

Testimony of
Mr. Bob Skinner
April 13, 2005

NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION
OREGON CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION
and the
PUBLIC LANDS COUNCIL

on
Livestock Grazing on Public Lands
Submitted to the
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
The Honorable Greg Walden, Chairman
of the
House Committee on Resources
The Honorable Richard Pombo, Chairman

Good afternoon, Chairman Walden and Distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, my name is Bob Skinner. I am a fifth-generation rancher from Jordan Valley, Oregon. Skinner Ranches is permitted for approximately 5,700 animal unit months of cattle on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land in the Vale District in the southeastern part of Oregon. I am also immediate past President of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to provide some of my experience in public lands grazing to the Subcommittee on behalf of the sheep and cattle rancher members of the Public Lands Council and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the Oregon Cattlemen's Association (OCA).

The Public Lands Council (PLC) represents sheep and cattle ranchers in 15 western states whose livelihood and families have depended on federal grazing permits dating back to the beginning of last century. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) is the trade association of America's cattle farmers and ranchers, and the marketing organization for the largest segment of the nation's food and fiber industry. The Oregon Cattlemen's Association currently represents about 2400 members in my home state, many of which do graze public lands.

Ranching out west has been part of the landscape, the economy, and the culture for approximately three centuries. About 214 of the 262 million acres managed by BLM are classified as "rangelands," as are 76 million of the 191 million acres managed by the Forest Service. More than 23,000 permittees, their families, and their employees manage livestock to harvest the annually renewed grass resource grown on this land. Western ranching operations provide important additional benefits to the Nation by helping to preserve open space and reliable waters for wildlife, by serving as recharge areas for groundwater, and by supporting the economic infrastructure for rural communities as well as the United States of America. Our policy is to support the multiple-use and sustained-yield of the resources and services from our public lands which we firmly believe brings the greatest benefit to the largest number of Americans.

Wild and Scenic Rivers and Ranching in Oregon

Oregonians are rightfully proud of the many beautiful rivers that course through our state. Unfortunately, management of these rivers, and in particular those with segments that have been designated under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA), have brought harm to many segments of society, in my case, the rural ranching communities.

The WSRA was passed into law in 1968, with I believe, the express intent of protecting the wild and free flowing status of designated rivers while protecting existing compatible uses along their corridors. Certainly if the respective river of designation qualified for WSR status in 1968 with grazing being one of the uses along the corridor then it should automatically continue thus protecting the values for which the rivers were designated under the Act. We believe that properly managed grazing can, and is, compatible with maintaining healthy river corridors. However, the "enhance" standard in the Act poses a virtually impossible hurdle for grazing to meet because to enhance certainly means different things to different people. Currently there are more than 1.2 million acres included in the Wild and Scenic River system on lands managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management in the west. Very roughly, it has been estimated that permitted grazing may occur on one-third of these acres. In several instances in my home state, special interest groups whose express interest is to terminate or restrict grazing have brought suit in the United States District Court of

Oregon challenging the Forest Service or BLM's river plans (the document that must be written to address how the respective agency will manage the river corridor).

In Oregon alone, we have seen several lawsuits challenging grazing usage on the Donner and Blitzen, the John Day, the North and Middle Forks of the Malheur, and the Owyhee Rivers. More than 50 operations ran cattle along the subject area of these Wild and Scenic Rivers, involving hundreds of people if you consider that each operation often consisted of several different families. Elimination of these ranch operations means the elimination of a way of life that has been in place for generations in many cases. Without the ranches and their economic activity, the local communities obviously suffer as well, and ultimately the fabric of life in rural Oregon and throughout the west begins to unravel.

The original congressional sponsors of the Oregon Omnibus WSRA certainly believed grazing would and should continue in these wild and scenic river corridors and communicated this belief to the local ranching community when my former Congressman Bob Smith explained that he wanted to ensure and maintain the grazing status quo along the river in a letter to former Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield dated August 29, 1988. In a letter dated September 28, 1988, Congressman Peter DeFazio wrote that "grazing and Ag practices are fully protected under the Act." Senator Hatfield wrote on October 3, 1988, that grazing under the Oregon legislation would be allowed "to the extent currently practiced." Former Oregon Senator Bob Packwood, in striving to assure his grazing constituency, wrote on January 13, 1989, that grazing "will not be affected by this [new] law." We think it is obvious that the intent of the law has been distorted.

OCA, PLC and NCBA ask this Subcommittee to try to restore the original intent of the legislation so resource protection can be achieved while ensuring that radical special interests can't use our liberal judicial system to manage the resource. The people whose lives are rooted in rural Oregon deserve the respect and attention of this body. The law should prevent degradation of river values; all of us certainly want that. However, rural families and communities in Oregon and throughout the west are begging for resolution to this runaway, expensive and emotionally draining fiasco that has evolved because of misinterpretations of the law. We would be pleased to work with the members of this Subcommittee to bring a better balance to the WSRA.

Noxious Weeds

I would like to shift gears to another issue that is certainly on land managers' agendas now – the problem of noxious weeds.

Weeds are certainly one of those issues that do not jump out to grab the headlines. However, they are rapidly taking over the landscape of this nation and certainly the entire west. While a number of government programs exist that help the edges of the problem, no single program exists that focuses the cooperative energies necessary to succeed in defeating the onslaught of weeds. Currently in Oregon, we are forced to live under the constraints of restricted applications of EPA approved chemicals, which in many cases are not only the best and cheapest form of non-native noxious weed control but in many cases it can be the only effective form of control. It is our belief that land managers should have at their disposal a "full tool box" of approved herbicides to combat this problem. Currently millions of acres of land are being devastated by these invaders and the numbers are growing at an almost unbelievable rate.

Last year, the Resources Committee approved the "Noxious Weed Control and Eradication Act" (Pub. L. 108-412), a bill that makes resources available for local cooperative efforts to eradicate weeds; we certainly applaud your efforts. We recognize that the federal budget is very tight this year and most probably in the years to come. We would again like to emphasize the importance of your efforts in trying to control these invaders, and urge Congress to try to find a way to continue to fund this important program in the future.

Conclusion

I want to thank the members of this subcommittee, and particularly Chairman Walden, for your past support of the resource industries and particularly your support for the livestock industry and its battle to ensure continued grazing on public lands. On behalf of the PLC, NCBA and OCA, we are eager to work with you to solve the many problems facing our members.

I look forward to any questions that you may have for me.