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# LARRY CRAIG

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## A Range of Options by Senator Larry Craig

“The world will not be a better place if ranching ceases on the public lands of this nation.” Those are the simple and direct words of Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and her brother Alan Day in their book *Lazy B: Growing Up on a Cattle Ranch in the American Southwest*. Justice O’Connor had it right on this one.

Public land ranching existed in the West long before our states did – it helped make the West what it is today. So much of our culture exists today because of ranching. Of course, ranching was a bit different back then, when it was sometimes regulated through the barrel of a gun. These days, it is regulated with the gavel of a judge, and that needs to change. Land managers, not judicial activists, should be managing our lands. Environmental groups should partner with ranchers, not battle them in court.

Unfortunately, the battles never seem to end, employing lawyers and activists but destroying ranching – the ultimate goal of one side of the debate. For instance, within hours of the Administration issuing new grazing regulations, environmental groups filed suit.

How can we resolve this impasse? Well, one giant step is grazing reform legislation that injects common sense into federal grazing management. As the chairman of the Senate subcommittee that oversees federal public land grazing, I am working on legislation to do just that.

While I am ironing out the details and expect to introduce legislation early in 2007, I am already looking at some concepts. For starters, we need to recognize the role ranchers play in the protection and conservation of the land. Often they are the only human presence on vast acreages of land that provide pristine wildlife habitat. In many ways, they are tasked with preserving it for generations to come.

The federal government needs to recognize this and offset grazing fees for environmental improvements ranchers make. For instance, they may maintain roads, provide year-round water for wildlife, reduce fire danger, or control noxious weeds. While many ranchers perform these services already, that should be recognized and encouraged.

One of the advantages of a vibrant ranching culture is the preservation of open space across the West. As folks flee the cities, driving property values up, it becomes more and more difficult to stave off development of our ranches. Currently leases are for 10 years. With the increased pressure of development, tools need to be in place to assist ranchers in keeping a working ranch. One possibility would be to offer longer-term leases on public rangelands with the stipulation that the rancher would not develop the private land on the ranch during that time.

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While grazing is an important land management tool, it is not always appropriate on every parcel every year. Unlike the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management lacks the authority to manage vacant allotments or “forage reserves.” This means that areas identified for grazing in a land management plan must be grazed or reallocated for another use. We should give the BLM the authority to set aside forage reserves for drought, pasture rotation, etc. in addition to current grazing allotments.

Finally, our land managers need a few more tools in their toolbox. We ought to give them categorical exclusion authority (reduced environmental paperwork) for ongoing range management practices that clearly will have no significant impact on the environment. We also ought to require litigants to exhaust the administrative appeals process before going elsewhere to challenge a rangeland decision. This will help move land managers out of the office and onto the range – improving the health of our public lands.

I have many fond memories from my time on our ranch. It certainly wasn't an easy life, but I am grateful for it. My time as a child and young adult on our ranch made me the husband, father, and citizen I am today. We can't let ranches fade from our landscape, culture, or economy.

In her book, Justice O'Connor also wrote, “The best way to preserve these vast acreages of public lands in the Southwest necessarily calls for responsible use of those lands by people who care about both those lands and their own survival.” I couldn't agree more.