

November 8, 2005

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Greta Anderson, Center for Biological Diversity 520.623.5252 x 314

Mark Salvo, Sagebrush Sea Campaign 503.757.4221

CONSERVATIONISTS PETITION FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

TO INCREASE GRAZING FEE

Conservation groups submitted a petition today to the Secretaries of the Departments of Agriculture and Interior to increase the grazing fee charged to livestock operators on BLM and Forest Service lands. A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report revealed the massive budgetary shortfalls of the federal livestock grazing program.

Conservation groups advocate increasing the fee to move the federal grazing program closer to cost recovery and to limit ecological damage from grazing. The rulemaking petition, filed pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act and submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Forest Guardians, the Oregon Natural Desert Association, and Western Watersheds Project, notes the ecological damage incurred by livestock ranching in the arid West and recommends a revised formula for calculating what rancher's owe for grazing privileges.

"Cost recovery should be one objective of this federal program, especially in this time of budgetary crisis. The ongoing deficit is essentially a subsidy, and the question is, what are taxpayer's getting in return? Impaired watersheds, accelerated erosion, invasive weeds, and degraded habitat for wildlife," said Greta Anderson, botanist and range restoration coordinator for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

The GAO report revealed that, in order to cover costs in 2004, the BLM would have to charge \$7.64 per animal unit month (cow-calf pair, or five goats or sheep) and the Forest Service would have to charge \$12.26 per AUM, in contrast to the \$1.43 per AUM that was actually charged. The fee petition requests that the Secretaries acknowledge the well-known flaws in the current fee formula and make adjustments that would result in reasonable fee increases. The petition also demonstrates why updating the formula is legal, equitable, and just.

"The federal grazing program is a lousy deal for taxpayers, as well as for the nation's sage grouse, bighorn sheep, desert tortoise and Pacific salmon that depend on the same public lands that we are paying ranchers to degrade," said Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. "As long as grazing is permitted on public lands, it's only fair that public lands ranchers pay for the cost of the activity."

Last week's GAO report showed that public lands grazing costs taxpayers at least \$123 million annually, a figure that many acknowledge is far below the actual economic and ecological costs of the programs. The BLM and the Forest Service fee is set using a decades old formula that fails to even come close to paying for the program, and which remains far below fees charged on comparable private rangeland, on state trust lands throughout the West, and even on other federal lands, such as those managed by the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The cover letter and petition are available on the web at:
www.biologicaldiversity.org/swcbd/programs/grazing/GrazingFeePetition.pdf