High Country News

WILD HARVEST

PUBLIC LAND GRAZING FAVORS THE RICH

HOW GAMING SUPPORTS TRIBES

GAY RODEO RETURNS TO RENO

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High Country News

A Cascades frog sits in a transport container the night before researchers take it to its new home in California's Lassen Volcanic National Park. (*See story on page 7.*) **Anton Sorokin / HCN**

Know The West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. Subscriptions to HCN are $45 a year, $47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The humanity of it all

I used to need about half a day per month to handle my personal business. That amount of time has tripled, mainly due to the skyrocketing degree of ineptitude on the other side of these transactions. AI receptionists, unwanted apps and other substitutes for human interaction have made everything worse. You can't refill a prescription if the AI receptionist doesn't recognize the name of the medication. It's getting harder and harder to get an actual person — someone capable of exercising judgment — on the phone. Punching zero rarely summons a human being anymore.

These nonhuman services use enormous amounts of water and energy to process information, furthering the aridification of a West already locked in perpetual drought amid a rapidly accelerating climate crisis. If you've wondered, *Why on earth are we doing this?* you're not alone. Whose time is this supposedly saving? Whose jobs are being eliminated? Whose futures are we stealing as we hand over control to the computers? And what about the aggregation, the sifting through original research and reporting and synthesizing it, regardless of how reliable any single source is, or whether any of it was even fact-checked? Ask Google a question, and your top answer comes courtesy of artificial intelligence. *Do not accept an AI summary as a substitute for journalism, ever.*

This is a matter of both quality and conscience. The story package at the heart of this issue, a partnership with *ProPublica*, was produced by two journalists, Mark Olalde and Jimmy Tobias, who spent more than a year investigating the public-lands ranching programs run by the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service, asking who benefits, who profits, and how much damage is being done. They filed more than 100 public records requests and sued the BLM to obtain its data. That's how journalism gets done, day by day. It should be noted that AI transcription services have been used by journalists for years. But *HCN* will never rely on AI for any part of the process that requires judgment. Our journalism is produced by journalists — writers and editors and artists and photographers and designers and fact checkers whose goal is to deliver stories that open your eyes and make you think. Stories prepared by humans and full of humanity.

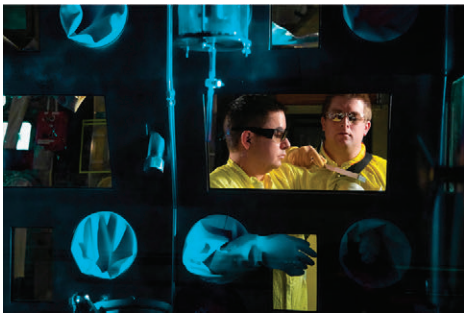
This publication has a long legacy of watchdogging federal agencies and communicating what is happening on the ground across the West. It's why we're here. It's also why I hope you will consider supporting *HCN* as the year draws to a close. We have a team of very helpful humans available to assist you with making donations or purchasing gift subscriptions for friends and family. If you need any assistance, just give us a ring. We answer the phone.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

RECENT STORIES AT HCN.ORG

Caitlin Ochs

Why Colorado River negotiations are so difficult
Basin states have had two years to figure out how to share the shrinking river.
Will they succeed before the feds step in?
By Caitlin Ochs



Los Alamos National Laboratory

The aging Los Alamos lab is at the center of America's nuclear overhaul
Despite problems with contamination, infrastructure and work outages, the New Mexico lab remains essential to efforts to modernize the nation's nuclear weapons.
By Alicia Inez Guzmán

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FEATURES

REPORTAGE

BOOKS, CULTURE & COMMENTARY

OTHER MATTER

ON THE COVER

A full moon rises over a high-elevation forest on Worley Mountain between Eagle Lake and Susanville, California. Crews often work into the dark, cutting and sorting Christmas trees by headlamp and truck lights. The silvertip trees in the foreground show the results of stump culturing, which ensures sustainable harvests for years to come. **Allen Myers**

Cattle trails scar a denuded landscape near Carlin, Nevada. Like much of the West, it is a patchwork of private property and public rangeland overseen by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. (*See stories beginning on page 22.*) **Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**
Aerial support by LightHawk

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org

A STORY THAT ROCKS

Thank you for such a beautiful piece in "Precious Metalheads" (November 2025). There were tears streaming down my face as I read it. I couldn't attend the festival, but it sounded incredible.

I'm currently in the process of purchasing a building with a couple of other folks in my town that will be used mainly as a music venue and community art space. I hope we can draw inspiration from the Firekeepers Alliance and do something as impactful for the youth in our community.

Kira Hannum
Anacortes, Washington

DON'T FORGET THE BEAVERS!

In the article "Conservationists make an (intentional) mess in Mendocino" (November 2025), there is no mention of adding beavers to the mix to improve the watershed. They provide a lot more benefits to the salmon than just playing with heavy equipment and logs.

Ponding behind beaver dams provides cover, food and slack water for the young salmon to thrive. They also improve groundwater levels and generate hyporheic flows, which tend to stabilize the water temperatures. They tend to regulate flows by storing water during high flows and slowly releasing it during periods of low flows. They reconnect the streams with their floodplains, which improves this buffering effect and also improves the riparian habitat for both vegetation and other wildlife. This encourages resilience to fire events, providing refugia and even firebreaks.

Best of all, the beavers will continuously maintain their work. They will rapidly repair their dams, dig canals to spread the water out on the floodplains and provide multi-threaded channels.

Beaver and salmon coexisted for millennia, and it is said that beaver taught salmon how to jump.

Jim Shepherd
Sparks, Nevada

A TOPIC WORTH CHEWING OVER

Your article in the November issue "A toothless conspiracy theory" about water fluoridation was far from your usual excellent research and reporting. Here in Portland, Oregon, the water is not fluoridated and never has been. Voters have turned it down four times, most recently in 2012.

While I agree that fluoride is an excellent topical treatment for teeth, I cannot see why ingesting it can be a good thing. The money cities spend fluoridating their water would be better spent providing free or low-cost dental care to low-income families.

Marian Rhys
Portland, Oregon

Ban, then study, is not a plan. What is an ideological discussion for those with regular access to dental care is a harsh reality for those on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. If you're going to end the program of optimally fluoridated community water, you need to establish a baseline so that comparisons can be made when decay goes up in the community. It is well established that it will. Food stamps do not allow for the purchase of toothbrushes, toothpaste, dental floss or fluoride rinses. Many poor families share a toothbrush. Optimally fluoridated community water has offset the lack of oral health literacy, and it has been a well-established public health policy in many areas for 80 years. Please do not place this burden on those who do not have regular access to dental care.

John P. Fisher, DDS
Naples, Florida

"Beaver and salmon coexisted for millennia, and it is said that beaver taught salmon how to jump."

MOURNING A VANISHING TREE

I just finished "Portrait of a Vanishing Tree" (October 2025) about the emerald ash borer in Oregon, and I have to say it's the best thing I've read all year. I've been a subscriber for 25 years, I think, and the magazine just keeps getting better.

Rusty Austin
Rancho Mirage, California

That was an excellent piece on the Oregon ash. The tree joins Port Orford cedar, sugar pine, white pine, tanoak and others as sacrifices on the altar of free trade. We know that exotic fungi/insects can decimate species that have no resistance to these invaders. We could build effective barriers to the entry of forest-killing pathogens. We could fund APHIS like we mean it. We could keep these critters out and study the ones that might get through, so we can fight them when they get here. But we don't. We don't spend the money. Free trade is actually incredibly expensive.

Rich Fairbanks
Jacksonville, Oregon

LEARNING FROM NATURE

Laureli Ivanoff's article "Working together is everything" (September 2025) is a beautiful story. I'm ready to book a trip to Eaton Island. I so hope climate change hasn't reworked the environment too much yet. Her story spoke loudly of the togetherness and love so important to a family.

Rick Bass' "Guardians of Our Food" (September 2025) is also a beautifully written article. I'm dumbfounded daily that humans have yet to learn what nature screams to teach. I so hope Bass and his neighbors can keep the Yaak and Black Ram pristine.

Katherine Brown
Cochise, Arizona

An adult Cascades frog floats among aquatic vegetation.

REPORTAGE

A frog hops into a park

The last Cascades frog in Lassen Volcanic National Park vanished in 2007. Now, scientists are bringing them back.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANTON SOROKIN

THE LAST CASCADES FROG in Lassen Volcanic National Park in Northern California was well known to amphibian survey crews. Year after year, she turned up near Juniper Lake, full of eggs, seeking a mate. But it was a hopeless search; there were no other frogs left. She appeared one last time in 2007. Cascades frogs were once plentiful in the park; now, researchers believed, there were none.

Seeing that final frog inspired ecologist Karen Pope to shift from observational research to studying nature to help restore it. "We've gotten to a place where, if we sit back, we're going to keep watching the last frog," said Pope, who recently retired from the Forest Service.

Now, thanks to a collaboration among timber companies, the National Park Service, the Forest Service, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and scientists from Washington State University, scientists are reintroducing Cascades frogs to Lassen Volcanic National Park.

The species, which spans much of the Cascade Range, is clinging to survival in California despite mounting threats: drought, habitat degradation, predation by invasive trout, and, perhaps the most serious, chytrid fungus, which has caused amphibian extinctions worldwide. The fungus has nearly eradicated two species of California frogs and compromised at least three others, including the Cascades frog.

Today, Sierra Pacific Industries and Collins Pine timber companies own land outside the national park that hosts the last healthy population of Cascades frogs at the southern extent of their range in the Lassen region. Somewhat mysteriously, frogs fare better against chytrid there than elsewhere. Researchers aren't sure why, but they suspect habitat features, evolved resistance or both.

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, a procession of rubber-booted biologists, nets in hand, waded into the amphibians' timber company stronghold to collect dozens of young Cascades frogs and tiny froglets just past tadpole stage. Their goal was to reintroduce them to Lassen.

But first, they checked their captives into a weeklong frog spa. Each day, Ryan Wagner, a Ph.D. candidate at Washington State University, who is managing the reintroduction, and several technicians transferred batches of wriggling frogs into plastic tubs of dilute antifungal solution. The amphibians clambered about as Wagner and his team gently sloshed them back and forth to ensure that the mixture coated their entire bodies. Escape attempts were met with a gentle prod nudging the frogs back into their medicinal bath.

The treatment isn't a silver bullet: The chytrid fungus may linger on the frogs' skin, and, once released, they will face it again. But the baths tip the odds, combating infections during the frogs' vulnerable early life, when much of their energy is funneled into growth and their immune systems are weaker.

Next, the researchers introduced the frogs to their new homes. "We were really trying to be selective with the sites," said Wagner. From a bird's-eye view, about a dozen places in the park looked promising, but from a frog's-eye view, most lost their luster. Sites had to be shallow enough for breeding, deep enough to remain partially unfrozen in winter, and rich in insects. "If you don't have all three, you probably aren't going to be able to support Cascades frogs here for very long," Wagner said.

Ultimately, two sites stood out. On Sept. 9, two teams laden with backpacks full of plastic cups, each housing a single frog, marched out to the possible frog havens.

Pope, who'd encountered Lassen's last Cascades frog, was back for their return, along with Nancy Nordensten, the park's chief of resources. Pope, Nordensten and Wagner carefully cracked open the cups. Some frogs sprang out in a blur, splashing into the water and streaking away. Others needed to be gingerly coaxed into the wild. Frogs gathered on stones and logs, basking in the sunlight, some facing outward, others keeping an eye on the action. The human handlers' expressions shifted between beaming excitement and quiet concern as they released frog after frog. Sitting in the shallows, snapping up insects, the frogs looked at home.

Wagner, Pope and a technician lingered for hours, trading observations as they watched the frogs settle in. "Putting the first frogs in the water — it caught me off guard how emotional it was," Pope said later. Miles away, across hills and valleys, the second team

Researchers bathe a batch of Cascades frogs in an anti-fungal solution before reintroducing them to Lassen Volcanic National Park (*below left*).

Nancy Nordensten, the chief of resources for the park, Ryan Wagner, a Ph.D. candidate at Washington State University and Karen Pope, formerly of the U.S. Forest Service, prepare to release the first frogs in September (*below*).

was releasing its frogs.

By the end of the morning, Lassen Volcanic National Park's Cascades frog population had risen from zero to 117. In the months and years ahead, the reintroduced frogs must dodge predators, survive the winter, stay healthy, and, ultimately, breed on their own. The scientists' future, too, is uncertain: If the Trump administration continues to cut funding for the Forest Service and national parks, further reintroduction efforts could be severely constrained.

When it comes to reintroducing Cascades frogs and other amphibians to their former habitats, there's no manual to guide the way, said Roland Knapp, a biologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara unaffiliated with this project. Instead, scientists are writing that manual as they go, said Knapp, who works on reintroducing closely related species across the Sierra Nevada. It's through work like this that amphibian decline in the West can be reversed. "You've done the reintroduction, but now you've got all the learning that comes from that," Knapp added. "You're not done. You've just started."

Anton Sorokin is a California-based biologist, photographer and writer who frequently covers wildlife, particularly overlooked species.

REPORTAGE

The gaming advantage

Tribes leverage gaming income to navigate shifting federal economic policies.

BY SHAUN GRISWOLD | ILLUSTRATION BY SUMMER ORR

CALIFORNIA'S first governor, Peter Hardeman Burnett, swore that the racist campaign he championed would not end "until the Indian race becomes extinct." His two years in office brought malnutrition, homicide and forced migration, decimating California's Native populations by nearly 90% between 1848 and 1900.

But Burnett died, his campaign ended, and ultimately, California's Indigenous people survived.

Then, in 1905, the United States publicly disclosed the unratified treaties it had made with 18 California tribes. The tribes responded by building a legal and economic framework for tribal sovereignty. In 1988, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was enacted, and small casinos sprouted on reservations in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Southern California. Similar resorts sprang up across the country, and the economic benefits have helped fuel the struggle for tribal sovereignty.

A recent study from the Harvard Kennedy School Project on Indigenous Governance and Development shows how gaming has helped tribes acquire economic and political capital. The report was written by three Indigenous researchers: Randall Akee (Native Hawaiian), Elijah Moreno (Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation) and Amy Besaw Medford (Brothertown).

"In reality, nearly every tribe is impacted by gaming in some capacity, whether directly or indirectly," the authors wrote. "Past studies on American Indian gaming likely understate its impact, as nearly every tribe in the US may be exposed to various aspects of the industry whether they directly operate a casino themselves or not."

The $43.9 billion tribes reported to the National Indian Gaming Commission (NIGC) last year accounts for nearly 40% of the nation's $115 billion in gaming revenue, according to the American Gaming Association. And tribes are using that money to fund health care, education, small business, philanthropy and other much-needed programs.

Tribal gaming has long faced criticism, including for the negative social impacts of gambling; the Harvard study offers a different perspective on the controversial industry, examining gaming economies and their impact on tribal investments, both in Indigenous economies and the overall U.S. economy. Researchers looked at 14 indicators, including population, income, poverty, labor, housing and education, for reservation communities in the Lower 48 states between 1990 and 2020. (Due to its population, the Navajo Nation was studied separately.) The writers concluded that gaming has been central to tribal economies that have successfully leveraged revenue for political capital, funding groups that lobby for tribal sovereignty, the largest and most prominent being the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

In early September, just weeks before his sudden death on Sept. 26, Indian Gaming Association Chairman Ernie Stevens Jr. (Oneida Nation) joined the Native-run lobby in Washington, D.C., meeting with NCAI leaders from the Ponca Tribes of Nebraska, Pechanga, Cherokee and Muscogee Creek Nations. The nation's largest gaming tribes had come together to remind Congress of Indian Country's economic contributions.

"In the Indian gaming world, we're responsible for 700,000 jobs," Stevens said. "We continue to help this world turn, and we

don't do it by asking for help. We do it *to* help. Ask people to understand what we do is for our communities, for our generation and generations to come."

Stevens said that gaming revenue had returned to "pre-COVID levels." The revenue came from gaming as well as related amenities — entertainment options, conferences, food and lodging.

Stevens said his mentors — Rick Hill, Gay Kingman and Tim Wapato — not only implemented tribal gaming laws, they also built a relationship with Congress to lobby for tribal sovereignty.

"They came to Washington to establish the presence of gaming and help folks understand why it's not just about economic development, it's about tribal sovereignty, our governments, how we interact in today's world, and to defend every aspect of tribal sovereignty," Stevens said.

Under Stevens' leadership, the NIGC used treaty laws to expand tribal gaming, increasing revenues by more than $20 billion and enabling tribes to fund essential services like housing, education and health care, as well as finance other capital projects. When the federal government shut down, the NCAI lobby credited its September meetings with Congress with helping tribes protect the Indian Health Service and Bureau of Indian Education from furloughs and funding cuts.

Tribes with substantial gaming revenue were able to assist their citizens along with others whose tribes lacked casino reserves, providing food aid and paying tribal government employees while their federal counterparts were furloughed during the shutdown. However, the tribes' financial reserves dwindled as the shutdown dragged on, reducing their capacity to help.

On Oct. 29, as the shutdown neared a month long, Ben Mallott, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives, told the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that Alaska's Indigenous people were being forced to choose between "food or fuel." So when the remnants of Typhoon Halong ravaged the western Alaska coast in October, the NCAI and gaming tribes jumped in to help with donations.

"As Cherokees, we have long-settled traditions of coming together and helping others, but especially in times of tragedy or catastrophes such as this," said Cherokee Nation Deputy Principal Chief Bryan Warner. "Our word for it is *Gadugi*, which at its core is all of us working together and supporting one another."

According to the Harvard report, "tribes with successful casinos also often play a significant role in funding community development, benefiting both tribal and non-tribal communities. The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, for example, has used its substantial success in the gaming industry to invest in community projects and support other tribes across Minnesota."

