



## **National Association of Conservation Districts**

**House Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
Hearing on Working Ranches, Healthy Range and Maintaining Open Space  
July 13, 2006**

**Comments Submitted for the record by the  
National Association of Conservation Districts**

On behalf of the nation's 3,000 conservation districts, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) is pleased to provide comments to the House Committee on Resources' to provide our views on working ranches, healthy rangelands, and maintaining open space. Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of government charged with carrying out programs for the protection and management of natural resources at the local level.

The rangelands of the nation's private ranches and public domain are a vital economic and environmental force in America. Approximately 250 million acres of federal rangelands administered by the U. S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are grazed by livestock under permits issued to private ranchers. Federal grazing permits are essential to the economic viability of many ranches and to the balanced use of private and federal lands that make up the landscape in the American West.

Forage is a principal resource, and livestock grazing is an essential tool in managing rangeland as well as forest resources and establishing a desirable ecological balance. NACD urges federal and state agencies to continue consideration to the roles of livestock in multiple-use managements of rangelands and forested ecosystems.

NACD supports the notion that grazing management practices should be implemented in an economically and environmentally sound manner in order to meet the national needs for food, fiber, wildlife, recreation, and water quality. With the threats of wildland fire, invasive species, drought, and land fragmentation, it is vital to the long term sustainability of our rangelands to work with federal land managers, permittees, and landowners in a cooperative manner to ensure that our working rangelands are conserved for future generations.

### **Working Rangelands**

NACD supports a working lands concept and believes that agricultural producers must have an economically viable farming/ranching operation to be able to make an investment in conservation practices on their land. NACD defines working lands as those lands in economic

production of food, feed or fiber. Where grazing is discontinued or private ranches are subdivided, the long-term health of watersheds is at risk due to the fragmentation of habitat and changes in land uses at the urban interface. Encouraging such fragmentation of open space should not be supported by taxpayer dollars.

NACD does not support permanent retirement of permitted rangelands through a federal buyout program. A permit buyout program would have only one objective – the elimination of grazing on public lands, and therefore, the virtual elimination of livestock production in the western states. Properly conducted range livestock production is not only ecologically sound but also provides income to both the federal government and local economies that otherwise would come out of taxpayer's pocket.

The majority of Western ranchers rely on public lands to support their livestock for part of the year. Without federal grazing permits, these producers would not be able to support the same numbers that they can with federal grazing allotments. It is just as important to recognize base property as a condition of the grazing permit. Ranchers who would support selling their allotments to a buyout program could be forced to cease livestock production and subdivide their privately owned ranchlands to replace income lost from their annual sales, consequently removing the open space characteristics of western landscapes and eliminating environmental benefits produced by their operation.

### **Fuels Reduction**

Pre-settlement population levels of large naturally reproducing herbivores (predominantly bison and elk) had a great impact on the ecosystems of the West. Prior to western settlement and domestic livestock production on western lands, these animals impacted range, forest and interface ecosystems and provided a host of services. One of these services was the management of underbrush and sub-canopy vegetation through both vegetation consumption and the effects of their movements across and through the landscape.

The utilization of grazing for fuels reduction activities on public and private lands provides a tool against catastrophic wildfires. This natural form of fuels reduction acts as a contributing factor in protection against wildfires while helping to maintain diversity among the plant species in both open and forested areas.

The presence of cattle on these lands today, both on Federal and private holdings, is a substitute for and carry-over of this role of livestock on the western landscape. NACD believes that careful management, good monitoring, and adaptive science and techniques can develop grazing as one of the important tools among others in the national effort to reduce high-density fuel loads and catastrophic fire damage.

### **Invasive Species**

Introduction of invasive plants to public and private rangelands are a major threat to rangeland health. As these non-native species move in to rangelands, many of the native grasses and forbs (which serve as feed for rangeland animals) are displaced or killed. In many cases, such as the tamarisk infestations in the southwest, the invasive plants absorb increased levels of water and nutrients from the soil, causing devastating effects on rangeland ecosystems, as well as minimizing grazing capacity.

Cooperation between government agencies and rangeland producers, increased public awareness, and consistent federal funding commitments are all necessary for invasive species eradication and rangeland restoration efforts. Conservation Districts provide the mechanism for project implementation and will continue partner with Federal agencies in these efforts.

## **Drought**

Drought continues to plague many regions of this country. It is a costly function of normal climate patterns. Drought occurs every year in different states; however, it is the multi-year droughts that can have devastating impacts on local and regional economies and result in major funding challenges. Drought can result in losses in rangeland production, cause wildfire and put added burdens on areas that already have limited water supplies.

Current drought conditions over much of the West have resulted in widespread reductions in grazing or total destocking of rangelands. Livestock reductions have been voluntary on private, state and some federal lands. In other cases, federal land management agencies have mandated reductions or destocking. NACD believes it is imperative for federal land management agencies to make decisions on a site-specific basis and should consider the existing forage conditions in all pastures to be used within the foreseeable future.

Both the agency and the permittee should monitor conditions to adjust the plan as needed. A flexible, cooperative approach will improve the ability of both ranchers and agencies to deal with drought.

NACD encourages support for policies and programs that provide a continued commitment to healthy working rangelands. We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on these issues in our continued commitment local landowners in resource conservation and land stewardship.