

## **Current Grazing Practices and the Relationship to Communities**

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Within the boundaries of the Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association (TBGPE) are land ownership patterns common to this part of Wyoming. Privately owned lands comprise about 54% of the area. Federally owned lands 41% (US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management). State owned lands 5%. The TBGPE is comprised of the southern portion of the Thunder Basin Grasslands (Grasslands), which has intermingled land ownership patterns and an area immediately south of the Grasslands, which is mostly privately owned. The TBGPE boundaries encompass just over 800,000 acres total, while the Grasslands has within its boundary 1.8 million acres with 572,000 of those acres in Federal ownership.

Most of the ranchers employ some type of rotational grazing system. On the privately owned (deeded) lands, this choice is, of course, entirely left with the rancher. Where National Grasslands permits are involved, the grazing system(s) in use are developed by Forest Service personnel in conjunction with the permittee as Allotment Management Plans (AMPs). More on AMPs later.

### **History of Thunder Basin Grazing Association**

The Thunder Basin Grazing Association was formed in 1937 as a cooperative grazing association by a group of area ranchers in conjunction with the Soil Conservation Service, the agency then charged with the management of these lands. Bylaws were developed and a Grazing Agreement and Rules of Management were signed. These documents currently are revised every ten years at expiration. This Association is

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currently negotiating on all three documents, as they expire at the end of February 2002. These documents govern the relationship of the Thunder Basin Grazing Association with the Forest Service and spells out the duties and responsibilities of each party.

### **Role of Grazing Associations**

Grazing Associations operate as permittees of the Forest Service. Associations, in turn, issue grazing permits to their members, who are local ranchers. Associations are controlled by boards, which are elected by the membership. This process allows local people to administer grazing privileges in accordance with Forest Service rules and procedures. Additionally Associations have their own bylaws, which provide for membership qualifications, meeting dates, election of officers, and general operating policies. These may not be less restrictive than Forest Service policies.

The Thunder Basin National Grasslands is composed of one large continuous unit and one smaller detached unit. Three Grazing Associations – Thunder Basin, Inyan Kara, and Spring Creek are permittees of the Forest Service. They each have their individual area of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands.

The Thunder Basin Grazing Association administers 72,000 AUMs to 56 permittees. The Forest Service sets seasons of use and stocking rates. The Association Board then allocates grazing privileges (AUMs) to its members based on dependency (a rather subjective term) and commensurability (defined by the Thunder Basin Grazing Association as owning, or leasing and owning, property used by the permittee for a farm or ranch operation, to equal at least 20% of the National Grasslands acreage that they are

permitted to graze. At least 50% of the acreage requirement must be derived from owned land).

Qualifications for membership vary from one Association to the next. Further requirements for membership in the Thunder Basin Grazing Association are: a) Residing within or adjacent to the Thunder Basin Grazing Area, as defined by a map attached to the By-laws. b) Must own base property and the livestock to be permitted, including the basic facilities necessary to conduct a ranching operation and the capability to produce a part of the annual forage crop needed to support the permitted livestock. c) Payment of an initiation fee and annual dues. d) US Citizenship.

Grazing Associations also invoice their members for permitted AUMs at the current authorized grazing fee rate, plus any additional fees such as annual dues and assessments. 25% of remittances go to the U.S. Treasury; the remainder is used by the Association for administrative expenses and Conservation Practices (CPs). CPs consist of replacement of fences, stock tanks, and windmills that are beyond useful life and normal maintenance, brush control, and other such items. The permittee must share in the cost of CPs, while normal maintenance is the sole responsibility of the permittee.

Earlier, I mentioned the term Allotment Management Plan (AMP). An allotment is defined as a pasture or group of pastures assigned by permit to an individual rancher. Some ranches have more than one allotment, but may not be permitted for more than 5,000 AUMs. AMPs are comprehensive operating plans detailing how and when each unit of the allotment will be grazed and by what kind and class of livestock, according to land capabilities and public needs. This, then, has a direct effect on the operating plan for the remainder of the

ranch. This document is to be completed by the Forest Service in cooperation with the Grazing Association and the permittee.

### **Costs of Ranching on Public Lands**

Much ink has been used and much energy expended over the years on this subject. The grazing fee is set annually by a formula, which takes into account forage value, production costs and the price of beef. This fee, however, is only one of the cost factors on public lands. Others include the value of the permit when the ranch is acquired. Although Forest Service permits may not be bought or sold, their value is still factored into the purchase price. This [permit] value is recognized by lenders, and also by the IRS at Estate settlement time. Additional costs may be transportation costs, as often the allotment is a distance away from the ranch headquarters. These become significant when water must be checked often (daily during drought conditions), salt and mineral distributed, fences maintained, and livestock checked for condition and health. On private lease, many of these costs, such as fence and windmill maintenance, and sometimes even checking the water supply, are borne by the lessor. Another important factor to consider is that on a private lease, one has an exclusive right; while on public, multiple use lands, the public also has access.

### **Relationship To Communities**

Since an earlier presenter covered this subject in detail, I will comment only briefly. Most of the members of the Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association trade primarily in the Douglas area, while some trade in Gillette, Newcastle, Lusk, Lance Creek or Wright. Purchases include food, clothing, fuel, livestock feed, automobiles, ranch supplies such as posts, wire and building supplies, insurance, and

banking services. These ranches make up a significant part of the economy in their respective communities and of course, are a larger part of Converse County's economy compared to Campbell County because of the extensive minerals in Campbell County.