Back in 1906, a year after California tribes obtained their treaty rights, a Bureau of Indian Affairs employee named C.E. Kelsey successfully petitioned the federal government to purchase an additional 235 acres of land to be added to the Pechanga's land in Riverside County. When Mark Macarro became chairman of the Pechanga Band of Indians in 1995, the tribe had just opened its first tiny casino. State law had yet to catch up, but in 1998, California voters approved Proposition 5, which allowed tribal gaming. Throughout that campaign, Macarro reminded people that Prop. 5 would prove a boon for tribal sovereignty. In 2002, the tribe opened a 200,000-square-foot casino and resort in Temecula, California, on the Kelsey Tract. The casino, which is currently one of the county's largest overall employers, has both Native and non-Native workers.

"What we do is for our communities, for our generation and generations to come."

In 2004, Katherine Spilde, chair of the Sycuan Institute on Tribal Gaming at San Diego State University, looked at the tribe for a different Harvard study on casino gambling's impact on overall economic well-being. Spilde is not Indigenous, but her parents were schoolteachers on the White Earth Nation in Minnesota, where she was raised, and she is an expert on tribal gaming.

"Pechanga government's gaming and resort revenues have allowed the Tribe to effectively eliminate its reliance on other governments and to create opportunities that benefit the entire region," Spilde wrote in 2004. "The results are a sense of independence and self-determination among Pechanga citizens, and productive and mutually supportive relations with the surrounding communities where once there was very little positive interaction between the Tribe and its neighbors."

In September, before the shutdown, Macarro said that both Congress and administration officials were coming to understand that tribal self-determination works. "We have much more work to do, but we leave this week with momentum, with allies on both sides of the aisle, and with a shared understanding that when tribal nations thrive America thrives."

Tribal sovereignty endures under long-standing legal frameworks that are strengthened by healthy economies. Ensuring that the U.S. continues to meet its trust and treaty obligations requires ever-evolving negotiations with the federal government. Right now, the U.S. government is shifting radically, in unexpected ways. The NCAI wants the federal government to realize that economically healthy tribes are in a good place to help the U.S. economy.

Cherokee Nation Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. acknowledges that some tribes face serious budget problems, worsened by recent cuts from the federal government. This is why, he said, the NCAI's lobbying efforts are vital to protect projects that are threatened by shifting federal priorities.

"We're pointing out where the Congress can do better, where the agencies can do better; we're pointing out that self-determination is the law of the land, and it's not only the law of the land, it is a prescription that works," Hoskin said. "While we may be able to absorb some of the damage done by cuts, there are tribes for which this is absolutely consequential in terms of stopping services. We're using our resources to do it and asking that the United States ought to step up and help us do it."

Shaun Griswold writes from the New Mexico high desert. A sovereign citizen from the Pueblos of Laguna, Jemez and Zuni, they write about Indigenous people and colonialism.

Get to know the western spotted skunk

A biologist uncovers the hidden life of a small, stinky creature.

BY KYLIE MOHR
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEX BOERSMA

MARIE TOSA KNOWS MORE about the western spotted skunk than almost anyone on Earth. Between 2017 and 2019, as a Ph.D. student at Oregon State University, Tosa trekked all over the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon's Cascade Range, capturing, collaring and following spotted skunks through dense forests and rolling valleys. In the process, she put 300,000 miles on two research trucks and got sprayed anywhere between 50 and 100 times. But it was worth it, she said: Her research revealed new details of the species' diet, movements and habitat preferences.

Though the western spotted skunk is less common and more elusive than the more familiar striped skunk, it's doing better than its cousin back East, where populations have declined by at least 90% since the 1950s. Even today, no one is sure why. "Because nobody was paying attention to it, they really have no idea," said Tosa, who now works for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Tosa hopes her work will help the West's spotted skunks avoid their counterparts' fate. They are, she said, "some of the most amazing critters in the world."

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent for High Country News *who writes from Montana.*

This story is part of High Country News' *Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.* **hcn.org/cbb**

Spotted skunks are some of **the most common carnivores in Western forests**, living from British Columbia to California and as far east as Wyoming, New Mexico and Colorado in both old-growth and younger forests.

Spotted skunks are nocturnal. At night, they hunt for food, find mates and move around. During the day, they sleep in burrows dug by mountain beavers or inside the hollowed-out trunks of giant Douglas firs and hemlock trees.

Spotted skunks weigh between 300 and 800 grams or about 10.5 to 27 ounces — **less than many neighborhood squirrels**, and much less than striped skunks. Traditional GPS collars would weigh them down too much, so Tosa used VHF radio collars, which emit short beeps every couple of seconds. Researchers must get within 500 meters (546 yards) of a skunk to pick up the signal.

Spotted skunks are resourceful, even while captured. Tosa observed them pulling ferns, moss and other material into their temporary cages to use as bedding. "They just make themselves at home," she said.

A western spotted skunk's **home range averages nearly 14 square miles**, larger than that of some ungulates. "It's kind of crazy that they can cover that much ground, being so small," Tosa said.

Black-tailed deer range

Western spotted skunk range

Researchers, who used **detection dogs to sniff out skunk scat**, found poop full of yellow jacket carcasses, an apparent spotted skunk delicacy. Tosa hypothesizes that the skunks avoid stings by gorging on the nests at night, while the insects are sleeping. In the winter, when yellow jackets are less available, the skunks eat more small mammals, including flying squirrels, shrew moles and chipmunks.

Striped skunk

Western spotted skunk

To scare off predators, spotted skunks **sometimes perform handstands** before resorting to spraying. "They make it look completely effortless," Tosa said.

Tosa and her team wore Tyvek suits to **minimize their exposure to skunk spray** during the capturing and collaring process, but "the stench kind of permeates everything," Tosa said. They often got sprayed twice, first while immobilizing the skunk with drugs and again when releasing it from the trap. Tosa quickly became nose blind to the pungent, raw garlicky smell.

Tosa loves spotted skunks so much that she made a spotted skunk costume for her baby's first Halloween.

REPORTAGE

He makes bows — and bow makers

Joshua Hood is decolonizing traditional bow-making and archery education from his Portland backyard.

BY KATIE HILL | PHOTOS BY EVAN BENALLY ATWOOD

WHEN JOSHUA HOOD LOOKS at a Pacific yew tree, he sees more than just the beginnings of a bow.

He sees a partnership that spans generations, a meditation on balance, tension and rest — a lifeway linking him to his Klamath-Modoc ancestors. He also sees his namesake: *nteys s?odt'a,* or "bow worker" in his tribe's language.

For Hood, 35, that name has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Along with constructing custom bows and teaching traditional bow-making and archery courses for majority-BIPOC students in Portland, Oregon, he also runs a nonprofit focused on teaching youth outdoor skills. Every part of Hood's work revolves around traditional archery in one way or another.

People from all walks of life are welcome at Hood's courses, which he announces through his Instagram account. His work fills a growing need in the BIPOC outdoor education space since the Trump administration has slashed grant funding and support for programs that empower historically marginalized communities. When organizations offering primitive skills workshops — such as bushcraft, toolmaking and wilderness survival — move toward high-cost courses and crowded retreats, they often fail to acknowledge their Indigenous roots. Hood's focus on decolonizing the exchange of Indigenous archery knowledge while keeping participation costs down provides an option for a community whose members don't necessarily feel welcome in other modern archery spaces.

"There aren't a lot of Native folks doing this type of work," Hood said. "They aren't as abundant as our counterparts, who have a chokehold on what you might call the 'skills' world." Bow-making courses can cost $1,500 or more for several days of instruction, compared to Hood's class, which runs $500 to $750 for three days. "I have to put food on the table and keep the lights on, but I've been able to do this work without breaking the pockets of our participants," Hood said.

HOOD LEARNED HOW to make bows in his late teens, while teaching at a survival school where a co-worker led bow-

making clinics. He welcomed the chance to learn a new skill, but the bow-making work didn't satisfy him the way he hoped it would. The group used power tools that Hood lacked access to outside class and he didn't like that they purchased commercial lumber from a hardware store.

"I wanted to be able to do this like my ancestors did it, without going to Home Depot," Hood said. At first, he gathered ash saplings and carved them with a whittling knife. Then he began honing his skills with hatchets, draw knives and other hand tools. "I wanted to be able to do this process wherever I gathered the wood," he said.

Hood's method of bow-making begins with the slow, mindful selection of the wood. Earlier in his career, he worked with hazel, ash and dogwood. Now, he prefers harder woods like Osage orange, black locust and Pacific yew, or "tsû'pinksham," the Klamath-Modoc Tribe's traditional choice of wood for bow-making. Today, Pacific yew is in danger of overharvest, so Hood uses it only when making bows for himself or another archer of Klamath-Modoc descent.

Once he selects his tree, he leaves an offering of tobacco as an act of reciprocity. Hood has begun building more meaningful relationships with the trees he harvests since embracing sobriety in 2019, a process he credits with making him more mindful. Asking for permission is important, he said. "We take a life from something very precious, that gives us oxygen, and then it just kind of sits in a void," he said. "The spirit of that tree is like, 'Where am I going next? Am I going to be firewood, or am I going to be made into something, or am I just going to sit and get eaten by bugs?'"

After harvesting the wood, Hood lets it cure for nine months or so, "like a baby in the womb." When the cured piece of wood, known as a "stave," is ready, Hood initiates a ceremony for it before starting his woodworking process.

"We let it know what our intentions are for it, and then we smudge it with cedar, give a prayer, and try to welcome it into a new form that can teach us how to restore balance to our lives," he said, explaining how the limbs of the bow must balance to project an arrow properly. "To have some type of vision, to see a bow in a piece of wood that otherwise normally just looks like a big stick, it's like a mirror," he said. "How do we have vision for where we're going?"

HOOD'S APPRENTICE, VEE, who asked that we not use her last name, also sees bow-making as a metaphor for envisioning a better and brighter future. Vee, 32, made her first bow with Hood in the fall of 2023, after losing her brother to a gunshot wound two years earlier. Hood became a kind of brother figure to her, and the following spring she returned to study bow-making and assist at clinics.

"We take a tree that was once living and bring it back to life in a new form, one shaped by who we are," Vee said. "I've seen people

"I wanted to be able to do this like my ancestors did it, without going to Home Depot."

From left: Students at an archery course led by Joshua Hood at Chinook Landing in Portland, Oregon. Hood stands for a portrait. In addition to archery and bow-making, the nonprofit Hood has co-founded will also offer classes in arrow-making, hide-tanning, knife-carving and creating fire by friction.

come in with hopes of making a bow and walk away with a little more soul, having tended to some of their wounds. Our world is medicine, and healing can be so simple."

Designing an educational course to allow for meaningful moments takes time, and Hood believes in letting each student take as long as necessary to complete their bow. Sometimes, the three-day course ends before a student is finished, so they return to wrap up their work at their own pace.

"Patience is a big value in bow-making," Hood said. "Nothing sacred should be rushed."

Once their work is complete, Hood leads participants through archery practice so they can learn to use their new bows in a safe and attentive atmosphere. His USA Archery instructor certification also qualifies him to teach archery in school settings.

In September, Hood, along with co-founder Joshua Tuski, launched a nonprofit called Learning Through Land that focuses on teaching outdoor skills classes for Portland-area youth. Archery and bow-making are central, but they also offer classes in arrow-making, hide-tanning, knife-carving and creating fire by friction. Hood and Tuski hope to enrich the lives of young people by teaching them these practices and imparting the wisdom that comes with them.

"These are fun and important skills, but also we want to have conversations with students about how they (the skills) can impact our daily lives," Hood said. "There are always teachings within teachings."

Ultimately, Hood aims to someday harvest an animal on his tribe's traditional homelands using a bow of his own making. This would be the ultimate full-circle moment, he said. Until then, he will continue honing his own craft and taking pride in teaching others to do the same. He sees value in people from all backgrounds learning these skills.

"This is in everyone's DNA," Hood said. "We just have to wake it up."

Katie Hill is a freelance journalist and writer based in Missoula, Montana, whose work has appeared in The Guardian, Field & Stream, Outdoor Life *and other publications.*

Hood hopes to enrich the lives of young people by teaching them traditional practices and imparting the wisdom that comes with them.

POEM

Ars Poetica

By Valencia Robin

I woke up singing
my favorite song as a kid
and I mean, really singing,
catching myself all morning,
asking myself what it means,
a reminder perhaps
that we can be strange
— we wake, we sing,
we wonder why we're singing,
we realize how seldom we have a song
in us anymore, remember how we
used to play/be Aretha and Anita
or Earth, Wind and Fire — Maurice
bringing it, sending us on one of the few oldies
where the words 'right on' don't sound silly,
standing in the middle of the room
giving our all to the olive-green sofa
and wood paneling, mama at work
— we even had his little laugh down
and when's the last time we believed
what we were saying so completely,
all that 70's positivity, all that gospel
pretending to be the devil's music
— and is that what ruined us, why we're so bad
at real life — practically screaming the last line,
And if there ain't no beauty, you gotta make some beauty,
deciding without even knowing we'd decided
that that — Lord help us — was the dream.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Valencia Robin read her poem at **hcn.org/ars-poetica**

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"I appreciate the detail that goes into the articles. None of us can sort out all this without being well educated. HCN *helps educate me."*

–Mark Running, Sustainers' Club member

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A stock transfer is one of the most tax-efficient ways to support *HCN*. When you give stock held for more than one year, you avoid paying capital gains taxes — and you can deduct the full market value of the gifted stock on your tax return. It's a win-win for you and us.

Qualified IRA Distribution

If you are 70.5 or older, you may donate up to $108,000 directly from your IRA to *HCN* tax-free. If you're 73 or older, you may use this transfer to satisfy some or all of your required minimum distribution.

Learn more about the many ways you can support *HCN* at **hcn.org/support**

DEAR FRIENDS

HCN's journalism is having on-the-ground impact

THIS YEAR MARKS THE CULMINATION of an ambitious three-year plan created by *High Country News* board and staff to "future proof" *HCN* by developing the tools, skills and strategy that will enable us to thrive and grow in a rapidly changing West and amid an ever-evolving media landscape.

Already, we've done some exciting things. Our sophisticated new tools have enabled us to get our journalism into the hands of the people who need it, and our stories are having real, on-the-ground impact. You'll read more about this in our *Impact Report* in the following pages, but here's a few highlights from this year:

- Our reporting about how federal spending cuts will impact public media in rural and Indigenous communities made noticeable waves. We were cited several times in the amicus brief that NPR member stations and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press filed in the lawsuit brought by NPR (and Colorado stations) against the federal government over its unprecedented clawback of federal funding. *The New York Times* and other news outlets followed our lead.
- When we learned that the White House had ordered federal agencies to cancel news subscriptions amid a tsunami of firings and forced retirements, we decided to offer all federal employees, including those who have recently lost jobs, free access to our reporting. More than 700 people have signed up so far, sparking what we hope will be new and lasting relationships with *HCN*.
- We hosted events around the West and online, connecting with readers over topics ranging from how young people are shaping the battle against climate change to the work of BIPOC and LGBTQ communities in the outdoor space and how the Rock Creek Band of the Yakama Nation is fighting to protect its sacred lands in Washington from energy development.

We do not do this work alone. Our reporters and editors regularly partner with other publications, an arrangement that enhances the quality of our journalism and empowers communities West-wide to tell their own stories. Some recent examples of our collaborative efforts include:

- *HCN* continues to be a sought-after partner for other news organizations. In 2025, we worked with *Public Domain* to bring readers an investigation into Utah's PR campaign for seizing public lands, while our collaboration with *Capital B News* resulted in a story about how Black communities in Phoenix are being impacted by climate change, and our partnership with *Type Investigations* revealed how California's new power outage program, designed to reduce wildfires, leaves customers experiencing thousands of outages a year.
- Our September 2025 issue, "Food and Power in the West," was a collaboration between *HCN* and the *Food & Environment Reporting Network (FERN)*. In this special issue, we worked to untangle the web of food production in the West, tracing it from the people who raise it to the ones who ship it, market it, sell it and profit from it.

Biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Idaho office survey for greater sage-grouse in Owyhee County, Idaho, in 2024. *HCN* is offering free access to our reporting to all federal workers. **Lena Chang / USFWS**

We've won awards and received plenty of love notes (and some hate mail), but what we truly care about is having a positive and lasting impact on Western landscapes and communities. Our communities are at the heart of what we do, and they have sustained this organization for half a century.

I like to sum up *HCN*'s theory of change like this:

1. There is strength in community.
HCN exists to foster a sense of community and belonging, and to share authentic insights into the region with people everywhere who care about the West.

2. Stories can spark change.
Our in-depth, public-interest journalism is intended to inspire action and spark on-the-ground change.

3. Stories + community = change that can endure.
We believe that this powerful combination of community bonds and shared stories has the power to create lasting solutions to the region's most pressing challenges.

None of this work would be possible without you, of course. Take heart in reading the insightful and thought-provoking stories in this issue and reviewing our *2025 Impact Report*, knowing that all of this was made possible thanks to your continued investment in *High Country News*. Thank you!

With heart,

—Greg Hanscom, executive director and publisher

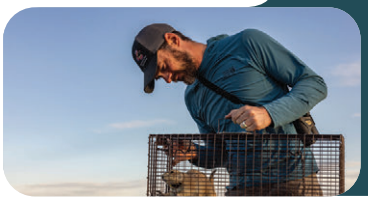
"I was born and raised in the Intermountain West, and my education and career have held me in unfortunate diaspora for the last 50 years. Worth its weight in platinum, HCN *has always provided a vital and vibrant connection for important issues, developments and people in my homeland. I'd have been well and truly lost without it. Keep up the great work, and thanks!"*

— L.V. Giddings | Silver Spring, Maryland

Stories with Impact

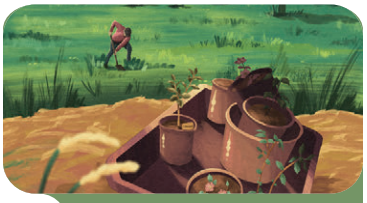
Our top stories from the year that resounded across the West (and beyond).

