

PLC members:

We request your action RE: Obama's "America's Great Outdoors Initiative." In April, Obama signed a [memorandum](#) establishing the America's Great Outdoors Initiative to develop a "conservation agenda worthy of the 21st century" and to "reconnect Americans with our great outdoors". In light of recent actions on the parts of both Congress and the Administration, this initiative has potential to be very damaging to our industry.

Parts of the Initiative seem fairly benign. They include "promoting community-based recreation and conservation", "advancing job and volunteer opportunities related to conservation and outdoor recreation", and educating "Americans in our history, culture, and natural bounty."

A more troubling passage follows, however: "Build upon State, local, private, and tribal priorities for the conservation of land, water, wildlife, historic, and cultural resources, *creating corridors and connectivity across these outdoor spaces...*" To understand this passage, we must put it in the context of a larger, federal land-acquisition movement. While the "natural corridor" concept is not new to us, consider the efforts being made on multiple fronts to increase federal land holdings (thus making such corridors more feasible):

1. In February, partial documents leaked by the Administration indicated plans for some 13 million acres of land to be designated as National Monuments. Recently, one of those internal documents has finally made it into our hands (see the attached "BLM's Vision for Treasured Landscapes in the 21st Century"). It reveals that the Administration is constructing a new management structure without the approval of Congress, planning federal land acquisition, and focusing on "private inholdings" as land to be acquired. Other agencies, such as U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and National Park Service, continue to refuse to release their documents.
2. In Congress, [legislation](#) has been introduced in both the House and Senate that would fill the Land and Water Conservation Fund with billions of dollars, to be spent without further approval by Congress. One of the purposes of the fund is to bring private lands into the Federal fold.

The America's Great Outdoors Initiative's "listening sessions" are an opportunity for us to make our voices heard. **Please submit comments** (below) using the instructions below. The comment period ends **September 6th**.

INSTRUCTIONS

To register, go to <http://ideas.usda.gov/ago/ideas.nsf/register> and enter your email and information. When you have completed registration, click the "Post my idea" button on the right.

The attached document has comments broken down into the four categories listed in the "IdeaSpace" field. Choose the category you're posting on (if you post all the comments I drafted, you'll be making 5 posts).

You can add a title of your choosing and “tags”. If you need ideas on tags, there are gazillions of them at the “Tags” page (see top of page). Copy and paste the comments (see below), or type in your own comments into the “Idea Description” box, and, if you’d like, link your submissions together using the field at the bottom. **Hit “save”**.

Once you see your comments posted, you can click on the title then “edit” to go back and make changes or “withdraw” the comment.

You can also vote on some of the ideas listed under the “What’s Hot” column on the right. Some of them are pretty good! And some very bad!

Thanks very much. Please email me when you submit. I’d like to see what our members put up there.

-Theo

America’s Great Outdoors Initiative Comments

PLC: Below are 5 comments for your use, if you like. There are four categories (listed below). I drafted comments for each category (the Tools category has two comments—post them separately).

- **Challenges** - What obstacles exist to achieving your goals for conservation, recreation, or reconnecting people to the outdoors?
- **What Works** - Please share your thoughts and ideas on effective strategies for conservation, recreation and reconnecting people to the outdoors.
- **Federal Government Role** - How can the federal government be a more effective partner in helping to achieve conservation, recreation or reconnecting people to the outdoors?
- **Tools** - What additional tools and resources would help your efforts be even more successful?

Federal Government Role:

As a federal lands rancher, I understand the importance of the role the Federal Government plays in helping protect our natural resources. Public lands ranchers possess private rights to graze livestock, under conditions established by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the Forest Service, on public lands. Public lands ranchers own privately 120 million acres of open spaces, and steward vast areas of public lands, accounting for critical wildlife habitat and the west’s natural resources. Our operations are viable because of this public-private partnership. This partnership exists because of laws such as the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act and the Taylor Grazing Act (TGA), which mandate multiple uses on federal lands, and allocate grazing rights to private ranchers such as myself.

