival native-range ranching's ability to produce food in harmony with native plants, insects, birds and animals, from the humblest frogs to the most majestic elk. Every pound of beef that is raised as part of a complex, functioning ecosystem is a pound of beef that does not have to be produced in confinement or on a former rainforest in Brazil.

You would think that an industry that provides healthy protein without artificial additives, with reduced dependence on fossil fuels, and in harmony with a functioning natural landscape would be hailed in our envi-

ronmentally aware era. You would be wrong. Native-range ranching is being systematically attacked. The specific threats to individual native-range ranches vary, but all involve converting those ranches into recreation areas. Native-range ranches are combined into vast preserves and managed long-distance for recreation by federal employees or nonprofit NGOs (nongovernment organizations). The assumption is that, so long as the managers are not producing a physical product, they cannot have a negative impact on the biomes they manage. Tragically for our beautiful rangelands, that assumption is not true.

My home in northeast Montana has been targeted for conversion to a bison range, either as a federal monument [see *RANGE*, Fall 2010] or as the property of the American Prairie Foundation, an NGO selling wildlife safaris. We are coming under pressure from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the office of the secretary of the Interior, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and several powerful NGOs.

The following will be affected:

**2** This is Hannah kissing her new baby, Butterscotch. Hannah is hand milked and raises one or two calves a year. She is a loving mother and a patient, sweet companion. She gives so much milk that we make gallons of most of the dairy products you can think of, and several you can't. My little boy is allergic to modern food additives, so this is the only ice cream (and cottage cheese, hot chocolate, cream soup, and sour cream) that he can eat. This bison monument would destroy tens of thousands of good-hearted cows, but we would weep for Hannah.



**1** These are Dusty, Riesgo (my little girl's best buddy), Trisca, Kit, Tanya, and Chance. Like bicycles and walking shoes, they provide fossil fuel-free transportation. They are happy, hardworking cow horses with idyllic lives. They have an intellectually stimulating, highly skilled profession, excellent health care, and long, carefree vacations on the open prairie between jobs. When they are too old to work, they live out their final years in the best comfort and health that we can provide. Here they are playing in the snow during their

winter vacation. The United States is full of horses that no one is able to feed [see *RANGE* past issues at [www.rangemagazine.com](http://www.rangemagazine.com) and "Special Report: Mustang" in this issue]. If the president creates a bison monument, no one will magically create more land. When these ranch horses (1,390 live in this area) lose their range, they will lose their food source. They will die. These hardworking, joyous creatures would be killed just so hikers could watch bison instead.



3 These are sage grouse dancing near our house. There are 15 in this picture, and there were at least 50 on the dancing ground that day. This dancing ground has survived for decades thanks to a livestock pond that my great-grandfather built in the 1920s. Ironically, native-range ranching is endangered because of its ability to coexist harmoniously with a complex ecosystem. Outsiders see the many valuable, wild components of the ecosystem and want to protect them...which they imagine means removing human impacts. Yet, you can't "protect" something valuable by changing it, by removing key components. If we take the very best sage grouse habitat and change it, remove the people and the fences and the stockwater and the cattle, we risk destroying elements that sage grouse need. [See story, page 20.]

The Northern Plains Conservation Network's 2007 publication, "Oceans of Grass," calls for the elimination of millions of acres of sage grouse habitat, including this dancing ground. This is not what they want, but they live too far from the area to understand all its complexities. They believe the range would provide better bison forage if it burned every four years (although that much fire would probably replace hearty, native perennial grasses with wispy, low-nutrient cheatgrass).

Both published research and experience show that big sagebrush, which sage grouse need to survive, takes more than a century to recover from fire. In ecology, you have to preserve the whole or lose it all.

Right now what needs preservation are the local people and traditional land-

use practices, which are the targets of fierce, ethnic, anti-ranching hatred. We can't allow these beautiful birds to be destroyed just because people who have never even seen them imagine that they know better than sage grouse what sage grouse need.



4 This is a native barn swallow with five babies in a nest on our house (the mud wasn't quite stout enough to hold the nest, so Dad reinforced it while they were down South). Our ranch headquarters with buildings for cliffs, permanent water (for livestock), and lots of flies to eat (on the cows and horses) is excellent barn swallow habitat. Our many pairs usually each raise two large broods per season. There are many species of native birds (their original habitats have been largely destroyed) that depend on some aspect of ranching (such as the "artificial trees" that hold up every fence) to create livable habitat for them in eastern Montana.