1 January Issue



Why the West needs prairie dogs
Christine Peterson

They're among the region's most despised species, but some tribes, researchers and landowners are racing to save them.



2 February Issue

A veteran transforms a legacy of violence into a campaign for restoration
Alexander Lemons

How a former Marine found a road to repair.

The true cost of the huckleberry industry
Josephine Woolington

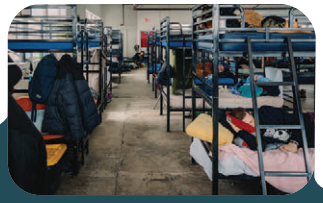
The Kamiłpa Band of the Yakama Nation has wanted an end to commercial picking of a critical cultural resource for years. Finally, the Forest Service is expected to make a decision.

3 March Issue

The horses and mules that moved mountains and hearts | Shi En Kim

Forest Service stock animals are indispensable to trail work on public lands in the West. Trump's radical upheaval is accelerating the death of a unique way of life.

4 April Issue



5 May Issue

The toll of Bozeman's housing crisis | Nick Bowlin

At the small city's only emergency shelter, demand is higher and the work is harder than ever.

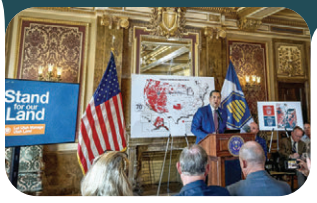
7 July Issue

Beneath the blazing sun, Black Phoenix sows community
Partnership with *Capital B News* | Adam Mahoney

Climate change is creating a mental health crisis in Phoenix. A budding movement in the desert might solve it.

Inside Utah's PR campaign to seize public lands
Partnership with *Public Domain* | Jimmy Tobias

Utah used actors, AI, stagecraft and NDAs as it sought to sway public opinion and take control of 18.5 million acres of federal public land.

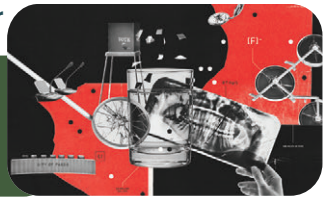


6 June online exclusive

Want flouride in the water? Too bad | Leah Sottile

Across the West, lawmakers are skipping over the will of voters and yanking fluoride.

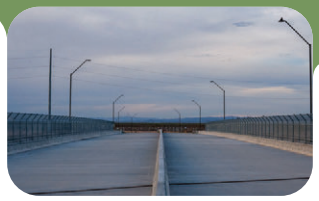
12 November Issue



The dried out subdivisions of Phoenix
Tony Davis

A groundwater crisis halted the construction of thousands of homes and pitted affordability against environmental concerns.

11 October Issue



"The work of your magazine and all who contribute are providing a vital service to the transformation that is ongoing in today's world. No other magazine could replace the work you all do, and the unique niche that you are providing to serve the evolutionary shift to a new, more balanced, enlightened culture."

— Scott Chausse | Paonia, Colorado

10 September Issue

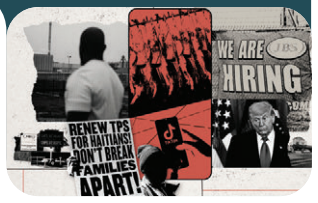
The Rio Grande's pecan problem | Partnership with the Food & Environment Reporting Network | Jeremy Miller

How Big Ag is threatening New Mexico's water supply.

How an immigration raid reshaped meatpacking — and America | Partnership with the Food & Environment Reporting Network | Ted Genoways, Esther Honig and Bryan Chou

In 2006, large-scale ICE raids in Greeley, Colorado, and elsewhere, triggered massive changes to the meatpacking workplace that continue reshaping the center of the country.

9 September Issue



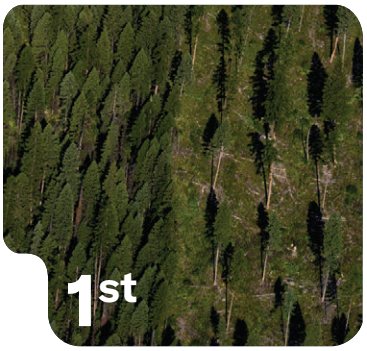
Native languages need radio, which is at risk of being lost
Chad Bradley

With the Trump administration cutting funds for public media, Indigenous radio struggles to preserve and grow endangered tribal languages.

8 August Issue

Awards & Recognition

HCN picked up 10 awards from the **Indigenous Journalists Association**, including:



HCN Associate Editor Anna V. Smith and Maria Parazo Rose, a reporter and spatial data analyst, won **first place for "best coverage of Indigenous communities"** for an investigation into state trust lands on reservations. It was part of a larger collaboration with *Grist* that also won **this year's Richard La Course Award — a high honor.**

Staff writer B. "Toastie" Oaster won **third place in the "Best environmental coverage" category** for their reporting on climate and environmental obstacles faced by Indigenous communities in the Northwest, and **second place for best editorial** for a thoughtful piece about the challenges of describing a sacred site without sharing sensitive information.

Paul Robert Wolf Wilson's images of tree sitters in Oregon earned him the **Best News Photo prize.** Other photography awards included an Indigenous celebration of Hanford, fish camps on the Yukon River, a Native-led native plants movement, and a group that is creating a gathering place for Alaska.

HCN contributors won **top honors for longform magazine writing** — one for a piece about a new DNA technique that could bring closure for families of missing and murdered Indigenous people, and the other for a story about tribes' role in decommissioning dams on the Klamath River.

Real Impact: Indigenous Affairs Editor Sunnie Clahchischiligi was elected incoming board president of the Indigenous Journalists Association this year.

How Our Stories Are Shared

HCN deepens our impact by offering much of our content for re-publishing in other media outlets for no cost. **Here are just a few newsrooms that shared our reporting in 2025:**

Buckrail, Truthout, Grist, Undark Magazine, Canary Media, Native News Online, Environmental Health News, Alaska Beacon, Cascade PBS, Mother Jones, Colorado Times Recorder, Sierra Magazine, Vox, National Parks Coalition, WyoFile, the *Arizona Mirror,* the *Navajo-Hopi Observer* and many, many more.

Unique sources that have syndicated our stories:

94

Number of stories shared:

232

Collaborations

HCN often collaborates with other newsrooms, sharing both editorial and funding resources so that we can extend our reach and delve deeply into complex issues. In 2025, we partnered with a number of outstanding newsrooms:

ProPublica

Public Domain

Food & Environment Reporting Network

KUNR Public Radio | 88.7 FM

Capital B

typeinvestigations

FREE RANGE

A *ProPublica* and *High Country News* investigation finds that government programs intended to support Western ranchers benefit a very wealthy few – while taxpayers and public lands bear the cost.

By MARK OLALDE and JIMMY TOBIAS
with additional research by GABRIEL SANDOVAL and additional data reporting by LUCAS WALDRON

Photography by ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA

PART I: WHO BENEFITS

THE WEALTHY PROFIT FROM PUBLIC LANDS. TAXPAYERS PICK UP THE TAB.

Roughly two-thirds of grazing on Bureau of Land Management land is controlled by just 10% of permit holders.

STAN KROENKE DOESN'T NEED FEDERAL HELP TO MAKE A BUSINESS FLOURISH. He is worth an estimated $20 billion, a fortune that has allowed him to become one of America's largest property owners and afforded him stakes in storied sports franchises, including the Denver Nuggets and England's Arsenal soccer club.

Yet Kroenke, whose wife is an heiress to the Walmart fortune, benefits from one of the federal government's bedrock subsidy programs.

As owner of the Winecup Gamble Ranch, which sprawls across grasslands, streams and a mountain range east of Elko, Nevada, Kroenke is entitled to graze his cattle on public lands for less than 15% of the fees he would pay on private land. The public-lands grazing program, formalized in the 1930s to contain the rampant overgrazing that contributed to the Dust Bowl, has grown to serve operations including billionaire hobby

▲ Northwest Colorado rancher Danna Camblin, on horseback, moves her family's herd of cattle to a new pasture to give the land time to recover.

ranchers, mining companies, utilities and large corporate outfits, providing benefits unimagined by its founding law.

President Donald Trump's administration plans to make the program even more generous — pushing to open even more of the 240 million acres of Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service grazing land to livestock while reducing oversight of the environmental damage. This, members of the administration contend, will further its goal of using public lands to fuel the economy and eliminate the national debt.

"That's the balance sheet of America," Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum said of federal lands at his confirmation hearing in January, "and, if we were a company, they would look at us and say, 'Wow, you are really restricting your balance sheet.'"

ProPublica and *High Country News* set out to investigate the transformation of the grazing system into a massive subsidy program. In the late 1970s, Congress raised the fees to graze on public lands to reflect open market prices at the time. But the fees have barely budged in decades. The government still charges ranchers $1.35 per animal unit month, a 93% discount, on average, on the price of grazing on private lands. (An animal unit month, or AUM, represents the typical amount of forage a cow and her calf eat in a month.)

Our analysis found that in 2024 alone, the federal government poured at least $2.5 billion into subsidy programs that public-lands ranchers can access, not including the steep discount on forage. Subsidies benefiting public-lands ranchers include disaster assistance after droughts and floods, cheap crop insurance, funding for fences and watering holes, and compensation for animals lost to predators.

Benefits flow largely to a select few like Kroenke. Roughly two-thirds of all the livestock grazing on BLM acreage is controlled by just 10% of ranchers, our analysis showed. On Forest Service land, the top 10% of permittees control more than 50% of grazing. This concentration of control has been the status quo for decades. In 1999, the *San Jose Mercury News* undertook a similar study and found that the largest ranchers controlled the same proportion of grazing within BLM jurisdiction as they do today.

Meanwhile, the agencies' oversight of livestock's environmental impact has declined dramatically in recent years. Lawmakers have allowed an increasing number of grazing permits to be automatically renewed, even when environmental reviews have not been completed or the land has been flagged as being in poor condition.

The Trump administration's push to further underwrite the livestock industry supports ranchers like Kroenke, whose Winecup Gamble is advertised as covering nearly 1 million acres. More than half of that is federal public land that can support roughly 9,000 head of cattle, according to an advertisement in brokerage listings. Last year, Kroenke paid the government about $50,000 in grazing fees to use the BLM land around the ranch — an 87% discount on the market rate, according to a *ProPublica* and *High Country News* analysis of government data. Previous owners enjoyed similar economic benefits. Before Kroenke, the ranch belonged to Paul Fireman, the longtime CEO of Reebok, who used losses from companies affiliated with the ranch as a $22 million tax write-off between 2003 and 2018, internal IRS data shows. And before Fireman, it was owned by others, including Hollywood superstar Jimmy Stewart of *It's a Wonderful Life* fame.

The land where Kroenke runs his cattle has been degraded by overgrazing, according to the BLM. Kroenke's representatives did not return messages seeking comment. Fireman declined to comment.

The Trump administration's retooling of this system is being worked out behind closed doors. In May, the BLM sent a draft of proposed revisions to federal grazing regulations — what would be the first updates to them since the 1990s — to the U.S. Department of the Interior, according to communications reviewed by *ProPublica* and *High Country News*.

In October, the administration released a 13-page

"Plan to Fortify the American Beef Industry." In addition to instructing the BLM and Forest Service to amend grazing regulations, including those that govern how ranchers obtain permits to graze their herds and how environmental damage from their animals is assessed, the plan called for increasing the subsidies available to ranchers for drought and wildfire relief, for livestock killed by predators and for government-backed insurance.

The Forest Service did not respond to requests for comment. The White House referred questions to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which said in a statement, "Livestock grazing is not only a federally and statutorily recognized appropriate land use, but a proven land management tool, one that reduces invasive species and wildfire risk, enhances ecosystem health, and supports rural stewardship."

In a statement, a BLM spokesperson said that the agency's mandate includes "sustaining a healthy and economically viable grazing program that benefits rural communities, supports America's ranching heritage, and promotes responsible stewardship of public lands. The grazing program plays an important role in local economies and land management, providing tools to reduce wildfire risk, manage invasive species, and maintain open landscapes."

Ranchers say that taxpayers benefit from helping them continue their work, since public-lands grazing can prevent private land from being sold and paved over. Bill Fales and his family run a ranch in western Colorado that has been in his wife's family for more than a century, and their cattle graze in the nearby White River National Forest. "The wildlife here is dependent on these ranches staying as open ranch land," he said. As development elsewhere carves up habitat, Fales said, the public and private lands his cattle graze are increasingly shared by elk, bears, mountain lions and other species.

Ranchers and their advocates also point to the livestock industry's production of meat, leather and wool. And as a pillar of rural economies, ranching preserves a uniquely American way of life.

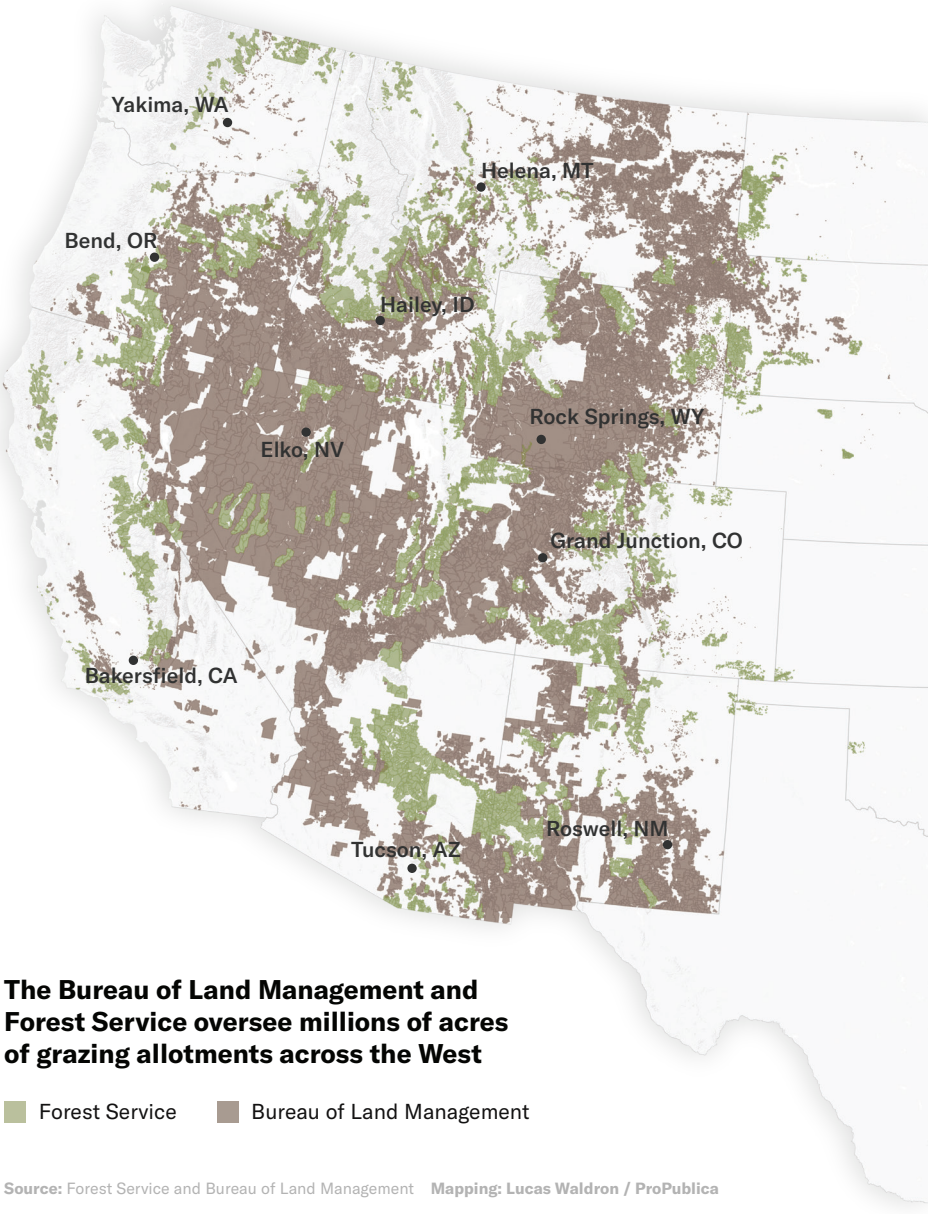
The major trade groups representing public lands ranchers did not respond to requests for comment.

While the country loses money on public-lands ranching, both ranchers and critics of the system agree on one thing: Without subsidies, many smaller operators would go out of business.

SETTLERS COVERED MUCH OF THE WEST WITH CATTLE

beginning in the mid-1800s, spurred by laws and incentives meant to realize the country's "manifest destiny." As the nation expanded, settlers, with the backing of the federal government and the military, seized the Indigenous land that would later be called the public domain.

Unchecked grazing followed.



The Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service oversee millions of acres of grazing allotments across the West

Forest Service Bureau of Land Management

Source: Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management **Mapping: Lucas Waldron / ProPublica**

> "On the Western slope of Colorado and in nearby States I saw waste, competition, overuse, and abuse of valuable range lands and watersheds eating into the very heart of Western economy," observed Rep. Edward Taylor, a Colorado Democrat, as Congress was considering how to properly manage grazing in the 1930s. "The livestock industry, through circumstances beyond its control, was headed for self-strangulation."
>
> In 1934, as Depression Era dust storms darkened the skies over the Great Plains, worsened by overgrazing that denuded grasslands, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Taylor Grazing Act, named for the lawmaker. It divided much of the public domain into parcels, called allotments, and established a permit system to lease them a decade at a time.

Congress modernized laws governing public lands in 1976 with the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, which required federal agencies to balance competing uses, such as grazing, mining, timber, oil drilling and recreation. Two years later, Congress passed a law that brought grazing fees in line with the value of forage on the open market at the time.

