

Authors: Ranchers should stop getting rich off public lands

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Waste of the West: Public Lands Ranching

Lynn Jacobs

1991

Price: \$28 — No. pages: 602,
with more than 1,000
illustrations and photos

Reviewed by
Paul Lindholdt

Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture

Jeremy Rifkin

Penguin-Dutton, 1992

Price: \$21 — No. pages: 353

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Lynn Jacobs and Jeremy Rifkin are only the latest in a long line of scientists, politicians, and economists who argue that western ranchers get rich unethically by fattening their cattle on western public lands.

Both writers vote to change the way beef is raised. Both agree that public lands have

been degraded for a century, managed for livestock production instead of multiple uses, and sustained by outrageous government subsidies.

Lynn Jacobs is a founder of the Ranching Task Force, a group in Tucson opposed to public lands ranching. Ranchers pay tiny grazing fees, Jacobs says, and receive some \$2 billion tax and private dollars in subsidies annually. Ironically termed welfare ranchers, most such businessmen are well situated. Many are millionaires. Yet, Jacobs shows, public lands ranchers cause more environmental harm, thwart more public uses, and wreak more political injustice than any other beneficiaries of public lands.

In his book, "Waste of the West," Jacobs advocates banning livestock from public lands and buying out the West's 30,000 public-lands ranchers and their property. He also proposes the formation of a Department of Public Lands office to restore the ecological integrity of our much-abused federal estate. Not only will such measures resolve a variety of problems, he argues, but they will cause few economic hardships. Public lands, he demonstrates, produce only about 3 percent of all American beef.

As local news has shown us, more public lands managers are turning activist than ever. Don Oman, a 26-year veteran of the U.S. Forest Service, received death threats from ranchers in 1989, when he tried to cut back the number of cattle in his Sawtooth Ranger District on the Salmon National Forest. Cowed by pressure from militant local beef growers, Oman's Forest Service bosses recommended he move from his Twin Falls home. Oman instead blew the whistle on his bosses, gaining attention of the media and President Bush, thereby managing to keep his job.

Grazing allotment fees on federal lands stand at \$1.92 per animal unit month, a figure that represents the amount of forage a cow and calf can gobble in four weeks' time (about 900 pounds, Jacobs claims). To graze these animals on private lands costs three to five times as much, all the critics agree. But the system of welfare ranching has become so entrenched, and politicians so far support the scheme, that only an act of Congress will change the way cows are grazed. The largest grazing permit holders include Pacific Power, the Mormon Church, the Aetna, Metropolitan and John Hancock life insurance compa-

nies and Union and Hunt oil.

Along with the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management is supposed to manage open range, but that office has been badly hamstrung both by budget cuts and by the reprisals of influential grazing lobbyists. Under Ronald Reagan, my own research shows, the BLM range management budget suffered savage cuts. In 1981 it stood at \$55.5 million, but by 1988 it had been slashed to \$34 million. Yet BLM and Forest Service grazing programs still operate in the red. That is, more public money goes out to maintain and restore rangelands trashed by cattle than comes in from grazing fees.

Rifkin's book, "Beyond Beef," has caused great commotion for its trashing of the cattle industry. All global malnutrition and starvation would cease, Rifkin asserts, if we took most of the grain we grow to fatten beef and fed human beings instead. A prolific author, Rifkin presides over the D.C.-based Foundation on Economic Trends and the Greenhouse Crisis Foundation.

Not since Upton Sinclair published "The Jungle" in 1906 — a novel condemning U.S. meat packing for its filth and abuses of human labor — has any book wounded American beef producers as deeply as has Rifkin's.

Just as Sinclair prompted investigations by Roosevelt that led to the Pure Food and Drug Act, Rifkin now offends an industry renowned for political clout, an industry so worried about its welfare that it ran an ad in the New York Times on Earth Day 1992 that named beef "Nature's Recycling Machines."

Rifkin mounts astounding evidence about cattle production. About 1.28 billion cows inhabit Earth, he says. In the U.S. they consume more than 70 percent of the grain we produce, requiring 9 pounds of feed to generate a single pound of meat. In the U.S. they excrete at a rate of 230,000 pounds/second. Globally, meanwhile, 40 to 60 million people are dying each year from hunger-related diseases. Rifkin is now appealing to organic farming groups to support his Beyond Beef campaign, which he says will take some 20 or 30 years to reach its goal — to cut American beef consumption by half.

Taken together, Rifkin and Jacobs challenge us to examine the effects of our diets and our land-use policies. These good books aim powerful blows at an already ailing American industry.

Lindholdt is a freelance writer, a professor of English at the University of Idaho and a resident of Moscow.