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Plan to Cut Grazing in Monument Hits Snag
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A recent legal opinion by the U.S. Department of Interior has thrown a monkey wrench into an environmental group's campaign to purchase and "retire" grazing permits in ecologically sensitive areas within the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

In a letter to Interior Secretary Gale Norton, department solicitor William G. Myers affirmed that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) can "retire" grazing permits.

But Myers -- a former lobbyist for the livestock industry -- also opined that once retired by the BLM, grazing permits could "remain subject to applications from other [grazing] permittees" as long as the BLM land remains a "grazing district" as set out in the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act.

That opinion could put an end to efforts by the Flagstaff, Ariz.-based Grand Canyon Trust, which during the past three years has spent about \$1.5 million buying grazing permits from ranchers who run cows in the national monument.

"I have a [lot of] dollars riding on this," said Bill Hedden, Moab field director for the trust, which has several other similar deals on hold.

The free-market deals with the ranchers were made with a reasonable expectation by Hedden that the BLM, which manages the 1.9 million-acre monument in southern Utah, would agree to reduce or eliminate cows from the grazing allotments.

In three environmental assessments released earlier this year, the BLM proposed retiring grazing permits on:

- * All 17,000 acres of land on the Big Bowns Bench grazing allotment in the monument's northeastern corner near the Escalante River.

- * Most of the 260,000-acre Last Chance allotment on the Kaiparowits Plateau in the south-central part of the monument. The rancher who sold his permits on Big Bowns Bench would move his cows to Last Chance.

- * All of the 12,000-acre Willow Gulch allotment in the headwaters of Calf Creek in the northern part of the monument, while still allowing one rancher to use the allotment as a transit route.

* All of the 55,000-acre Clark Bench allotment in the southwestern portion of the monument. Instead of being used for cows, the allotments would primarily benefit wildlife.

The trust purchased the Big Bowns Bench grazing permits last year from Dell LeFevre, a well-known Escalante rancher and Garfield County commissioner.

It purchased the other allotments from other ranchers who wanted out of grazing, which is becoming an increasingly losing enterprise.

The buyouts amount to 4,500 "animal-unit months" (AUMs), a measurement that equals grazing time for one cow and a calf for one month. The 4,500 AUMs represent less than 5 percent of the grazing permits in the Grand Staircase- Escalante.

But a group of Kane County ranchers not associated with any of the Grand Canyon Trust's deals fears the grazing reductions are an environmentalist-BLM conspiracy to take the "American cowboy" off the range.

"This will be a green light for environmentalists to start buying out ranchers," said Mark Habbeshaw, an officer in the Canyon Country Ranchers Association, based in Kanab. "It's a very dangerous precedent. If they can eliminate grazing in these areas, then it sets a precedent for further restricting and eliminating grazing in other parts of the monument and even outside the monument."

The ranchers officially protested the BLM's plan to retire the grazing permits purchased by the Grand Canyon Trust.

To date, the BLM, headed by former Utah Natural Resources director Kathleen Clarke, has not ruled on the group's protest.

Don Banks, BLM spokesman in Utah, said he could not comment on how Myers' letter might affect the protest, noting the issue is "very sensitive."

But Worth Brown, president of the ranchers association, believes Myers' opinion supports his group's grievance.

"This opinion appears to invalidate the environmental assessments developed by the [monument] staff seeking to permanently eliminate grazing," Brown said in a news release.

The ranchers association said a reduction in grazing would hurt the local economies -- a questionable assertion, given agriculture's decreasing importance to the economy, said Hedden.

Regardless, said Hedden, the Grand Canyon Trust does not intend to eliminate all grazing. The idea is to take cows out of unsuitable places inside the monument, restoring those areas to a more natural,

pre-settlement condition.

Hedden and Kane County Commission Chairman Joe Judd, who has no sympathy for the ranchers' opposition to the BLM plan, characterize the ranchers association as a fringe group of part-time cowboys and an ex-BLM employee who are still angry about former President Clinton's surprise and controversial creation of the monument in 1996.

However, the association has been able to foment sympathy in broader circles. The directors of the Utah departments of agriculture and natural resources have written letters to the BLM expressing concern about the plan to retire grazing permits.

The plan comes at a time when the ranching community feels particularly under fire by other environmental groups that want to end livestock grazing on public lands.

A year ago, the Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, which now has an office in Logan, challenged all of the BLM grazing permits issued in northern Utah. And in April, a coalition of 100 environmental groups launched a campaign to persuade Congress to buy out all public-lands grazing permits, which would then be permanently retired.

To give ranchers a "soft landing," the proposed price per AUM would be about three times the current market value, said Kieran Suckling, director of the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, a co-sponsor of the buy-out proposal.

A bill on the proposal is expected to be introduced in Congress after the elections. Suckling declined to disclose the name of the bill's sponsor.

In the meantime, Suckling said his group may use Myers' letter as ammunition in lawsuits challenging grazing.

The letter states that under the Taylor Grazing Act, the BLM must analyze its lands to determine whether they are "chiefly valuable" for grazing.

In light of numerous new scientific studies in recent years and changing public use patterns, the arid Western lands may not meet that standard.