Today, ranching interest groups justify their subsidies by arguing that their livestock feed the country. According to Agriculture Department research, ranching on federal lands accounts for $3.3 billion in economic output annually and supports nearly 50,000 jobs.

But grazing on public lands sustains just 2% of the nation's beef cattle while accounting for a vanishingly small proportion of the country's agriculture industry.

ProPublica and *High Country News*' analysis found that the government disproportionately benefits the largest ranchers, who account for a majority of public-lands grazing.

The J.R. Simplot Co. is the largest rancher on BLM land. Founded as a family business in Idaho nearly a century ago, it made a fortune in part by selling potatoes to McDonald's. The business has since ballooned into a multinational agricultural conglomerate. J.R. Simplot benefits significantly from subsidized forage, paying $2.4 million below market rate to graze nearly 150,000 AUMs on federal lands last year, according to an analysis of BLM and Forest Service data.

The company did not respond to a request for comment.

Industrywide, the $21 million collected from ranchers by the BLM and Forest Service was about $284 million below market rate for forage last year.

Fales, the Colorado rancher, relies on access to cheaper forage on federal land. To him, it makes sense that grazing there is less expensive. "Private leases are almost always more productive land," he said. And unlike private leases, public leases typically require ranchers to pay for the maintenance of infrastructure like fences and water tanks beyond what land-management agencies fund.

The full cost to taxpayers, including grazing's impact on the land, is unknown.

Even before Trump began to aggressively downsize the federal workforce, it was impossible for agencies' limited staff to monitor the public lands for environmental damage from excessive grazing. The number of BLM rangeland managers fell by 39% from 2019 through 2024, according to the most recent Office of Personnel Management data. By June 2025, after the Trump administration spurred a mass exodus from the federal workforce, the number had shrunk by another 9%, according to internal BLM employment data.

Now, each rangeland manager is responsible for an average of 716 square miles, making it impossible for them to inspect their entire territory every year, BLM employees said.

On the Winecup Gamble Ranch near the Nevada-Utah border, billionaire owner Stan Kroenke has access to steeply discounted forage on more than half a million acres of Bureau of Land Management grazing allotments.

FOR MANY OF THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST RANCHERS, the benefits of running cattle on public lands extend beyond profits from selling beef.

In June, Air Force Two landed in Butte, Montana, where Vice President JD Vance transferred to a motorcade of black SUVs that shuttled him south to a sprawling cattle operation near Yellowstone National Park. Vance had traveled to this remote ranch to meet with its owner — Rupert Murdoch, the billionaire founder of Fox News.

In 2021, Murdoch purchased the Beaverhead Ranch for $200 million from a subsidiary of Koch Industries, the conglomerate controlled by conservative billionaire Charles Koch. Peggy Rockefeller Dulany, an heir to the Rockefeller fortune, owns a massive ranch nearby. Dulany's ranch did not respond to a request for comment.

"This is a profound responsibility," Murdoch told *The Wall Street Journal* through a spokesperson when he bought the ranch. "We feel privileged to assume ownership of this beautiful land and look forward to continually enhancing both the commercial cattle business and the conservation assets across the ranch."

Ultrawealthy families like the Murdochs, Kochs and Rockefellers own cattle ranches for a variety of reasons. Some want a taste of cowboy-themed luxury or the status gained from controlling vast and beautiful landscapes.

For some, it's also good business. Even hobby ranches qualify for big property tax breaks in certain jurisdictions. Business expenses related to ranching can be deducted from federal taxes. And federal agencies assign grazing permits to the owners of nearby private ranches, called "base properties," inflating the value of those properties and making them stable long-term investments. Real estate agents touted Murdoch's ranch as encompassing 340,000 acres, but two-thirds of that land is public and leased from the Forest Service and BLM.

▲ Cattle congregate at a watering hole (*top left*) near northern Nevada's Cortez Mountains, cutting paths into a checkerboard of public BLM lands and private Nevada Gold Mines property, including the massive Goldstrike Mine north of Carlin, Nevada (*right*).

Chris Jasmine, (*bottom left*) oversees a livestock operation for Nevada Gold Mines that grazes around 5,000 head of cattle on public and private lands.

As with Kroenke's operation, taxpayers help underwrite grazing at Murdoch's ranch.

Beaverhead paid less than $25,000, 95% below market rate, to graze on federal lands last year, according to an analysis of agency data.

At least one of Beaverhead's BLM allotments in the picturesque Centennial Valley — a several-thousand-acre parcel known as Long Creek AMP — is failing environmental standards as a result of grazing. Matador Ranch and Cattle, which was formed from the aggregation of Beaverhead and a smaller ranch purchased by Murdoch in 2021, declined to comment for this story.

Public-lands grazing can also help advance unrelated businesses. The Southern Nevada Water Authority, which serves the Las Vegas Valley, is continually searching for new sources of water. Beginning in the 2000s, the utility purchased land hundreds of miles from Las Vegas in order to acquire its groundwater rights. Those properties were associated with public-lands grazing permits, which the utility inherited. Bronson Mack, the water authority's

spokesperson, said in a statement that it continues the grazing operation as part of its "maintenance and management of property assets, ranch assets, and environmental resources in the area."

Mining companies are among the biggest public-lands ranchers, in part because grazing permits afford them greater control over areas near their mines. Copper-mining companies like Freeport-McMoRan, Hudbay Minerals and Rio Tinto all run large cattle operations in Arizona, for example.

A Hudbay representative sent a statement that said, "Ranching and mining have coexisted in Arizona for generations, and we operate both with the same commitment to land stewardship and care for our neighboring communities." The other companies did not respond to requests for comment.

Nevada Gold Mines, which owns 11 ranches surrounding its northern Nevada operations, is the behemoth of the group. A joint venture between the world's two largest gold-mining companies, the company holds millions of acres of grazing permits.

"We own them for access," explained Chris Jasmine, the company's manager of biodiversity and rangelands. "Access to mineral rights, water rights and mitigation credits."

Many of Nevada Gold Mines' grazing permits surround its open pits, including the largest gold-mining complex in the world. Access to that land makes it easier for the company to participate in programs that give it credits in exchange for environmental restoration projects. Then, the company can either sell these credits to other companies or use them to offset its environmental impacts and expand its mines.

Jeff Burgess, who tracks grazing subsidies via a website he calls the Arizona Grazing Clearinghouse, said such massive government assistance provides little benefit to taxpayers.

"When does the spigot stop? When do we stop throwing away money?" asked Burgess. "It's a tyranny of the minority."

"WE OWN THEM FOR ACCESS. ACCESS TO MINERAL RIGHTS, WATER RIGHTS AND MITIGATION CREDITS."

Chris Jasmine, manager of biodiversity and rangelands, Nevada Gold Mines

IN CENTRAL NEVADA'S REESE RIVER VALLEY, A RED-BRICK farmhouse that once served as the headquarters of the Hess Ranch has been reduced to crumbling chimneys and shattered windows. Despite its dilapidated appearance, this ranch is one of the private base properties that has allowed a little-known company called BTAZ Nevada to assemble a livestock empire that stretches across roughly 4,000 square miles of public lands, according to a Western Watersheds Project analysis of BLM and Forest Service data.

This empire illustrates the livestock industry's consolidation, the subsidies that prop it up and the environmental harm that often follows.

Based in Fremont, Nebraska, BTAZ belongs to the Barta family, which owns Sav-Rx, an online provider of prescription medication. The contact phone number BTAZ provided to the BLM is a Sav-Rx customer service line. The family patriarch, Jim Barta, was convicted in 2013 on felony charges for conspiracy to commit bribery. (The conviction was overturned after a judge ruled that Barta had been subjected to entrapment. Barta has since died.)

The Bartas' operation, now among the largest beneficiaries of the public-land grazing system, includes permits in Nevada, Oregon and Nebraska. Last year, BTAZ paid the government $86,000, $679,000 less than the market rate, according to agency data.

In the Toiyabe Range of Nevada, where BTAZ's BLM and Forest Service grazing allotments border each other, cow feces covered the ground around a stock tank fed by mountain streams. A dead raven floated on the water's surface. The BLM listed allotments in this area as failing land-health standards due to grazing in 2020 and again in 2024.

Higher in the mountains, the evidence of BTAZ's grazing was even clearer: swaths of ground chewed and trampled bare, discarded plastic piping, cow feces and bones in an unfenced creek. Streams like these were once suitable habitat for native Lahontan cutthroat trout. But activities such as grazing and development have degraded so much habitat that the threatened species now occupies only 12% of its historical range, according to a 2023 survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"This is completely unnecessary," Paul Ruprecht, Nevada director of the Western Watersheds Project, said as he surveyed the damage. "It's not supporting the local economy, at least in any major way; it's not providing significant amounts of food for anyone; it's being heavily subsidized at every turn by taxpayers; it's not adding anything to the scenery or the wildlife."

BTAZ did not respond to requests for comment.

SMALLER RANCHERS HAVE ACCESS TO MOST OF THE SAME subsidies as the wealthiest ranchers, but the money isn't enough to protect them from harsh economic headwinds.

Roughly 18,000 permittees graze livestock on BLM or Forest Service land. The bottom half accounts for less than 4% of the AUMs on BLM land and less than 10% of those on Forest Service land, an analysis of the agencies' data found.

IF THE CAMBLINS LOSE THEIR FEDERAL GRAZING PERMITS, THEY MIGHT HAVE TO SELL THEIR PRIVATE LAND.

◀

Paul Ruprecht, Nevada director of the Western Watersheds Project, examines a water trough that straddles a boundary between BLM and Forest Service lands in central Nevada's Reese River Valley and is used by a BTAZ herd.

On a BTAZ grazing allotment, cow bones litter the ground near a degraded creek, the type of ecosystem that once supported the threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout.

The smaller operations lack the economies of scale available to larger corporations, making it difficult for them to survive on agriculture's thin profit margins. They're also more vulnerable to shifting conditions on the ground. Climate change has strained their water supplies. And more than 70,000 wild horses and burros now compete with livestock for forage.

Consolidation in the meatpacking industry is further squeezing ranchers. The four largest operations have taken over more than 80% of the market, giving them leverage to lower the prices paid to ranchers.

Burgess argues the federal government should stop supporting ranchers who would otherwise go out of business. "They refuse to face the reality that a lot of people aren't going to be able to raise cattle profitably, so they're just throwing money at it," he said, calling the system "a vestige of the past."

That could have ripple effects, shuttering businesses in rural towns. It could also force small ranchers to sell their private land — perhaps to developers who would build on the open spaces, perhaps to wealthy owners like Kroenke or BTAZ.

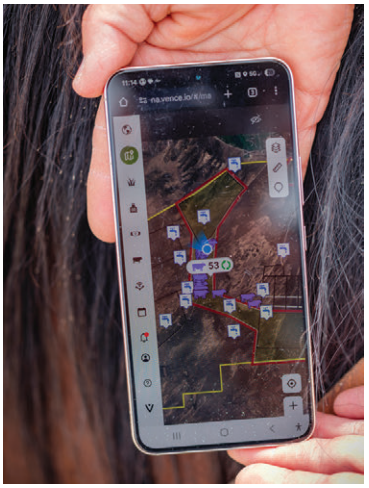
Mike and Danna Camblin run a small cattle operation near the Yampa River in northwest Colorado. Years of drought have forced them to downsize their herd, while each year they must tie up much of their money in their operation until they can sell their animals. Even with beef prices breaking records, they couldn't turn a profit without subsidized drought insurance and other government support — including the ability to graze cheaply on federal land.

"Most of these BLM leases have been in the family for years and years, and, if you take care of it, the BLM will allow you to continue to stay," Mike Camblin said. If they lose their federal grazing permits or otherwise can't make the economics work, the Camblins might have to sell their private land. Camblin has mixed feelings about the influence of government assistance on his industry, saying it "tethers us to those subsidies."

"That's where they screwed up, they started subsidizing a lot of these guys clear back in the Dust Bowl," Camblin said of the biggest ranches. Some larger operators who don't need government assistance take advantage of the system, he said, speaking favorably of an income-based metric that limits richer producers' access to certain agricultural subsidies.

Smaller ranchers' precarious financial situation can lead to environmental harm, as they may run too many livestock for too long on federal land where grazing is cheaper.

The Camblins make environmental stewardship part



of their operation — monitoring soil and plant health and rotating their several hundred head of cattle among pastures to let the ground rest — but that adds costs.

"A cow turd will tell you more than anything else," Camblin remarked as he eyed a fresh one left by his cattle. If it's flat, that means the cow is getting enough protein from the grass, he said. If it degrades rapidly, that means insects are attracted to the plentiful organic matter. "I spend more time looking down than at the cattle."

Technology helps them rotate their herds. Danna Camblin's smartphone displayed a satellite view of the area that showed purple cow icons confined within red polygons — virtual fences that shock the cattle via collars should they stray. Unlike physical fences, virtual fences don't get in the way of migrating wildlife, and the Camblins can redraw them in an instant to shift their cattle to less-grazed areas.

Leasing the collars for the system cost nearly $18,000 last year, Mike Camblin said.

▲ Mike Camblin (*left*) and his wife, Danna (*top right*), ranchers in northwest Colorado, use virtual fencing technology to move their cattle.

Silvia Secchi, a University of Iowa economist who studies agriculture, said federal grazing subsidies need to be reimagined so they benefit the American public instead of enriching the wealthiest ranchers. She suggested potential solutions like subsidizing co-ops that allow smaller ranchers to access economies of scale, capping the size of ranching operations that pay below market rate for forage and ending disaster payments for climate change-fueled droughts that are here to stay.

"We have baseline subsidies that are going up and up and up because we are not telling farmers to change the way you do things to adapt," Secchi said.

Secchi and the Camblins agree that ending all public support would have repercussions for rural communities and landscapes. Mike Camblin acknowledged it could put his and Danna's operation at risk.

"You're going to lose your small rancher," he said.

PART II: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

CONGRESS MADE IT EASIER TO IGNORE GRAZING IMPACTS. AGENCY OVERSIGHT PLUMMETED.

Federal law requires that agencies review the impacts of grazing on public lands. Government employees allege that the system is riddled with loopholes and caveats.

ONCE EVERY 10 YEARS, RANCHERS MUST RENEW THE PERMITS THAT ALLOW THEIR cattle, sheep and other livestock to graze on the West's public domain. These renewals are the government's best opportunity to address how those livestock are harming the environment.

The Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service, which manage the majority of public lands, are required by law to review each permit before deciding whether to place additional conditions on it or — in rare cases — to deny its renewal.

But in 2014, Congress mandated that the agencies automatically renew permits for another decade if they are unable to complete the reviews. This exemption has dramatically reduced scrutiny of grazing's impact on public lands.

In 2013, the BLM approved grazing on 47% of its land open to livestock without an environmental review, a *ProPublica* and *High Country News* analysis of agency data showed. (The status of about another 10% of BLM land was unclear that year.) A decade later, the BLM authorized grazing on roughly 75% of its acreage without review, the analysis found.

A similar study by the Western Watersheds Project found a steep decline in environmental reviews on grazing land managed by the Forest Service.

This diminishing oversight has coincided with a sharp drop in the number of federal employees who complete the reviews. These staffers also conduct land-health assessments of large parcels to help determine whether permits in the area need changes to protect natural resources.

The BLM's rangeland management staff shrank 39% between 2020 and 2024, according to Office of Personnel Management data. President Donald Trump's administration is further hamstringing the BLM: About 1 in 10 rangeland staffers left the agency between last November's election and June, according to agency records.

When agency staff aren't monitoring the land, cattle can graze where they're not supposed to, or in greater numbers or for longer periods than permitted. Such overgrazing can spread invasive plants by dispersing seeds and disturbing the soil, pushing out native species and increasing wildfire risk. When herds strip vegetation near creeks and streams, silt flows into the waterways, wiping out fish nurseries. And, without adequate staff to amend permits, agencies lose the chance to reduce the number of animals on an allotment — and the climate-warming methane they emit.

Once a permit is renewed, with or without a review, it becomes more difficult to rectify such harms for another decade.

Ten current and former BLM rangeland management employees said in interviews that they felt pressure to go easy on ranchers. This included downplaying environmental harm in permit reviews and land-health assessments, according to BLM staffers who worked in rangeland management. Several spoke on condition of anonymity because they still work for the government.

"Sometimes the truth was spoken, but, more often

▲ A cow carcass lies under mesquite trees in Las Cienegas National Conservation Area in Arizona.

than not, it was not the truth," one BLM employee said of agency oversight.

In a statement, an agency spokesperson said, "The BLM is committed to transparency, sound science, and public participation as it administers grazing permits and considers updates to grazing regulations."

In a shift, the Trump administration placed the approval process for all the BLM's contracts and agreements of value in the hands of political appointees rather than career civil servants. In recent months, officials cut funding for an app that assists ranchers in collecting soil and vegetation data for use in permitting, for contractors who manage the data that informs grazing permits, for New Mexico farmers growing seeds used in restoration projects and for soil research in the Southwest, according to BLM records obtained by *ProPublica* and *High Country News*.

"Does not believe this action is needed to meet the administration priorities," the cancellations read.

The Forest Service did not respond to requests for comment. The White House referred questions to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which said in a statement, "Ranching is often a multi-generation practice that serves to keep working landscapes intact, while also preserving open space, and benefiting recreation, wildlife, and watersheds."

TO GAUGE THE EFFECTS OF THIS SHRINKING OVERSIGHT, *ProPublica* and *High Country News* toured federal grazing allotments in Arizona, Colorado, Montana and Nevada, finding evidence of either unpermitted grazing or habitat degraded by livestock in each state. In Arizona alone, reporters witnessed such issues in two national conservation areas, a national monument and a national forest.

On an allotment within Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, an expanse of desert grasslands and forested streams southeast of Tucson, the BLM lets up to 1,500 head of cattle graze across roughly 35,000 acres. These permits were recently reauthorized until 2035 using the exemption that allows environmental reviews to be skipped.

