ECOLOGY

A New Wind Sweeps The Plains

Grasslands researchers have helped shape a controversial new plan that calls for reducing cattle grazing to benefit wildlife, but some ranchers say they will resist

The early 1980s were a difficult time to be a researcher on South Dakota's Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, a windswept range where dozens of ranchers graze their cattle. Many of the ranchers were convinced that native prairie dogs were eating grass needed by their cows, and they weren't happy to learn that rodent eradication programs might be challenged. So when U.S. Forest Service biologist Dan Uresk began briefing ranchers on his studies showing that the prairie dogs don't compete with the cows for food—and might even increase the amount of available forage—"they didn't believe it," he recalls. "Some would get mad and walk out," while others left threatening phone messages.

Next month, however, the Forest Service is expected to release a new grasslands management plan that draws heavily on what Uresk and other scientists have learned about these great plains. The plan, which covers 1.17 million hectares of public land in four states, calls for de-emphasizing traditional uses such as grazing in favor of wildlife such as the prairie dogs and judging managers' success by the health of the ecosystem instead of the size of the herds. "It's a major shift," says Kirk Koepsell of the Grasslands Sierra Club, an environmental group in Sheridan, Wyoming. But some ranchers say the plan endangers their livelihood, and they're threatening to challenge the new rules in court.

The new Northern Great Plains Management Plan—which took 5 years to write and drew over 110,000 comments—represents the latest chapter in 70 years of prairie controversy. In the 1930s, the federal government stitched together a set of public grasslands from failed Dust Bowl farms across Nebraska, Wyoming, and North and South Dakota, then rented grazing rights back to ranchers at deeply discounted rates. Today, ranchers often pay less than 15% of the price they would on private lands and also have a major voice in managing the public grasslands through local grazing associations.

Over the last several decades, however, environmentalists and government biologists have complained that the arrangement has led to overgrazing and extensive damage to habitat needed by wildlife, such as beleaguered grassland birds. In the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, North Dakota officials commissioned studies that concluded that half of all federal grazing allotments in their state contained "poor" wildlife habitat, and that up to half of grassland riparian areas, or streamside corridors, were threatened by the trampling of cattle.

In the wake of such research, Forest Service officials are about to unveil a new approach to overseeing the region's eight National Grasslands and two National Forests.

Doggone. New grasslands plan aims to boost populations of black-tailed prairie dogs.

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In general, the decade-long blueprint calls on grassland managers to shoot for "desired conditions" that are friendlier to wildlife, such as a range of grass heights that will harbor more species, officials say. Another major goal is to boost populations of black-tailed prairie dogs, which are an important source of food for the black-footed ferret, a highly endangered species that federal biologists are trying to save.

Although each grassland will have some flexibility, the plan is expected to reduce grazing in many areas. In North Dakota, for instance, ranchers could soon lose 10% or more of their grazing privileges. Even modest reductions should help restore the "better mosaic of low, mid, and high grasslands which birds and wildlife require," says John Sidle, an endangered-species specialist with the Forest Service in Chadron, Nebraska. Eliminating grazing is not necessarily desirable, grasslands biologists note, because cattle have replaced the bison that once thundered across the plains, providing the disturbance required for some plants to prosper.

But the anticipated cutbacks don't sit well with many ranchers, and the plan's bid to boost prairie dog numbers is fueling controversy. Until recently, many ranchers and government officials considered the small burrowing rodents, which can build teeming "towns," to be a leading pest. They complained that prairie dog holes frequently injured livestock, and that the rodents competed with cattle for food. As a result, state and federal governments spent millions over the last century trying to exterminate them, helping drive their numbers to 1% of historic levels.

In the last decade, however, environmentalists have persuaded officials to curtail eradication efforts on public lands, in part to aid ferret recovery. And 2 decades of research disprove the competition concept, says Uresk. His early studies, for instance, found that total plant production is 24% higher in areas inhabited by prairie dogs than in areas that are grazed. And plant biomass is 13% higher in areas that hold both cattle and prairie dogs, compared to areas that hold just cattle. Overall, Uresk says, newer studies confirm that prairie dogs and cows directly compete for less than 10% of available forage.

Such data do little to mollify some ranchers. With help from skeptical members of Congress, they have already delayed the release of the plan once in a bid to soften some provisions. And some North Dakota ranchers now say they will work mightily to limit the plan's impact as it is phased in over the next few years—and perhaps even sue once it is formally adopted this summer.

Forest Service officials, however, say the plan still gives grazers plenty of influence and note that the economic impact of any changes should be minimal, because less than one-tenth of 1% of the national cattle herd grazes on federal land. Their goal, they say, is not to force modern cowboys from the grasslands but to rein in grazing to reduce negative side effects. "Grazing is an important [land management] tool; I just wish we were in more control of it," says Sidle. The plan will just try to put the cows in the right places at the right times.

—PAUL THACKER

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