

The Legal Bleat

Environmentalists are more concerned with membership than environment

It is grazing time again in the nation's capitol. Congress is currently considering legislation that would affect the relationship between two federal agencies and ranchers who run sheep and cattle on some 270 million acres of federal land.

Livestock grazing on Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service land is a perennial hot topic in Congress.

Every two years the issue rises like a Phoenix from the ashes of the previous Congress.

Depending on who holds sway, federal lands ranchers are either fending off attempts to triple or quadruple their grazing fees or they are pushing for legislation to stabilize the industry and its often rocky relationship with the federal agencies.

In this Congress the latter is the case.

The combatants – ranchers and environmentalists – take some measure of comfort in knowing well in advance the arguments the other side will present as gospel in hearings and with the media.

Position papers and catch phrases are stockpiled for use at a moment's notice.

Ranchers claim they are fully capable of environmental sensitivity while producing food and fiber.

Environmentalists claim the industry is only sensitive to the bottom line at the expense of the landscape.

So how does one discern the truth in this choreographed clash of the titans? Look for consistency or the lack thereof.

True proponents of environmental

protection will maintain their standards whenever the environment takes them. Mother Nature, after all, has no regard for political boundaries.

Recently a group of ranchers and Park Service personnel got together in north central Yellowstone to kick the dirt and deliberate on the Park's management of its vast rangeland.

Environmentalists support the Park's policy allowing grazing of the Yellowstone range by bison and elk without regard for the number, duration or intensity of their foraging.

As one longtime Park employee admitted, the Park's (and environmentalists') policy favors the production of – his words – “red meat” in the form of bison and elk over the production of willows, aspens, grasses and the like.

Of course, the policy merely reflects the public's desire to see these magnificent animals.

There is no constituency in Yellowstone (except perhaps the animals themselves) for vegetation.

You need only ask a park ranger next time you are in Yellowstone to show you an “exclosure.”

These are areas of the park that have been fenced for decades so as to prevent bison and elk from eating everything in reach. The contrast is dramatic.



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Inside is a thicket of trees, shrubs and grasses. Outside is dirt and an occasional sagebrush or clump of grass.

The ranchers, who recognize they are grass farmers first, were appalled by the overgrazed range and angered at the double standard. Had those range conditions existed on a neighboring federal livestock allotment in Idaho, the rancher's permit would have been yanked long ago with the resounding approval of the environmental community.

Not so in Yellowstone.

In Yellowstone, environmentalists take a holiday, ranchers complain of overgrazing and federal conservation officers defend production of red meat as compatible with sound range science.

Former House Speaker Tip O'Neil said all politics is local. So local, apparently, that professional environmentalists can upend their standards merely by crossing the border from a National Forest to a National Park.

This suggests that their agenda, both in Washington and in Yellowstone, may have more to do with selling memberships and magazines than protecting the environment.