During a visit in late April, a grove of hearty cottonwoods stood against the afternoon sun, casting cool shadows over a narrow creek. This stretch of green sustains birds, frogs, snakes and ocelots. It's also designated under federal law as critical habitat for five threatened or endangered species. Cattle are not allowed in the creekbed, but a thin barbed-wire fence meant to stop the animals lay crumpled in the dirt.

A native leopard frog broke the hot afternoon stillness as it leapt from the creek's bank. Its launching

pad was the hardened mud imprint of a cow hoof, and it landed with a plop in water fouled by cow feces and the partially submerged bones of a cow corpse. A half-dozen cattle crashed through the creek and up the steep embankment, tearing up plants that protected the soil from erosion and sending silt billowing into the water.

"Looks like a sewer," Chris Bugbee, a wildlife ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, remarked as he took in the destruction. "This one hurts. There is no excuse."

A 2024 BLM land-health assessment listed the grazing allotment as "ALL STANDARDS MET." In April, a camouflaged trail camera bearing the agency's insignia was pointed toward the creek. (*ProPublica* and *High Country News* submitted a public records request for images on the camera's memory card in May, but the BLM has yet to fulfill the request.)

No ranchers paid to graze their livestock in this allotment last year, according to BLM data, so it is unclear who owned the cattle. The Arizona Cattle Growers' Association, which represents ranchers in the state, did not respond to requests for comment.

Each year for the past eight years, Bugbee and his team have surveyed grazing impacts on the banks of streams and rivers in the Southwest that are designated as critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act. Half of the 2,400 miles of streams they inspected "showed significant damage from livestock grazing," according to their March report.

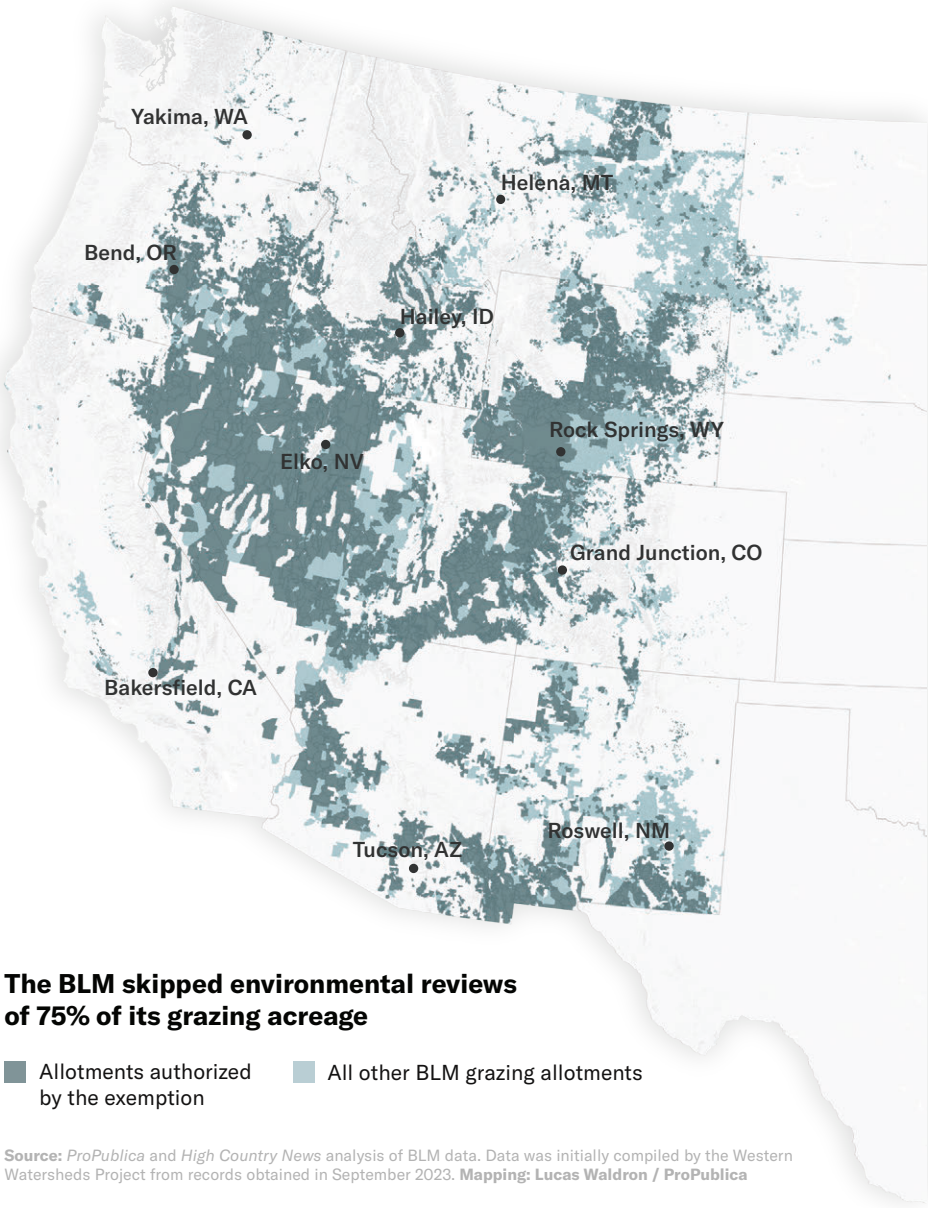
The industry maintains that the presence of livestock benefits many ecosystems, pointing to studies that have found, for example, that grazing can increase soil's ability to hold carbon dioxide that would otherwise contribute to climate change. Other research suggests that, when managed properly, grazing can improve habitat health and allow it to support a more diverse mix of species.

Grazing also reduces vegetation that could fuel wildfires. Frank Shirts Jr., owner of the largest sheep operation on Forest Service land, said that sheep eat invasive weeds and brush, creating firebreaks. "These animals are fantastic," he said.

Retta Bruegger, a range ecologist at Colorado State University, said that some ecosystems, especially those that receive more precipitation, can withstand more intense grazing. In regions where plants evolved over many years alongside large grazers like cattle, livestock can "provide a very important ecosystem function."

"We should be asking, 'Are there individual producers who need to be doing a better job?' instead of asking, 'Should there be grazing or no grazing?'" said Bruegger.

But answering those questions, she said, would require adequate staff to monitor the land.



The BLM skipped environmental reviews of 75% of its grazing acreage

Allotments authorized by the exemption

All other BLM grazing allotments

Source: *ProPublica* and *High Country News* analysis of BLM data. Data was initially compiled by the Western Watersheds Project from records obtained in September 2023. **Mapping: Lucas Waldron / ProPublica**

AFTER A CENTURY OF INTENSE GRAZING WORE DOWN the public lands, a court ruled in 1974 that grazing permits were subject to environmental reviews, and Congress passed a law two years later mandating reviews every decade.

For years, a backlog of permit reviews grew, as federal land-management agencies lacked the staff to inspect all their territory — 240 million acres across BLM and Forest Service jurisdictions. Around 2000, Congress began giving temporary approval for regulators to skip reviews. Western Republicans, with the livestock industry's support, pushed to enshrine the concept in law. The idea ultimately received bipartisan approval in December 2014, after being slipped into a must-pass defense spending bill.

Some conservationists now call it simply "the loophole."

Many in the livestock industry lambaste the lack of reviews. When permits are automatically renewed, the law does not allow the terms to change, so ranchers are prevented from updating their grazing practices.

"It just locks people into grazing the same place, the same time, year after year," said Chris Jasmine, manager of biodiversity and rangelands for Nevada Gold Mines, which owns 11 ranches in northern Nevada.

To help inform permit renewals, teams of BLM experts — rangeland specialists, hydrologists, botanists, soil scientists and wildlife biologists — assess the health of grazing allotments.

When the process is working as intended, these assessments are considered in permit reviews. But the current lack of staff has left large swaths of land without scrutiny.

All told, the BLM oversees 155 million acres of public lands available for grazing. But the agency has no record of completing land-health assessments for more than 35 million acres, nearly a quarter of its total.

Where the BLM has conducted such assessments, it found grazing had degraded due to livestock, at least 38 million acres, an area about half the size of New Mexico. And close to two-thirds of the land it listed as being in good shape had not been checked in more than a decade, the analysis found.

The situation, though, is even worse than these numbers indicate, as the agency has often skipped permit reviews on land in poor condition. Of the acreage the BLM had previously found to be degraded due to livestock, 82% was reauthorized for grazing without a review, according to *ProPublica* and *High Country News'* analysis.

Several BLM employees said agency higher-ups instruct staff to study land that's in better condition while avoiding allotments that are in worse shape or more controversial. Environmental groups such as the Western Watersheds Project as well as local stockmen's associations are quick to litigate changes to permits. Automatic renewals avoid these drawn-out public fights. "We were just using a bureaucratic loophole," one staffer said. "We were allowing ongoing degradation of habitat."

"This can't be the future of public lands," Bugbee, with the Center for Biological Diversity, said of parcels degraded by cattle, likening the land to a "mowed lawn."

Agency staff pointed to myriad reasons why the environment is suffering.

Chris Bugbee of the Center for Biological Diversity surveys a stand of cottonwood trees where the understory has been heavily grazed by cattle.

For example, after a wildfire, the BLM aims to keep livestock off the land for two years to allow the ecosystem to recover. But ranchers often negotiate an earlier return to the public pastures where their livestock graze, said Steve Ellis, who spent his career with the BLM and Forest Service, rising to high-level positions in both.

"There was always pressure to get back on," Ellis said. "That's not a new thing. It's just part of working for the bureau."

The government's support for ranchers can add to the damage. Land-management agencies sometimes seed invasive grasses, which can benefit livestock. And state and federal agencies kill predators such as wolves and cougars — integral to healthy ecosystems — to protect ranchers' economic interests.

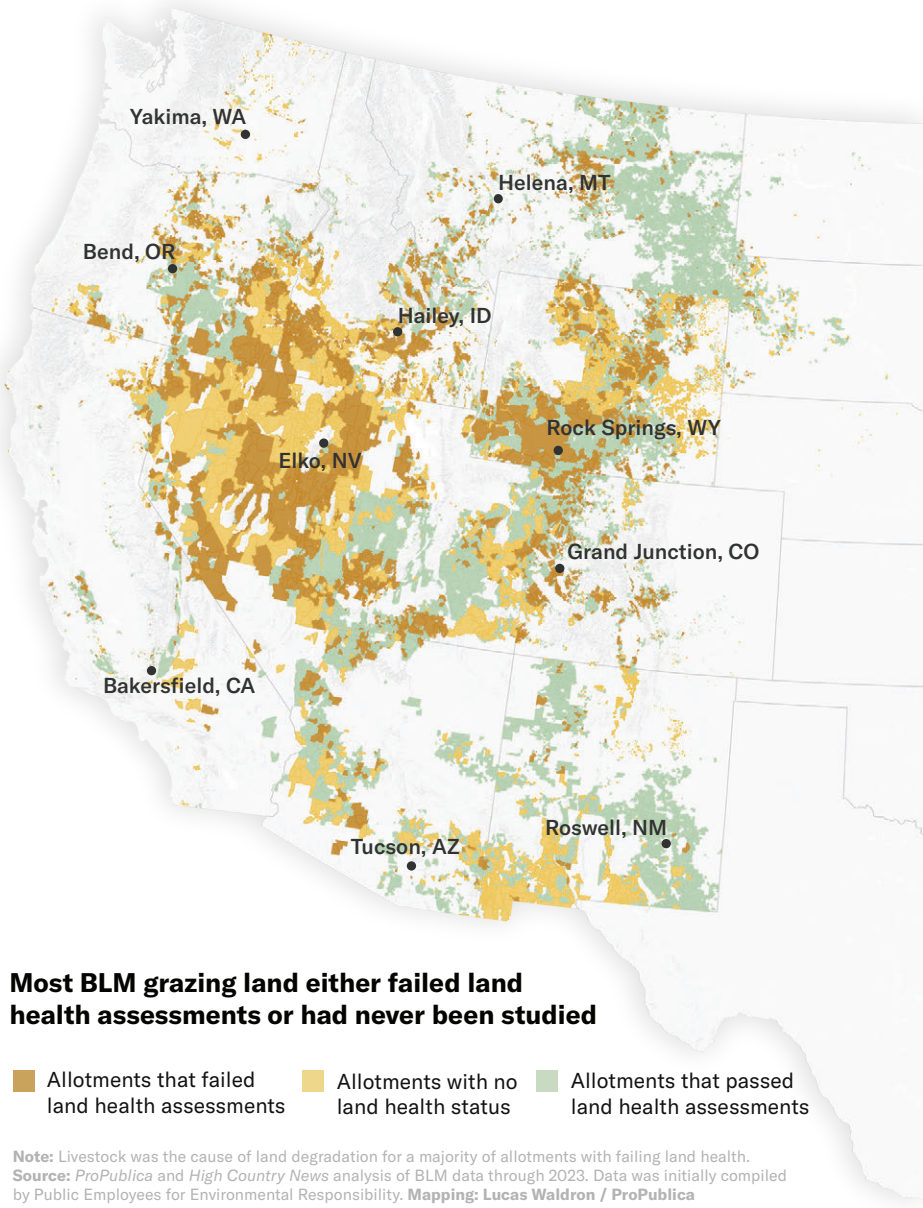
BLM employees also said that in some permit reviews and land-health assessments, rank-and-file staff noted the presence of threatened and endangered species, which would have triggered tighter environmental controls, only for agency managers to delete that information from their reports.

One BLM staffer called the reviews "rubber stamping" and said higher-ranking staff who controlled the text of reports "wouldn't let me stick anything into the official documentation that acknowledged things were in poor shape."

Another complicating factor, according to BLM staff, is that ranchers are often invited to participate in fieldwork to gauge whether they are overgrazing. The result, employees said, was watered-down reviews and assessments.

The industry, though, is critical of the assessment process for other reasons. Erin Spaur, executive vice president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association, said it's an inflexible "one-size-fits-all approach" that doesn't sufficiently account for differences in ecosystems.

"There are huge cultural problems within the agency," said Dennis Willis, who spent more than three decades with the BLM, including managing rangeland, adding that "there's a real fear of dealing with grazing problems."



Most BLM grazing land either failed land health assessments or had never been studied

Allotments that failed land health assessments
Allotments with no land health status
Allotments that passed land health assessments

Note: Livestock was the cause of land degradation for a majority of allotments with failing land health.
Source: *ProPublica* and *High Country News* analysis of BLM data through 2023. Data was initially compiled by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. **Mapping: Lucas Waldron / ProPublica**

SOME RANCHERS ACKNOWLEDGE THE ENVIRONMENTAL impacts of their industry. But they say that more flexibility — not stricter oversight — would make them better stewards of the land.

Jasmine, with Nevada Gold Mines, contends that ranching can be done without denuding the West. A sixth-generation Nevadan, he oversees the mining company's ranching operations, which run about 5,000 head of cattle.

On a sunny July day near Carlin, Nevada, Jasmine walked through chest-high vegetation to show off the recovery of Maggie Creek, a tributary to the Humboldt River that flows through a checkerboard of public and private lands. Photographs from the 1980s show barren ground around the shallow creek. When ranchers changed how they rotated their herds in the 1990s to give the streambed more rest, the land bounced back, Jasmine said. He credited a BLM biologist with initiating many of the projects that helped revive Maggie Creek.

"It's a renewable resource. That grass that they're eating right now will come back next year and the year after that if managed properly," he said. "It's about not eating the same plants in the same place year after year after year."

Jasmine touted the company's goal of protecting locally important species, its sage grouse restoration projects and its partnership with the BLM, which targeted grazing to remove unwanted vegetation and create a firebreak.

But Nevada Gold Mines — a joint venture between two companies with a combined value of around $150 billion — operates in a different economic reality than most ranchers and can afford to keep cattle off the land long enough for it to recover.

Smaller ranchers face slim profit margins, making it attractive to heavily graze federal lands, where the cost is much lower than on state or private land.

For years, some politicians and environmental groups have proposed protecting degraded or sensitive habitats by paying ranchers to retire their permits, making the areas off-limits to grazing and preserving the land as wildlife habitat. Ranchers have occasionally taken these offers. But the industry as a whole is hesitant to surrender grazing permits.

In October, U.S. Rep. Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat, introduced a bill to further voluntary retirement, calling it "a pragmatic solution that supports local economies, protects biodiversity, and saves taxpayer dollars by reducing the cost of administering grazing programs."

Louis Wertz, a spokesperson for the Western Landowners Alliance, said that the conservation-minded ranchers who make up his group want to both stay in business and "live in a place that is vibrant, full of life, provides clean water, has clean air." But when it comes to food production, he added, "the expectations we have of both being environmentally harmless and healthy and cheap are untenable. Over the last 150 years in the United States, we have chosen cheapness at the expense of environmental quality."

Like Jasmine, Wertz said that understaffing at the BLM and Forest Service deprives ranchers of an opportunity to change how they manage their herds, even when they want to.

"It is important that there be accountability for producers on the landscape," Wertz said, but there should also be "flexibility so producers can be economically successful and so they can do what is right for the landscape."

Cattle forage on a Bureau of Land Management grazing allotment in southern Arizona that is also key habitat for native species.

PART III: POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

SYMPATHETIC OFFICIALS AND POLITICAL CLOUT HELP RANCHERS DODGE OVERSIGHT

From a U.S. senator to county commissioners, elected officials have supported ranchers accused of breaking the rules.

▲ Invasive grasses spread across the West Salt Common allotment near Grand Junction, Colorado.

IN LATE 2019, A PAIR OF MONTANA RANCHERS GOT IN trouble with the Forest Service, which oversees the federal lands where they had a permit to graze their cattle. Agency staff had found their cattle wandering in unauthorized locations four times during September of that year. The agency also found some of their fences in disrepair and their salt licks — which provide cattle with essential minerals — too close to creeks and springs, drawing the animals into those habitats.

