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BLM public grazing fees raised for 2015

by Mark Mendiola - WLJ Correspondent

— 2015 fee: 25 percent increase on last year's fee

The Jan. 30 announcement that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service (USFS) will increase federal grazing fees for 2015 by 25 percent or from \$1.35 per animal unit month (AUM) in 2014 to \$1.69 per AUM did not entirely surprise J.J. Goicoechea, a Nevada rancher, veterinarian and Eureka County Commission Chairman.

Effective March 1, the new fees will impact nearly 18,000 grazing permits and leases administered by the BLM and more than 8,000 permits administered by the Forest Service in 16 states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

There are an estimated 724,000 livestock operators and cattle producers in the United States.

About 85 percent of Nevada's land is federally owned and operated, one of the largest percentages of any state in the union. Goicoechea is President of the Nevada Land Action Association created in 1976 to help oversee developments impacting public lands.

The BLM, a U.S. Department of Interior bureau, manages more land than any other federal agency—more than 245 million surface acres, mostly in 12 western states, including Alaska. The Forest Service, a U.S. Department of Agriculture agency, manages 193 million acres in 44 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

An AUM is a unit that measures the use of public lands for a month by one cow and her calf, one horse, or five sheep or goats. The fee is calculated according to existing private grazing land lease rates, beef cattle prices and the cost of livestock production.

Goicoechea told the Western Livestock Journal that he is willing to pay a little more in grazing fees if grazing boards would get back 12.5 percent of those fees as promised to better help manage range lands. He said he expected the AUM fees to go up because of historic high cattle prices.

“I’ll be very candid. With the current market prices, none of us were surprised to see the adjustment,” Goicoechea said. “I think everyone was pretty much aware it was coming with the push in the markets. I think everybody was probably afraid it was going to be a greater increase.”

The fourth generation Nevada rancher said he is frustrated that the Obama administration blamed “sequestration” for recently reducing payments to the grazing boards, cutting them down to only 7 percent or about half of what they are supposed to be.

“They would not give all the money back,” Goicoechea said, noting ranchers also are tussling with the federal government over sagegrouse habitat, wild horses, and water improvements. “These weren’t budgeted monies in the first place. ... How much more are they going to keep?” Pastures and range lands are continuing to worsen because management has become too passive, neglecting reseeding and other improvements, he said. During the 1960s and ‘70s, mule deer thrived due to habitat work, he noted.

“If they continue to put the money into the top-heavy administration as the BLM has become, you’re going to see pushback,” Goicoechea predicted, commenting that dogs need to be petted once in a while. If someone keeps kicking them, the dogs bite back.

“Our hands are tied by red tape and lack of funds, which gives them ammunition.”

The federal government continues to scale back the number of AUMs in the West and the amount of livestock allowed to graze on ranges, decreasing its revenue stream. Meanwhile, it has increased grazing fees in part to offset administrative costs.

“Put the cattle out there in the numbers they should be out,” Goicoechea urged.

A prolonged drought in Nevada has taken its toll. Cows are 50 percent of their peak totals and sheep are 10 percent of the numbers they once enjoyed. Hay, however, is still being produced.

“We’re sliding backwards,” the county commissioner said, noting his daughters are his family’s fifth generation in the central Nevada area. “Litigation is where we are going to go. We’ll survive one more generation in the courts. One more generation is all.”

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), an environmental organization, criticized the BLM and Forest Service for not charging more for grazing fees on federal lands, contending the gap between federal grazing fees and non-irrigated private land rates has widened considerably since 1981.

The new 2015 fee is 8 percent of what it would cost to graze livestock on private land, the CBC said. It was about 24 percent of non-irrigated private rates 24 years ago, it purported.

“The Obama administration just guaranteed that taxpayers will continue taking a huge financial hit in the grazing program on public lands,” said Randi Spivak of the CBC. “The federal fees benefit a very small percentage of livestock producers while taxpayers, wildlife and watersheds bear the full cost.” — **Mark Mendiola, WLJ Correspondent**

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