The recognition by law of our individual grazing rights is key to the conservation of open space, for several reasons. First, without our right to graze on public lands, we would likely be forced

out of business, and the result would be the fragmentation and urban development of the open space our industry provides. Second, public spaces are notoriously difficult to manage sustainably. The “tragedy of the commons”, such as overgrazing, can only be prevented when accountable, responsible individuals have effective ownership of a resource. By assigning longstanding, uninterrupted private rights to graze the range (via the TGA), government has prevented overuse of the resources. Our right to graze livestock on the range not only creates jobs—it keeps us connected to the land, appreciative and protective of its resources. The President was wise to emphasize that the America’s Great Outdoors Initiative would be implemented in a manner “consistent with applicable law”—laws such as, in our case, the Taylor Grazing Act.

The Administration must also be mindful of the importance of upholding the law in its efforts to create “corridors and connectivity across these outdoor spaces”. I am wary that such efforts could lead to the violation of private property rights, which, as we have noted, are critical to our economic and environmental integrity.

Not every country has the benefit not only of our bountiful resources, but of the principles and laws that govern us. Ownership and property rights have resulted in accountability, profitability and good management, which in turn have allowed citizens of the United States to create wealth using our land’s natural resources. This wealth has given us the ability to sustain a way of life that keeps our open spaces open. The Federal Government’s role, then, is to champion laws such as the TGA that protect our open spaces and their resources.

What works:

As a federal lands rancher, I and ranchers like me possess private rights to graze livestock on public lands, under conditions established by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the Forest Service. We public lands ranchers own privately 120 million acres of open spaces, and steward vast areas of public lands, accounting for critical wildlife habitat and the west’s natural resources. Our operations are viable because of this public-private partnership.

The President’s memorandum refers to “public-private partnerships and locally supported conservation strategies” as a means to achieve the conservation agenda. I can attest that strengthening the public-private partnership would prove fruitful, as our grazing allotments constitute just such an arrangement and have, for generations, benefited both people and the environment, alike. Our conservation strategies are “locally supported” because the ranching families that steward these public lands know that the health of our range is the lifeblood of our traditions and economic vitality. We know the lands are healthy when they allow us, generation after generation, to continue our operations. We also know they are healthy when we see the diverse and flourishing flora and fauna that the public so enjoys. Our close management and intimate knowledge of the public lands has helped prevent damaging wildfires and pests, and has provided safe and abundant habitat for untold numbers of wildlife. In return for good management, our rural economies and traditions have thrived for centuries. Truly, as the memorandum states, “our working landscapes, cultural sites...and streams are gifts that we have inherited from previous generations”. This is because of the involvement of private entities such as my family. A sturdy public-private partnership is “what works”.

Challenges

As a federal lands rancher, I and ranchers like me possess private rights to graze livestock on public lands, under conditions established by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the Forest Service. We public lands ranchers own privately 120 million acres of open spaces, and steward vast areas of public lands, accounting for critical wildlife habitat and the west's natural resources. Our operations are viable because of this public-private partnership.

As the President's memorandum acknowledges, "Despite our conservation efforts, too many of our fields are becoming fragmented...and we are losing our connection to the parks, wild places, and open spaces we grew up with and cherish." Is this due to a failure in the public-private partnership? Public spaces are notoriously difficult to manage sustainably. The "tragedy of the commons" can only be prevented when accountable, responsible individuals have effective ownership of a resource. By assigning longstanding, uninterrupted private rights to the range, government has prevented overuse of the resources.

However, a troubling trend is causing the local stewards of our public lands to lose their ability to manage these ranges. Due to a combination of lawsuits brought by radical "environmental" groups and unfavorable (and often unfounded) public opinion, a phenomenon best described as a tragedy of the anti-commons is prevailing. A management technique of no-use is replacing the grazing practices that have sustained our families and environment for centuries, thus knocking off-balance the longstanding private-public partnership.