After repeated calls, texts and letters, the Forest Service sent the ranchers a "notice of noncompliance," according to documents obtained via public records requests. The agency asserted that the ranchers had engaged in "a willful and intentional violation" of their permit and warned that future violations could lead to its revocation.

The ranchers were hardly the largest or most politically influential among those who graze livestock on public lands. But they soon had help from well-placed people as they pushed back, hoping to get the warning rescinded based on their belief that they had been treated unfairly.

"The Forest Service needs to work with us and understand that grazing on the Forest is not black and white," the ranchers wrote to the agency. The agency's acting district ranger, for his part, said his staff had "gone above and beyond" to help the ranchers comply with the rules.

With assistance from a former Forest Service employee, the ranchers contacted their congressional representatives in early 2020. Staffers for then-Rep. Greg Gianforte and Sen. Steve Daines, both Republicans, leapt into action, kicking off more than a year of back-and-forth between the senator's office and Forest Service officials.

"When they hear something they don't like," they run to the forest supervisor and the senator's office "to get what they want," a Forest Service official wrote in a 2021 email to colleagues.

Public-lands ranching is one of the largest land uses in many Western states like Montana, where there are more cattle than people. Politicians have shown themselves remarkably responsive to requests for help from grazing permittees, even those of modest means.

Ranchers who have been cited for violations or who resist regulations have called on pro-grazing lawyers, trade group lobbyists and sympathetic politicians, from county commissioners to state legislators and U.S. senators like Daines. These allies — some of whom now hold positions in the Trump administration — have pushed for looser environmental rules and, in some cases, fewer consequences for rule breakers.

Multiple current or former Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service employees told *ProPublica* and *High Country News* that ranchers' powerful allies can pose a serious obstacle to enforcement of grazing regulations. When pushback comes, regulators sometimes cave.

"If we do anything anti-grazing, there's at least a decent chance of politicians being involved," said one BLM employee who requested anonymity due to a fear of retaliation from the administration. "We want to avoid that, so we don't do anything that would bring that about."

MARY JO RUGWELL, A FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE BLM'S Wyoming state office, said that a majority of ranchers in the public-lands grazing system "do things the way they should be done." But some are "truly problematic" — they break the rules and "go above and around you to try to get what they want or think they deserve." Ranching interests

"can be very closely tied to folks that are in power," she added.

Since 2020, members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have written to the BLM and Forest Service about grazing issues more than 20 times, according to logs of agency communications obtained by *ProPublica* and *High Country News* via public records requests. In addition to Daines and Gianforte, these members include Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz.; former Rep. Yvette Herrell, R-N.M.; former Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.; Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, and others. Their communications addressed such issues as "Request for Flexibility with Grazing Permits" and "Public Lands Rule Impact on Ranchers and Rural Communities."

Rick Danvir, who was a longtime wildlife manager on a large ranch in Utah, said pressure on the BLM comes not just from ranchers and their allies, but also from litigious environmental organizations opposed to public-lands grazing. "Everyone is always kicking them," he said of the agency. "I didn't feel like the BLM was out to pick on people." But the agency, wary of being taken to court, often ends up in a defensive crouch.

In the Montana dispute, Daines' office, from March 2020 through February 2021, sent a stream of emails to Forest Service officials about the issue, including demands for detailed information about the agency's interactions with the ranchers. In April 2021, a Daines staffer showed up unannounced at a meeting between the ranchers and the Forest Service, only to be turned away because the Forest Service did not have the appropriate official present to deal with a legislative staffer. But interventions by Daines' office apparently made an impact.

It's not unusual for people regulated by the government to reach out to their elected representatives, and "constituent services" are a big part of every senator's and House member's official duties. But local Forest Service officials involved in the dispute noted that the pressure from outside political forces was leading them to give the ranchers special treatment.

"If this issue was solely between the (ranger district) and the permittee, we should administer the permit and end the discussion there," wrote one Forest Service official in 2020. "Unfortunately, we have regional, state and national oversight from others that deters us from administering the permit like we would for others. It is very unfair to the top notch operators that call/coordinate/manage consistently. But, what the (ranchers) perceive as picking on them, for political reasons, has become a mandate that we make accommodations outside the terms of a mediated permit. So be it."

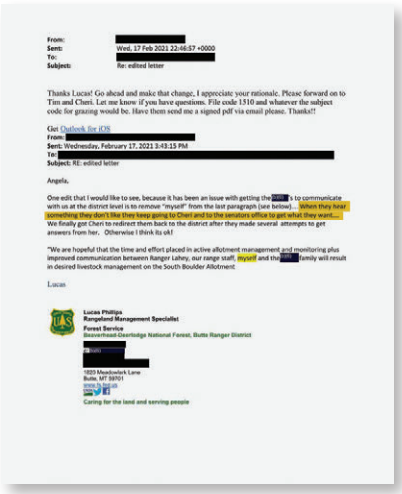
Another agency official wrote, "It leaves a sour taste to think I am expected to hold all other permittees to the terms of their permits/forest plan/forest handbook … yet be told to continually let it go with another."

By June 2020, the acting district ranger expressed willingness to "cut (the ranchers) some slack" if it would improve relations. In December 2020, the agency found the ranchers were once again violating the terms of their permit, citing evidence of overgrazing that could lead to declining vegetation and soil health, but decided not to issue another formal notice of noncompliance. By late 2022, the agency noted the Montana ranchers had been in violation of their permit for four consecutive years and warranted yet another notice of noncompliance. Agency staff, however, were wary of the conflict that would likely ensue.

Although the Forest Service found that the ranchers' grazing land showed widespread signs of overuse, the agency declined to officially recommend another citation in its year-end report for 2022, according to agency records.

As one agency official wrote during the yearslong squabble, "the drama continues."

A spokesperson for Daines, in a statement, said that the senator "advocates tirelessly on behalf of his constituents to federal agencies" and "was glad to be able to advocate" for the ranchers in this case. The Forest Service, the ranchers and Gianforte's office did not respond to requests for comment.



From: [redacted]
Sent: Wed, 17 Feb 2021 22:46:57 +0000
To: [redacted]
Subject: Re: edited letter

Thanks Lucas! Go ahead and make that change, I appreciate your rationale. Please forward on to Tim and Cheri. Let me know if you have questions. File code 1510 and whatever the subject code for grazing would be. Have them send me a signed pdf via email please. Thanks!!

Get Outlook for iOS
From: [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, February 17, 2021 3:43:15 PM
To: [redacted]
Subject: RE: edited letter

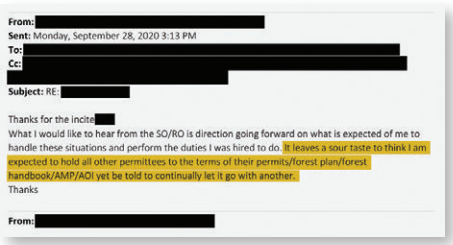
Angela,

One edit that I would like to see, because it has been an issue with getting the [redacted] to communicate with us at the district level is to remove "myself" from the last paragraph (see below)… When they hear something they don't like they keep going to Cheri and to the senators office to get what they want… We finally got Cheri to redirect them back to the district after they made several attempts to get answers from her. Otherwise I think its ok!

"We are hopeful that the time and effort placed in active allotment management and monitoring plus improved communication between Ranger Lahey, our range staff, myself and the [redacted] family will result in desired livestock management on the South Boulder Allotment.

Lucas

Lucas Phillips
Rangeland Management Specialist
Forest Service
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Butte Ranger District
[redacted]
1820 Meadowlark Lane
Butte, MT 59701
Caring for the land and serving people



From: [redacted]
Sent: Monday, September 28, 2020 3:13 PM
To: [redacted]
Cc: [redacted]
Subject: RE: [redacted]

Thanks for the incite[redacted]
What I would like to hear from the SO/RO is direction going forward on what is expected of me to handle these situations and perform the duties I was hired to do. It leaves a sour taste to think I am expected to hold all other permittees to the terms of their permits/forest plan/forest handbook/AMP/AOI yet be told to continually let it go with another.
Thanks

From: [redacted]

In a 2021 email (*left*) a Forest Service official told their colleagues that ranchers were turning to a sympathetic senator to get around staffers' attempts to enforce regulations.

In a 2020 email (*right*) a Forest Service employee complained that being forced to apply rules inconsistently after a politician intervened in a grazing dispute "leaves a sour taste."

Obtained, redacted and highlighted by *ProPublica* and *High Country News*.

THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION IS SHAPING UP

to be another powerful ally for ranchers who have argued against what they see as government overreach.

The administration appointed Karen Budd-Falen, a self-described "cowboy lawyer," to a high-level post at the U.S. Department of the Interior. Budd-Falen comes from a prominent ranching family and owns a stake in a large Wyoming cattle ranch, according to her most recent financial disclosure released by the Interior Department. She also has a long history of suing the federal government over the enforcement of grazing regulations. In one of her

▲ A BLM grazing allotment in Colorado shows some signs of a healthy environment, such as native Indian ricegrass (*left*), as well as areas degraded by cattle (*right*).

best-known cases, she used the anti-corruption RICO law — often used to target organized crime — to sue individual BLM staffers over their enforcement of grazing regulations. (The case made it to the Supreme Court, where Budd-Falen lost in 2007.) She also represented an organization of New Mexico farmers and stockmen in a legal filing supporting Utah's failed 2024 lawsuit to take control of millions of acres of federal land within its borders.

President Donald Trump nominated Michael Boren, a tech entrepreneur and rancher, as undersecretary of agriculture for natural resources and environment at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a post that oversees the Forest Service. Boren has a contentious history with the Forest Service, which manages a national recreation area that surrounds his 480-acre ranch in Idaho. Among other issues, a company he controlled received a cease-and-desist letter from the agency in 2024 for allegedly clearing national forest land and building a private cabin on it. He was confirmed to his USDA position in October.

The new administration has also wasted no time in dismantling Biden-era reforms designed to strengthen environmental protections for public rangelands.

In September, the Trump administration proposed rescinding the Public Lands Rule. The rule, finalized in May 2024, sought to place the protection and restoration of wildlife habitat and clean water on equal footing with uses such as oil drilling, mining and grazing on federal land. It would have allowed individuals, organizations, tribes and state agencies to lease BLM land for conservation purposes and sought to strengthen the BLM process for analyzing the impact of grazing and other economic activities on the environment.

Under the Biden administration, the BLM also issued a memo prioritizing environmental review for grazing lands that were environmentally degraded or in sensitive wildlife habitat.

The Trump administration effectively nullified that memo this year.

The Interior Department and BLM said in a statement that "any policy decisions are made in accordance with federal law and are designed to balance economic opportunity with conservation responsibilities across the nation's public lands."

The administration is also undertaking a broad effort to open vacant federal grazing lands to ranchers as part of its drive to position "grazing as a central element of federal land management." The administration says there are 24 million acres of vacant grazing land nationwide. Many of these vacant grazing allotments are temporarily without livestock because they needed time to recover from wildfire, did not have enough water or forage to support cattle, or were awaiting removal of invasive species.

Still, in May, Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz gave staff about two weeks to compile lists of unused grazing allotments that could be quickly refilled with livestock, according to internal communications obtained by *ProPublica* and *High Country News* via public records requests. Such policies cater to organizations like the Public Lands Council, which in a 2024 policy paper called on federal agencies to swiftly fill vacant allotments. The council did not respond to requests for comment.

"Vacant grazing allotments have always been open and available to permitted grazing," a USDA spokesperson said in response to queries.

The Trump administration has sometimes run afoul of ranchers. In October, ranching groups blasted the administration for increasing beef imports from Argentina amid rising prices for consumers.

Long before Trump first took office, presidential administrations that tried to raise grazing fees or strengthen regulations faced fierce pushback from ranching interests.

In the mid-1990s, the Clinton administration backed off a proposal to raise fees amid widespread rancor from public-lands ranchers and their Republican allies in Congress. Many in the industry saw then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt's proposed reforms as an existential threat. "The government is trying to take our livelihood, our rights and our dignity," said one rancher at a hearing on Babbitt's failed push to raise fees. "We can't live with it."

Ranching industry groups do not spend anywhere near as much money lobbying Congress as do well-funded industries like pharmaceuticals, oil and gas, and defense contracting. But they get their perspective heard in the Capitol.

J.R. Simplot Co. — the largest holder of BLM grazing permits, according to a *ProPublica* and *High Country News* analysis — spent about $610,000 lobbying Congress from 2020 through 2025. Earlier this year, the company hired the Bernhardt Group to lobby on its behalf in Washington, D.C. David Bernhardt, who launched the firm this year, served as secretary of the Interior during the first Trump

administration and sits on the board of Trump's media company.

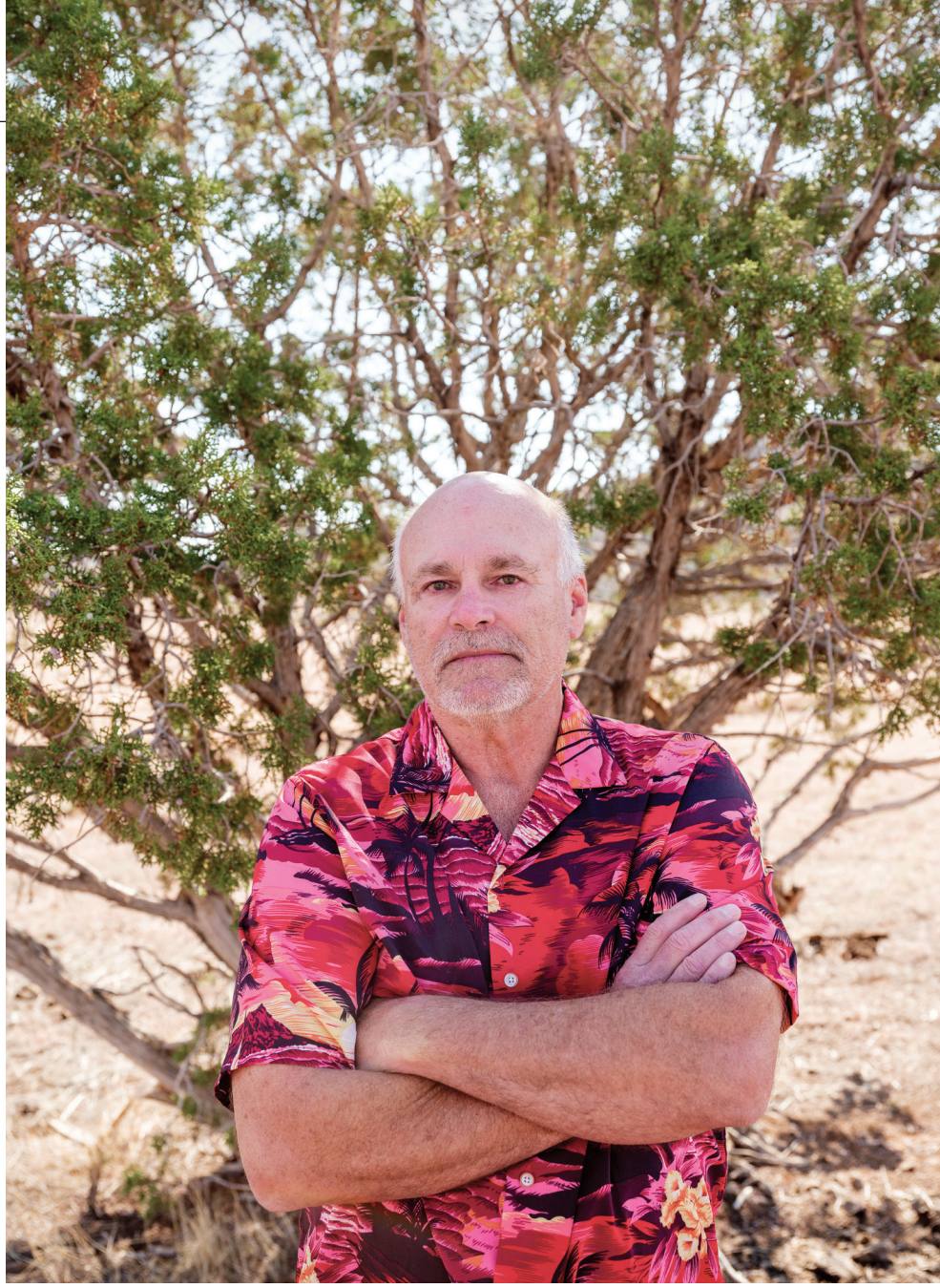
Permittees with fewer resources may turn to trade groups such as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, which has affiliates in 40 states. In recent years, the association and its allies have sued the Environmental Protection Agency over Biden-era water regulations and the Interior Department over endangered species protections for the lesser prairie chicken. A federal judge in August vacated protections for the imperiled species after a request from the Trump administration. The administration has also moved to roll back the water regulations at the center of the association's EPA lawsuit.

The association, which represents public-lands ranchers as well as the beef industry as a whole, spent nearly $2 million lobbying in Washington, D.C., over the past five years and contributed more than $2 million to federal candidates and political action committees in the last two election cycles. During the 2024 election cycle, more than 90% of its political contributions went to Republicans.

The association vociferously opposed the Public Lands Rule and, alongside other groups, filed a lawsuit to halt its implementation before the Trump administration moved to rescind it. Rancher Mark Eisele, then-president of the association, called the rule "a stepping stone to removing livestock grazing from our nation's public lands." The association did not respond to requests for comment.

Groups like the cattlemen's association and Public Lands Council were influential in getting the Public Lands Rule rescinded, said Nada Culver, a deputy director of the BLM during the Biden administration.

The political influence of ranchers, she said, goes beyond their relatively modest lobbying and campaign donations. "It is tied to their cultural power," she said. "They are icons of the American West."



▲ Wayne Werkmeister, a former BLM employee, spent years fighting to reduce the number of cattle on the West Salt Common allotment.

STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS, FROM LEGISLATORS TO county commissioners to sheriffs, also sometimes come to the aid of ranchers who run into trouble with the Forest Service or BLM.

In June 2019, in the midst of a long-running dispute between a group of ranchers and employees of Utah's Fishlake National Forest, a forest supervisor told a rancher that he would receive a citation if he failed to sign his permit, place ear tags on his cattle to identify them and otherwise abide by the rules. The rancher "became really angry, said there were two ways this could go, and he wasn't going to court because the courts are all stacked in our favor," the Forest Service employee wrote in an email recounting the conversation.

"He then said if anyone in his family got hurt by this, remember I have a family and they can get hurt too," the supervisor noted in his email. "I asked him if he was threatening my family, and he said his family has worked hard for what they have and weren't going to have it taken away, or something to that effect." The rancher declined to comment for this story.

The ranchers in the dispute, which lasted years, had support from a local sheriff. At one point, the sheriff expressed his willingness to jail Forest Service personnel, according to *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Minutes from a January 2016 meeting of the Piute County Commission note that the sheriff said that "he will not allow this to be a Bundy situation," referring to the infamous 2014 standoff between rancher Cliven Bundy and the BLM in Bunkerville, Nevada. "If that entails jailing the forest service he will do it!!!" The sheriff told the *Salt Lake*

Tribune that his comments were taken out of context.

In a few cases, ranchers who violate grazing regulations have even taken up arms — without losing support from elected officials.

This was the case during the Bundy family's Bunkerville standoff. After two decades of chronic trespassing, the Bundys owed about $1 million in grazing fines and unpaid fees. Bundy maintained, without evidence, that the U.S. government had no say over grazing on public lands in Nevada. When federal agents arrived with a court order to round up the family's trespassing cattle, Bundy and a group of supporters engaged in an armed standoff. The agents eventually retreated. "I'll be damned if I'm going to honor a federal court that has no jurisdiction or authority or arresting power over we the people," Bundy told *The New York Times* in 2014.

Throughout the dispute, the family was supported by political figures from across the region. The commissioners of Nye County, Nevada, for instance, passed a resolution denouncing "armed federal bureaucrats … operating outside their lawful delegated authority," and at least one commissioner traveled to Bunkerville to support the Bundys. Michele Fiore, a member of the Nevada Legislature at the time, voiced her support for the family, and several members of the Arizona Legislature traveled to Nevada after the standoff to support the Bundys.

The Bundys' ties to powerful officials have only grown. Celeste Maloy, Bundy's niece, was elected to represent Utah's 2nd Congressional District in 2023. (Bundy married Maloy's aunt.) During her short time in the House of Representatives, Maloy has pushed for the sale of some federal lands and sponsored legislation to make it easier for ranchers to access vacant grazing allotments during droughts and extreme weather. During the 2024 election cycle, Maloy received $20,000 in campaign contributions from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Maloy's office did not respond to requests for comment.

WAYNE WERKMEISTER, A LONGTIME BLM EMPLOYEE who spent most of his career overseeing federal grazing lands before retiring in 2022, said he knows how difficult it can be to enforce public-lands protections.

"When you have everything stacked against you, when you've got political pressure on you, when you've got management who doesn't want to hear it, when you've got a rancher who's trying to prove himself, it's nearly impossible," he said in an interview with *ProPublica* and *High Country News*.

By 2017, after intensive on-the-ground research, Werkmeister and his colleagues had determined that two ranchers near Grand Junction, Colorado, were damaging habitat across the more than 90,000-acre allotment where they grazed roughly 500 cattle. Werkmeister began pushing to reduce the number of cattle on the land.

"WHEN YOU HAVE EVERYTHING STACKED AGAINST YOU, WHEN YOU'VE GOT POLITICAL PRESSURE ON YOU, WHEN YOU'VE GOT MANAGEMENT WHO DOESN'T WANT TO HEAR IT, WHEN YOU'VE GOT A RANCHER WHO'S TRYING TO PROVE HIMSELF, IT'S NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE."

Wayne Werkmeister, former BLM employee

In response, the ranchers hired former BLM employees to argue their case, accusing the agency of "agenda driven bullying." They copied then-U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, a Colorado Republican, on correspondence with the BLM. Werkmeister said he had to justify the agency's actions to the senator's aides.

In October 2018, Werkmeister's office received a two-page letter from the Budd-Falen Law Offices — the firm co-founded by Budd-Falen — which represented the two Colorado ranchers. "The actions of the BLM in reducing livestock grazing on the West Salt Common Allotment could potentially and unnecessarily force them out of business," the letter read. The firm also sent the letter to local county commissioners.

Werkmeister said his bosses quickly ordered him back into the field to gather more data, even though, as BLM records show, he and his colleagues had already spent years documenting the condition of the allotment, its precipitation patterns and its use by the ranchers. The ranchers continued to dispute the agency's findings.

Ultimately, Werkmeister said he was never able to reduce grazing enough to give the allotment time to recover. As recently as 2024, agency records show, the BLM reapproved grazing there.

The ranchers, their attorney and Gardner did not respond to requests for comment.

Werkmeister counts his inability to turn around the parcel's ecological fortunes as among his biggest failures. During a recent visit, he pointed out the denuded ground and nubs of native bunchgrasses amid a sea of invasive cheatgrass.

"Overgrazed to the point of gone," he said.

For information about the data and analyses used in these stories, see **hcn.org/grazing-data**.

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WILD HARVEST

In Northern California's high country, crews race a changing climate, catastrophic wildfire and the uncertainty of migrant labor to bring silvertip trees to market for the holidays.

PHOTOGRAPHS & TEXT BY **ALLEN MYERS**

As the sun sets over Eagle Lake *(right)*, a crew boss rides his quad through the forest. The terrain here is rugged, far from paved roads or modern comforts, but the rewards include views like this.

High on the volcanic shoulders of Northern California's Cascade Range, the air is thin enough to sting your lungs.

Between the mid-October freeze and November's first heavy snow, chainsaws echo in short bursts, muffled by dense trees and resin-sweet air. In the morning half-light, a small crew labors rhythmically, harvesting wild red firs for sale in Christmas tree lots across the country. Red firs — *Abies magnifica,* more commonly known as silvertips for their fine, silver–tinged needles — thrive between 6,500 and 8,000 feet, clinging to rough terrain in California and Oregon that burns hot in summer and freezes hard in winter, a pattern that shapes the trees' distinctive concentric branching.

"You only get a few weeks," John Wayne Strauch, whom everyone calls Bambi, told me. A wild Christmas tree harvester for 50 years, he owns more than 300 acres of timber rights on Worley Mountain, between Eagle Lake and Susanville, California. It's hard work: "If the ground doesn't freeze, the needles won't set," he said. "If it snows early, you're done." And it's a race against time, with only a limited number of days before the crews are snowed off the mountain. "Why are we doing this?" Strauch said. "Guys are barely breaking even … but we just keep doing it."

Strauch first came here in the early '70s with my godfather, Joe McNally. Both were new to the business and looking for adventure. They learned from their failures, hauling broken trucks out of snowdrifts, watching trees vanish under sudden storms, fingers stiff with cold and frustration. Every winter, they returned with the same mission: to bring a piece of wilderness into people's homes.

Now, Strauch relies on mostly migrant Mexican workers who travel north each winter, many of them fresh off orchards or vineyards. This year, according to Dan Barker, who helps oversee the harvest, dramatic shifts in immigration policy and increasing danger from ICE raids have brought new uncertainty to the work.

Typically, two crews — about 18 men altogether — form the backbone of the operation: a cook, two drivers, two cutters, a bail operator, with the rest hauling trees from deep in the forest. They rotate roles and move quickly, slicing and dragging silvertips down steep ridgelines, where they're graded for shape, symmetry and color: 2s, 1s, primos and double primos, each priced accordingly. This year, an 8-foot double primo will likely sell for around $250 on the lot, while a 2 of the same size would bring in about half that.

The harvest relies on a practice called coppicing or *stump culturing*, a careful cut that allows a tree's base to regenerate. Within a few years, one of the remaining branches receives internal signals and turns toward the sun, growing into a new tree that can be harvested again and again. "We're not clear-cutting," Strauch said. "The better we take care of the trees, the better they take care of us. Some, we'll get five, 10 harvests. Those are the mothers." The forest renews itself without replanting, tilling or spraying in a simple, sustainable cycle that has kept these slopes producing for decades.

Strauch's Worley Mountain stand yields roughly 7,000 trees each year, and it is one of the nation's last commercial wild Christmas tree harvests. It's small-scale compared to farmed Christmas tree operations, but its value lies in silvertips' rarity, sustainability and the relationship between land and labor. "These are beautiful trees with a beautiful story," Barker said. "We don't just want people to accept them — we want them to love them like we do."

Allen Myers is a Portland-based photographer, filmmaker and journalist. Founder of Regenerating Paradise, he explores resilience, labor and the environment in communities shaped by wildfire, migration and climate change.

A cutter fells a 40-foot red fir *(above)* without breaking its branches by using wedge and relief cuts to guide the tree gently to the ground. The cuts are made above the base, leaving several whorls of branches to regenerate, in a process called stump culturing.

Climate change is impacting both the forest and the people who work in it. Extreme early-season heat scorched thousands of young trees *(below)* in May and June, burning new growth before it could mature.

At 80 years old, John Wayne Strauch — “Bambi” to his friends — clears away undergrowth so his crews have room to work. After five decades, he remains a steward of a rural tradition: harvesting wild Christmas trees.

A worker stands beside a tagging box mounted to a baling trailer (above). Each tree is graded by shape, color and branch density, then tagged according to height with color-coded labels. An 8-to-9-foot red fir varies widely in price according to its grade, part of a meticulous system connecting high-country forests to living rooms hundreds of miles away.

Freshly cut red firs lie stacked and ready for shipment. Within days, they'll be loaded onto trucks and sent to tree lots across the West, marking the end of another short, hard season in the high country. The red firs, known as silvertips, are cut only after enough freezing nights have passed to "set" their needles, a unique trait that keeps them from dropping well into March.

A worker carries a freshly cut silvertip down the slopes of Haight Mountain *(left)*, at about 7,500 feet above sea level. Each silvertip is hauled by hand through dense brush. This forest, once a thriving stand, was burned in the 2021 Antelope Fire, one of many blazes that have reshaped Northern California's landscape.

Crews work through a blizzard *(below)*, loading trees into a dump truck on the slopes of Haight Mountain. The season is short, just two or three weeks a year before snow buries the roads and drives workers off the mountain.

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VICTORY FOR WOLVES

WELC staff were fortunate to encounter seven gray wolves in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park this year. Thirty years after the first wolves were reintroduced to the park, we sat in the original enclosures used for habituation before their release and contemplated how close they came to disappearing from the western landscapes we hold so dear. That very same day, our attorneys were in court fighting for western wolves.

Alongside 10 strong partners, we challenged the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to deny Endangered Species Act protections for western wolves. We won our case—an enormous victory for wolves over bad science and hostile management.

The court ordered the Service to reanalyze threats to western wolves in accordance with the law. The science is clear: Wolves have yet to recover across the West. Allowing a few states to undertake aggressive wolf-killing regimes is inconsistent with the law. As the Service reevaluates western wolf protections, our team at WELC stands ready to defend western wolves—again if need be.

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Photo captured by Emma Kulkarni of Arizona. @emmaexpedition

DID YOU KNOW?

A study from the University of Maryland this year found that even if the Inflation Reduction Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, and recent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations were rolled back, ambitious state and local action could still lead the U.S. to a 54% to 62% reduction in emissions by 2035.

CULTURE

Reno's Gay Rodeo is back

Nearly 40 years after an armed sheriff, anti-LGBTQ activists and a judge's order shut down the Gay Rodeo Finals, this year the riders came home.

BY FIL CORBITT | PHOTOS BY ALEJANDRA RUBIO

FIFTY MILES EAST OF RENO, Nevada, on the edge of Fallon, a small agricultural and military town, John King looked across a noisy highway toward the ranch where a legendary rodeo never took place.

Thirty-seven years ago, in October 1988, that year's Gay Rodeo Finals contestants and organizers were refused entry to the ranch, blocked by then-Churchill County Sheriff Bill Lawry. "It was the first time I'd seen raw, undeniable hate," King said.

A judge's injunction hung on the ranch gate, and the sheriff, his shotgun and a group of deputies stood between the rodeo contestants, organizers and their horses. King recalled that for several tense hours, the crowd pushed toward the gates but was met with heated threats of violence. Eventually, people were allowed to load their horses and leave.

"It was our Stonewall," King said.

The 1988 standoff in Fallon marked the culmination of a monthslong battle between the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) and its venue managers and the anti-gay activists who had mobilized to shut down that year's rodeo in Reno, where gay rodeo was invented.

Natalie Gibbs, Ms. Palm Springs Hot Rodeo 2026, flies the inclusive Pride flag during the International Gay Rodeo's ceremonial start in Reno, Nevada.

In response, the rodeo decided to relocate to private land in Fallon, but were barred. Gay rodeo did not die, though; instead, the finals were redistributed across several cities. But the incident left a black mark on northern Nevada.

In mid-October this year, 50 years after the first Gay Rodeo, the finals came home to Reno. A couple days before, attendees took a bus out to Fallon for a history tour at the site of the standoff.

I stood around with Andy Siekkinen, a tall man in a big hat with a handlebar mustache who is the rodeo's press person and a competitor. The president of IGRA, Brian Helander, walked up and pulled his hand from his jean pocket to shake.

"We're not out here in anger," Helander said, "It's about understanding ... and closure."

"And triumph," Siekkinen added with a slight smile.

"And triumph," Helander agreed. "We're still here."

On the roadside across from the ranch gate, organizer Brian Rodgers held a poster-sized printout of the injunction that halted the rodeo 37 years ago. A crowd of about 50 people repeated after him, "We remember, we honor, we continue." Then Rodgers rolled up that symbol of bigotry and pain and taped it shut with rainbow-print duct tape, sealing the whole thing in the past, closing that chapter.

As we filed back onto the bus, everybody grabbed a Pabst or a Bud from a big cooler. "Thanks to everybody who came," said Rodgers from the aisle. "Drink your beers. Let's rodeo!"

The Georgia Satellites' song *Keep Your Hands to Yourself* played as we motored up the freeway back to Reno.

TWO DAYS LATER, the high metal ceiling of the Reno Livestock Events Center echoed with excited voices as a few hundred folks filtered in before lunch, grabbing seats as the calf roping on foot event kicked off. Many wore Western wear: blue jeans and snap-button shirts; others donned more glamorous displays: fringe, bolo ties, denim jackets with Western scenes stitched across the back. The air smelled like fresh dirt and horses, except by the snack stand where it smelled like a deep fryer and weak coffee.

Calf-roping contestants lined up by the calf chute, swinging lassos until the gate opened and a calf emerged, ideally into the open loop of their rope. Murmur Tuckness, a rodeo veteran who was at the standoff in 1988 and competed in bull riding as early as 1981, won best time in the women's category, lassoing her calf in the blink of an eye.

During the Grand Entry — the rodeo's ceremonial start — the Canadian, U.S. and Nevada state flags whipped past, held by riders on horseback as the inclusive Pride flag joined them at a full gallop. Rodeo royalty and contestants from all the regional gay rodeo associations paraded from the roping chutes to the bucking chutes.

Reno is a city I love. But I also know it can be self-destructive. It can ignore, or even sabotage, its homegrown strengths just to chase some shiny mirage on the horizon.

The solo events were broken up by gender, with registration based on self-identification. Nonbinary and trans athletes are welcome to compete in their chosen gender category, making this one of the rare sporting organizations that encourages trans participation. Unlike traditional rodeo, women can compete in bronc, steer and bull riding, and mixed gender teams contend in the roping events. Cisgender and straight folks stood shoulder to shoulder with everybody else.

I've covered rodeos before, from big corporate ones to the ranch-hand variety in small Nevada towns. Here, the atmosphere behind the chutes was different: The steely, competitive glares of the young and the scared were replaced by goofy smiles, pep talks and flashes of flamboyance and machismo.

"It's a level playing field," said Mark Allen Smith, an athlete and rodeo royalty contestant in the nonbinary category in a light denim shirt and a trim gray goatee. "I can walk out there with my rodeo partner Jen and compete on the same events."

That day, Smith took a hefty blow from a wily steer in the steer-decorating event, and afterward headed to the downtown casino, the Silver Legacy, for the other half of the Gay Rodeo: a Western dance competition and a royalty contest, where Ms., Miss, Mr., Mx., and MsTer International Gay Rodeo Association would be crowned.

The carpeted casino basement was packed with big men in cowboy hats, butch cowgirls, drag queens, everyone in between, and the audience whooped and hollered for their friends on stage. Smith emerged in full makeup, a brunette wig, long skirt, trimmed goatee and black sash. As the clocks in the casino sportsbook hit midnight, Smith took the title Mx. International Gay Rodeo Association, a crown they will hold for a year.

After the sashes were handed out, the party raged: Teams of line dancers and cloggers and spinning two-steppers appeared from the back of the ballroom and danced deep into the night.

THE FIRST-EVER gay rodeo was organized in 1976 in Reno by Phil Ragsdale, an early leader in the local chapter of the Imperial Court System, a grassroots network of LGBTQ organizations. He wanted to raise money for the Senior Citizens Thanksgiving Feed, and, being in Nevada, he threw a rodeo. In 1976, 125 people attended; in 1980, 10,000.

By 1988, there were IGRA chapters across the country, and the Gay Rodeo Finals were scheduled to take place that year at Lawlor Events Center at the University of Nevada, Reno. The AIDS crisis was sweeping across the LGBTQ community to devastating effect, and conservative Christian activists were mobilizing nationwide, pushing bigoted stereotypes about the disease. In Reno, local activists pressured politicians to cancel the event.