RANGE articles by Dan Dagget [Summer & Fall 2008] describe how the U.S. Forest Service, caving to pressure to remove native-range ranchers, has caused the local extinction of a threatened minnow, the spikedace. A peer-reviewed, replicated study in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* [2007; 5:549-53] found that livestock removal caused local extinctions of threatened and endangered fish in desert springs. The public must realize that when "preservation" involves major ecosystem changes, it will cause significant extinctions. How could we evict these barn swallows for the sake of yet another underfunded park?



5 This is a *Lomatium foeniculaceum* (desert biscuitroot). According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, it is a threatened species. It grows abundantly here and on surrounding ranches. It is particularly common around our "ranchstead." If we crumble under mounting pressure and abandon the ranchstead, if we stop doing the things that make this lovely little plant choose to live with us, will we be consigning it to extinction? The thought breaks my heart. My bachelor degrees are in range science and biology. My masters is in biology, and my doctorate is in botany. I can say with some authority that there is almost no difference in the way individual cattle and bison interact with the environment. There is, however, a vast difference in the way they are managed. Our cattle are kept to carefully controlled numbers and moved through the landscape to provide habitat for a rich variety of native plants and animals. Federal (and private park) managers are traditionally forced by the public to overstock a few highly competitive,



charismatic species to the detriment of soil and water quality and of hundreds of less popular species. In 2006, Yellowstone Park ran 4,900 bison on a range with a federally estimated bison carrying capacity of 350. The BLM has determined that it has 69,000 feral horses, and range for 24,000. Crowds of sick and starving animals are only romantic to the uninformed.



6 This is me, as a little girl, by the sod-roofed log cabin that my great-grandfather built in 1918. By 1982, it had rotted down and was replaced with a conventional house. Only in the fertile Midwest did the Homestead Act provide enough land to feed a family. In the arid West, the federal government gave settlers full title to a homesite and then (after starving thousands) granted enough additional federal grazing to feed a family. Every time the government reneges on a BLM- or FS-administered grazing grant, a family loses the ability to support itself. When the family can't eat, their private land must be sold.

Developers are usually the only ones who can afford to own arid land with no attached federal grazing. Much of the private ranch land tied to a grazing grant (like ours) is freely open to the public for hiking, hunting, and exploring. All 107 million acres of private, grazing-grant-dependent ranch land serve public uses like wildlife and watershed conservation. Each has a family who pays the government for the privilege of controlling weeds and wildfires, maintaining facilities the public uses, picking up litter, maintaining public roads, and rescuing lost recreationists.

Research shows that nature preserves have more invasive weeds and fewer of certain native birds and carnivores than ranches [*Rangelands* 2007; 29:4-9]. Forcing out even one family means converting hundreds of acres of America's privately owned wildlands into sterile, chemical-soaked, water- and power-guzzling ranchette developments. A few people's conviction that they can't enjoy the Missouri Breaks so long as ranchers exist is driving them to demand the degradation of 3,467,324 acres of federally administered land and the permanent destruction of 2,825,859 acres of America's privately owned wildlands.



7 This is my little girl. She is learning to measure and name native plants to be sure they are healthy and thriving. She sometimes says, "When I am Grandma..." and tells us her wise and compassionate plans for a future when the well-being of the livestock, wildlife, and wild plants are her responsibility. It took me 13 years of college to learn enough about plant chloroplast DNA to obtain a Ph.D. Learning enough about the environment, plants, and animals to live sustainably within an ecosystem takes decades. Our country can ill afford to just throw this knowledge away.



8 This is my family. Our credentials as stewards of America's priceless open lands include a doctorate in mathematics, a doctorate of veterinary medicine, a masters in wildlife biology, and my doctorate in botany. We are only one family, but there are 21,000 endangered grazing-grant families. Every western wilderness and monument and park and bison range tears apart these families, often by the dozen, and makes them homeless

and rootless. Every one increases our dependence on foreign oil and on countries with poor environmental records. Every one destroys vital ecological knowledge. Unless the greater public begins to understand our part in a functioning landscape that produces healthy food sustainably, this ecosystem and way of life are doomed.

You are cordially invited to visit the Missouri Breaks ecosystem before it is lost forever.

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*Sierra Dawn Stoneberg Holt is a native Montanan. She obtained a Ph.D. in botany (and an education about Communism) in the Czech Republic and is now raising the sixth generation on the family ranch. She has proposed a Montana State University-Bozeman seminar on humans as a valid part of the ecosystem with support from Range Conservation Foundation. She has sent various versions of this letter to 45 politicians, plus bureaucrats, groups, journalists, and individuals whom it ought to concern.*