The result? Without our public land grazing rights, our ranches are withering and dying. No number of studies and real-world examples of the benefits of well-managed grazing seems capable of turning the tide. Our pleas to remain stewards and producers on the land are falling upon deaf ears. Ranges where grazing is banned are becoming overgrown, weed-infested, and prone to catastrophic fire. And the rural communities and cultures that once depended on ranching are morphing beyond recognition. In light of failed, sold-out ranching operations, tract-housing, roads, power lines, and septic systems are springing up where wildlife and livestock once grazed and crops were grown. In the words of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, "conservation and economic vitality are inextricably linked". Alternatively, economic failure, as proven in countless destitute countries, leads to environmental detriment.

Tools (1):

Multiple Use Mandate & Well-Managed Grazing

As a federal lands rancher, I know of several tools that are being used and should be reinforced as means to protect our natural resources and open spaces.

Public lands ranchers own nearly 120 million private acres of open spaces, and steward vast areas of public lands, accounting for critical wildlife habitat and the west's natural resources. Our operations are viable because of this public-private partnership. If we lose our right to graze federal lands, our operations will likely fail, and we are forced to sell, often resulting in fragmentation and development of open spaces.

Our public-private partnership is made possible by laws such as the Taylor Grazing Act, which require that certain public lands be included in a "multiple-use" mandate. The multiple-use

mandate protects our right to graze livestock on these lands—protection that sustains our livelihood and open space. By reinforcing the multiple-use mandate of federal lands and allowing the continued, on-the-ground management provided by ranchers, the traditional stewards of these lands, we will ensure that the 120 million acres of private open land stays open.

But we want more than just “open land”. We want healthy range. Countless peer-reviewed studies have indicated that good grazing practices are not only *compatible* with, but are often the *cause* of increased public land health, and should continue to be used as tool for resource conservation. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, well-managed grazing:

- Increases plant and wildlife populations and diversity
- Reduces soil erosion
- Improves air and water quality

Ultimately, eliminating grazing in order to “protect” valued areas from livestock can often result in the very scenario the removal was intended to prevent: degradation of habitats through wildfire, reduced grass production, and invasive weed monoculture.

- For example, grazing reduces fine fuels which, when left unmanaged, are often the cause of fires devastating to wildlife and plants
- As stewards, public lands ranchers serve as on-site monitors, identifying and eliminating fire and noxious weeds where they occur

Tools (2):

Education

The President’s memo directs the Initiative to support “existing programs and projects that educate and engage Americans in our history, culture, and natural bounty. As a federal lands rancher, I know that educating the public is an invaluable tool to be applied to resource conservation and preservation.

Public lands ranchers own nearly 120 million private acres of open spaces, and steward vast areas of public lands, accounting for critical wildlife habitat and the west’s natural resources. Public lands ranchers possess private rights to graze livestock, under conditions established by the BLM or Forest Service, on public lands. Our operations are viable because of this public-private partnership.

Ranchers who lose their right to graze livestock on public lands often go out of business. When ranching operations fail and are forced to sell, their expanses of open land often become development sites, or, at the very least, become fragmented. The impact on wildlife can be formidable. As for the public land once managed by the rancher and grazed by livestock, overgrowth, pest infestation, and catastrophic fire often wreak havoc on the unmanaged land. Again, wildlife suffers.

Not all of the concepts public lands ranchers operate under daily—good management, property rights, and the like—are easily understood by the general public. Due to a combination of unfavorable (and often unfounded) public opinion and lawsuits brought by radical “environmental” groups, many public lands ranchers are losing their ability to manage the public lands. I would be glad to partake in a campaign to educate the public, especially young people, how we use “science-based management practices”, as noted in the President’s memo, to “restore and protect our lands and waters for future generations.”

America’s Great Outdoors Initiative holds great potential to reconnect our citizens, especially the young people who hold the future in their hands, to the land. There is nothing more wholesome and grounding than understanding the natural processes that bring food to one’s table and put the clothes on one’s back. Public lands ranchers, by telling their story, can contribute to that understanding, and help “educate and engage Americans in our history, culture, and natural bounty”.