Rather than cancel it outright, the university claimed there were issues with the contract and pulled out of the agreement. The ACLU pushed back, but ultimately the IGRA decided to choose an alternative venue — the rodeo arena on private land in Fallon.

But a secondary cascade of legal troubles followed, and District Court Judge Archie E. Blake filed an injunction banning it, claiming the private venue wasn't permitted for a rodeo — even

From top: Mark Allen Smith "Daddy Duchess" was named Mx. IGRA 2026, the non-binary royalty title, at the rodeo. A hat that belonged to the late Eloy Galindo on the IGRA archival table. Kirk Jerry Wyllie, Mr. IGRA 2025 second runner-up, and Kami Boles, Ms. IGRA 2025, before grand entry.

though, according to Rodgers, it had hosted others without issue. The episode broke Reno's title as home of the Gay Rodeo.

Growing up here, I barely knew about any of this, let alone that we shared the same birthplace: It had been wiped from the map of this place.

In 1988, Reno blew it. It could have laid claim to something special, could have supported a rich community of creative people who invented something new. Instead, it ran them out of town.

Reno is a city I love.

But I also know that it can be self-destructive that way — falling for the billionaire's big talk, the promise of jobs or clout or riches: double or nothing every time, even as it bets the house on a losing hand.

It can ignore, or even sabotage, its organic, homegrown strengths just to chase some shiny mirage on the horizon.

ON SUNDAY, THE FINAL DAY, the air was crisp, the sunlight sharp: a perfect Nevada day, the kind I've looked forward to every hot summer of my life.

Gay rodeo has a lot in common with traditional rodeo, but with the added flair of "camp events" like goat dressing, a crowd favorite, where contestants race across the arena to put underwear on a goat, and steer decorating, where teams of two try to subdue a steer long enough to tie a ribbon on his tail.

Perhaps the most chaotic camp event is the Wild Drag Race. Each three-person team consists of one man, one woman and one drag queen, or simply "drag." The drag stands on a chalk line 70 feet from the chutes. One contestant is given a rope that's tied to a steer, and when the chutes open, the two team members work to coax the steer past the chalk line and then stop him. When stopped, the drag jumps on the steer's back and must ride back across the line to win. It's a hilarious and at times dangerous event that often results in the drag getting bucked off and one of the other teammates dragged across the dirt, clinging desperately to the rope.

Between events, I wandered the concourse. Small booths sold Western wear, cowboy boots, tie-dyed shirts, various penis-shaped objects. One exhibit showcased the history of Gay Rodeo with posters, plaques, medals, ropes and photo albums detailing the story of the sport and how it got to where it is today.

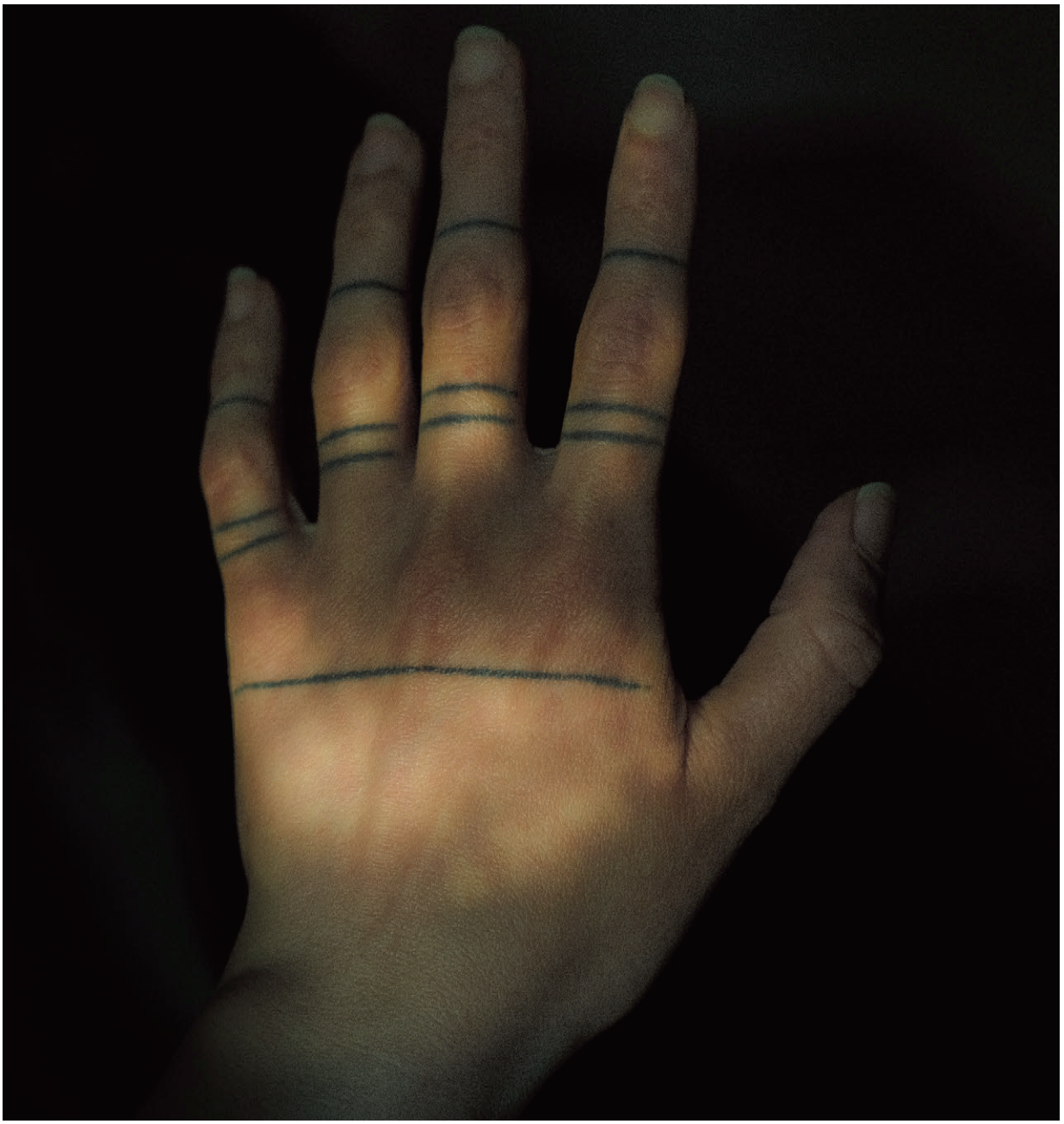
Taking it all in, I could imagine another timeline where the annual Reno Gay Rodeo had become part of the city's fabric, a wild event the town was proud of, excited for, that guards against the moralist, condescending comments from outsiders. Reno is also a city that loves a second chance. Maybe it's not too late.

The rodeo ended with a final bull ride as Lil Jon's *Turn Down For What* blared. The rider stayed on for the full 6 seconds. And that was it: The announcers thanked everyone, and Roy Rodgers and Dale Evens crooned *Happy Trails*. The arena emptied into the dusk. Somewhere behind us, back inside, an organizer placed the rolled-up injunction into a box to be filed away with the rest of the archives.

An artifact of the past.

Fil Corbitt is a nonbinary podcaster whose podcast, The Wind, *is made from a desk in the mountains outside Reno.*

An Inuit woman explores living in direct relationship with the land, water and plant and animal relatives of Alaska.



The love is there

Finding energy and light at the turning of a season.

BY LAURELI IVANOFF

AS THE DAYS grow shorter and the nights longer, I find myself, like so many of us, spending more time than necessary peering at my phone. There's a woman I follow on TikTok with round, kelly-green wire-rimmed glasses and a delightful Scottish accent. She calls herself @thatglasgowwitch. I like her because she speaks truth, teaches simple mindfulness and manifestation practices, and just seems like a cool broad. I like to think we'd be friends if our paths ever crossed in person.

Recently, she shared her belief that the depth of winter is not a time to make New Year's resolutions. It's a time for planting seeds, not for the garden, but for the self. I thought of her and her message after my first therapy visit in more than a year, as the birch and cottonwood leaves blanketed the ground outside my door in Anchorage. Snow dusted the Chugach Mountains, and we were headed toward winter.

I've been experiencing health issues that mirror my mom's when she was my age. Debilitating fatigue, inflammation in my joints and maddening brain fog that have caused me to question my career, my ability to take on positions and missions I would love to devote my energy toward. But my body said otherwise. My body said *rest. Take care.* Mom was roughly my age when doctors told her to retire.

So, after two years of trying in good capitalistic fashion to push through it, I listened. I took time away from the 8-to-5 to listen to my body and what it needs. And I made an appointment with my therapist.

During our first visit, I asked her to use sensory-motor psychotherapy, a kind of talk therapy focused on physical, bodily feelings. I sat across from Claire, and she placed headphones over my ears and played calming music. She asked what life would feel or look like if I was healthy.

"I'd be excited to make plans with my family," I said. A fish head suddenly stuck in my throat. It's such a simple thought, but one that filled me with fear and sadness, knowing my body has sometimes forced me to stay home when my family goes *ugruk* hunting or fishing, or even just for a simple walk through the birch and cottonwood outside our house. Migraines pop up or exhaustion smashes me to the couch a lot more often than I like to admit. Thinking about that specific vision of health, I immediately felt a tightness in my chest. A heaviness. I closed my eyes.

I felt sadness. Grief. And anger. I recognized the anger I carry in my chest as the anger of no longer experiencing Mom's overflow of fun, giving, excited-about-life love. For decades, I've been so angry that my kids and our whole family don't have access to the big love she gave.

Love doesn't leave. Love is energy and that energy remains. In my kids. In our kitchen. In the fish we cut. In making cranberry orange scones.

"If it feels comfortable, place a hand on your chest," Claire said. I did. She asked me to recognize and watch the sensation. It changed and traveled up my throat. The fish head, again, stuck. I felt like I couldn't swallow. Or talk. I sat with the sensation. It moved up the side of my face. And then, it transformed.

A golden light surrounded my head. And it was then that I felt her presence. As if she were right next to me, her essence and heart and voice, I heard her say, "The love is there. The love is there. The love is there. Babe, the love is there. The love is there. The love is there."

Love doesn't leave. Love is energy, and that energy remains. In my kids. In our kitchen. In the fish we cut. In packing the tent, sleeping pads and Jetboil for camping. In making cranberry orange scones. In dancing when a good song comes on that makes your body need to move. In my husband, Timm, wearing the goofy, flowery pants I sewed and seeing him, for the first time, move with swag. In wiping the honey off the counter, the coffee stain, the dribbles from breakfast yogurt. In telling Pushkin, our little Yorkipoo, that his breath stinks and doing nothing about it and rubbing his little belly. In hugs when my grown kids arrive at the airport, when my young son Henning leaves for school. In reminding each other to take vitamin D during the dark winter. In lying on the couch and saying nothing. The love is there.

Mom left us 21 years ago. In the months leading up to her death, she experienced severe depression. She no longer slept more than 30 minutes a day. She said she thought twisted, messed-up thoughts. Behind her eyes she was no longer simply the mother who raised me and my older brother and sister, but a woman, now, in deep suffering.

Every year, at the beginning of winter, I grieve. And of course I miss her. She was the best of us, and she'd get a kick out of me saying that. And stick out her chin and dance to Otis Redding in the kitchen, in that way that made us laugh and told us not to take life so seriously. And this winter, as we approach solstice, I thank her as I remember her words. You're right, Mom. The love is there.

I think of @thatglasgowwitch and know that this season, this is the planted seed. The seed is in the darkness. Sitting. Hibernating. Waiting and ready. Because thoughts become things. Intention is essential. And so I will say it over and over, just like Mom did in my therapist's office. *The love is there. The love is there. The love is there.* Making plans is not a scary or sad sensation in my chest. I feel it in my belly and behind my eyes. Like a golden light, or the turning of a season, there is such a sense of possibility.

Laureli Ivanoff is an Inupiaq writer and journalist from Unalakleet, Alaska, now based in Anchorage.

Photo by Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu ingrich

Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write heard@hcn.org.

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

OREGON

Business is booming for one Portland costume shop. Or should we say, "blowing up?" Ever since protesters started dressing in inflatable costumes and gathering outside the South Waterfront area's Immigration and Customs Enforcement building to denounce Trump's "war on the city," Portland has been living up to its proud reputation as the epicenter of weird. And it's not all just hot air. Many of the costumes have been purchased at Lippman Co., a 77-year-old party supply store in Portland's Central Eastside. As far as weaponry goes, the store's inflatable frog, dinosaur and chicken costumes, retailing for $60 to $70, may not be as pricey as Raytheon cruise missiles or even tear gas and rubber bullets, but they're still capable of packing a wallop. Worth it, though, if mocking authoritarian-style policies is your thing. "The costumes provide a pure Portland counterpoint to federal officers dressed in riot gear with gas masks and guns," as *Willamette Week* reported.

And they're getting a lot of attention: Lippman's manager, Robyn Adair, said that "a couple bought Garfield and a banana the other day, and I saw them on the news." Another man in a banana costume, carrying a sign that read "This is bananas," told Reuters — as SpongeBob SquarePants, Pikachu, a shark, and a mushroom bebopped happily around him — "We're in the silliest timeline, so I thought, why not be silly with it?"

Perhaps Kermit the Frog's parody of "Rainbow Connection," as seen on Stephen Colbert's *Late Show* and reported by *The Oregonian,* summed it up best: *Why are there so many Trump thugs in ski masks? / And why do they have to hide? / You can spray us with pepper, but we won't surrender, / We'll respond with a naked bike ride. / So march through our city, we'll stand up to fascists / The chicken, the T. rex, and me.*

CALIFORNIA

Historically, sailors sang sea chanteys, but nobody has written any sea chanterelles. Although that could change: Sam Shoemaker, a self-proclaimed mushroom nerd — no, not the inflatable Portland kind — really knows how to put the "fun" into fungus. Not only did he paddle 26 miles across the Catalina Channel in a 107-pound kayak that he made using mycelium material technology — the same kind that produces fungi faux-leather for designer purses — he actually grew the material that went into it from wild *Ganoderma polychromum* mycelium in his at-home mushroom laboratory. On his website, samkshoemaker.com, he explained that he propagated the mycelium on "a hemp hurd substrate packed inside a custom two-part fiberglass form."

The vessel took six weeks to grow and several months to dry. When it was sea-ready, he launched from Two Harbors, Catalina Island, at 6 a.m. on Aug. 5. Shoemaker told the *Orange County Register* that being in the middle of the channel was "almost psychedelic"; he was nauseous, hallucinating (and not because he was *on* shrooms) and afraid that his boat might snap in half. At one point, he found himself accompanied by a whale, an "unlikely guardian on his trek." But after 12 hours, he landed safely on San Pedro's Cabrillo Beach. He hopes to inspire others to experiment with fungi, he explained. "There's really nothing that you can't apply fungi to ... they're food, they're medicine. They're used in therapeutic practices," adding, "We're addressing heavy metals and oil spills with fungi." And the morel of the story? When truffles come your way, look for the portabella in the storm.

CALIFORNIA

A series of squirrel attacks in San Raphael last September prompted Joan Heblack to post flyers warning her neighbors "Attack Squirrel Beware!!!!!! This is not a joke more than 5 people have been attacked by a very mean squirrel." At least three people were treated for cuts in the emergency room, KQED reported, but fortunately, squirrels rarely carry rabies. Marin County animal experts said that they'd seen this "squirrels gone wild" behavior before. Allison Hermance, director of marketing for WildCare, said that when baby squirrels fall from their nests, they're sometimes taken home and raised by well-intentioned people. Unfortunately, the squirrels often grow up to find themselves living in the wild again after having learned to associate people with caretaking and food. When dinner is not served promptly, they sometimes get upset, as many of us do, "desperate for the food that they are expecting a human to provide." Squirrels may be adorable and look harmless, but it's never a good idea to feed wild animals. With the possible exception of inflatable frogs and dinosaurs, of course.

HCN Correspondent **KylieMohr**

The flames were long extinguished when I drove into Las Vegas, New Mexico, this spring on a reporting trip for *High Country News*. Three years earlier, the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon wildfire — the state's largest on record — burned 340,000 acres. Wildfire recovery efforts are still very much ongoing, though. So I spent a couple of days driving around the burn scar and talking to residents about the fire's aftermath, specifically their access to clean drinking water. **Repeated heavy rains on burned soil have sent ash, dirt and soot rushing into rivers, rendering the town's water treatment plant intermittently unusable and contaminating wells in outlying areas.** These problems are expected to continue for at least the next five to 10 years.

I met a man who lived off-grid in the mountains nearby; over lemonade in town, he pointed out the gigantic water jug he was using to haul potable water. It took up the entire bed of his pickup. **I talked with a family whose cows had drunk floodwater after the fire and died; they were still worried about the safety of drinking water from their well. I listened as a woman with health problems post-fire described how hard it was to get her tap water tested for pollutants.** Together, they gave me insight into the challenges communities face in the years after a wildfire. By reporting on these lingering problems, I hoped to show how larger and more destructive wildfires are overwhelming local, state and federal systems.

It felt important to visit after the national media had long since moved on. This is what *High Country News* does best: We're in it for the long haul.

Sharon Stewart

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Kevin Mohatt / HCN

#IAM THE WEST

ELIZABETH BLACK AND CHRISTOPHER BROWN
Owners of Your Neighborhood Christmas Tree Farm
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We started our farm wanting to do our part by planting more trees for the environment and also by creating a local source for a holiday tradition. It is actually quite difficult to maintain a Christmas tree farm in Colorado due to the harsh conditions we face, including a short growing season and limited precipitation. Most Christmas trees are trucked in from several states away. We keep our production relatively small — just 1,000 trees on our 1-acre lot — which allows us to put a lot of care and attention into nurturing each seedling. Our farm is sustainable because the trees are grown locally in the community that enjoys them, and we only cut down 100 each season. The highlight of our year is seeing all the families with their little kids coming to find the perfect tree.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story? Let us know on social.
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