



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



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Rural Welfare?

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This article examines the confrontation between the U.S. government and several ranchers who recently occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon and others who are currently occupying government grazing land in Nevada. To set the stage for this discussion, here are several facts about issue.

The ranchers contend the land they are using is not owned by the U.S. government. A few are late in paying their fees for grazing. One high-profile Nevada rancher, Cliven Bundy, is behind on his grazing fees (and interest) by approximately \$1.1 million.

Given the ranchers' expenses, the ranchers contend the government fees are too high in relation to the support the government provides a renter. The government contends its fees are below private grazing fees, and that it provides extensive support services to its renters.

Beyond the grazing and occupying issues, some protestors have been arrested for what the federal government claims are acts of terrorism.

The ranchers who occupied the refuge were armed. The government declared the ranchers' militant actions were a violation of the law and arrested some of the men, an action resulting in the death of one of the protestors.

A Vested Interest in this Subject

Who is right? Who is wrong? It depends on which side of the fence one stands. Before entering into what will be a heated debate, permit me a few words explaining why I am interested in the subject.

I come from a cattle ranching family in New Mexico. I did not make my living as a rancher. Still, I have a respectful knowledge of ranching and its culture.

In the 1920s, Mom and Dad moved from Texas to the southeast corner of New Mexico where they met, married, and for many years, eked out a meager existence on the harsh high plains of the southwest. Dad worked several hundred acres of land and made his living raising cattle, sheep, and Quarter Horses. He met the land payments, made sure our larder was full, and kept his creditors at bay.

It was a tough life and we never went hungry, but the concept of disposable income was not in our vocabulary.

This Land is My Land



During the times of my youth on the family ranch, I had no idea that the land on which we made our living was not ours. It belonged to the U.S. government as was part of the Taylor Grazing Act, The extent of the act is seen in the figure. I circle in red the part of America where I was born and lived my first 20 years. This map does not show Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land.

All the ranchers I knew back then, and those I know now, are in unison about the idea that they have an affinity, even a love for the land where they live. Although it is a mistake on their part, it is

understandable if some come to think of the government land as their land.

Therein lies the problem. Until they gain title to the land on which their cattle graze (an unlikely event), they are breaking the law. It would be as if I rented an apartment, did not like the landlord's arrangements, and decided to take over the lobby in the apartment building.

Nonetheless, human nature as it is, we sometimes come to think that something that is not ours is indeed ours. As Henry David Thoreau said in *Concord Days*, "That is mine which none can steal from me." For my distant seat in Idaho, it appears some of Thoreau's ideas became part of the ranchers' mentality.

One Side of the Fence: The Ranchers' View

The ranchers have claimed the United States government is a dictatorship. They state they are being treated unfairly. Some claim the government is arbitrary in how it deals with their problems. From their standpoint, they are having trouble making a living with the way Uncle Sam deals with them and their use of the land.

In doing research for this article, I came across ranchers who told me the government dictates how many cows/calves they could run per acre. I came across others who said the government merely makes suggestions. The ranchers' views seem to vary, depending on which side of the fence they stand in their views of the government.

I could find no universal agreement on this subject. The states themselves vary in their recommendations/dictates (take your pick) on this important subject. Texas is different from New Mexico, and so forth. Some ranchers said it depends on "who you know" and "the connections you have" that determine the ratio of cows per acre.

The Other Side of the Fence: The Anti-ranchers' View

The other side claims the men occupying the wildlife refuge land brag that they are part of rugged (the Marlboro Man) America, all the while sucking on Uncle Sam's welfare tits. The ranchers' critics say this mentality has slowly become part of the makeup of the men who occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon and of Clive Bundy, who is occupying land in Nevada.

They said the local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works with the ranchers to develop a plan to best utilize the land and allow a flexible arrangement for the cattle grazing. I gather the support or nonsupport of the cattle grazing program depends a great deal on the personal interactions and relationships between the ranchers and the government.

The harshest critics of the ranchers say they are little more than welfare kings. The only difference is their rural setting in comparison to the so-called welfare queens in America's urban ghettos. This writer disagrees. Granted, because of my background, I am partial toward the way these ranchers make their living from the land.

Nonetheless, I do not come out on the same side of the fence as the ranchers. The next part of this narrative explains why.

Information on Cattle Grazing Issues

In order to evaluate in more detail the issue of cattle grazing on government land, let's get a few facts under our belts. (This information is from: Taylor Grazing Districts in 1937, *Opportunity and Challenge: The Story of BLM*, DOI, BLM, 1988. Washington: GPO, and https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/public_lands/grazing/pdfs/CostsAndConsequences_01-2015.pdf.)

- 1) During the homesteading years, western public rangelands were often overgrazed. ... *In response to requests from Western ranchers* (the italics are mine), Congress passed the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, which led to the creation of grazing districts in which grazing use was apportioned and regulated.
- 2) Appropriations for the BLM and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) grazing programs have exceeded grazing receipts by at least \$120 million annually since 2002.
- 3) The gap between federal grazing fees and private land fees has widened considerably. The BLM grazing fee in 2014 was set at the legal minimum of \$1.35/AUM, or animal unit month, which is the amount of forage to feed a cow and calf for one month. The annual federal grazing fee has been set at the minimum required by law since 2007. In 2013, the federal grazing fees of \$1.35/AUM were just 6.72 percent of fees charged for non-irrigated private grazing lands in the West, which averaged \$20.10 per AUM. The gap has widened considerably since 1981, when the federal fee was 23.79 percent of fees charged on private rangelands. The federal grazing fee is generally also considerably lower than fees charged on state-owned public lands.

In addition to the information cited above, consider these additional facts: The grazing fees taken in by the government do not all go directly to Uncle Sam.

Federal law requires that 50 percent of all grazing revenue, for both BLM and USFS, goes into range rehabilitation and improvement funds. Activities that can be funded include, but are not limited to, constructing fences to contain livestock, installing water tanks, building impoundments to improve access to water for livestock, and seeding to improve vegetation and forage. Half of these funds are designated for use in the district, region, or national forest from which they were generated. The remaining half is designated for use as directed by the secretary. Counties receive between 12.5 percent and 50 percent and the balance, between 25 percent and 37.5 percent gets returned to the U.S. Treasury.

As said before, the grazers of federal land are part of my cultural DNA: They are ranch people. Nonetheless, for those cowboys, I offer these thoughts to you: This land is not your land. It is my land and the land of other taxpayers. And it will be the land of many generations who come after us. If you wish your independence, then pay your back rent, and kindly remove yourself from this land. Move your cattle to a privately-owned pasture, one that charges several times more than you currently pay the government.

In the meantime and returning to the original theme of this narrative: For the cowboys occupying government land who are not paying grazing fees: Get off my land.