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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

GRAZING ON PUBLIC LANDS: AN ALTERNATE VIEW

The review of the 1996 report by the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST), title "Grazing on Public Lands," by Kathleen H. Keeler (*Great Plains Research* 7:356-357) was quite critical. As Chair of the CAST task force that researched and wrote the report, I am in a position to respond to the criticism and present an alternative view. Keeler suggested that the report: 1) lacked objectivity and presented an industry view of grazing on public lands; 2) was poorly documented, in spite of more than 240 references; 3) repetitive in presentation; and, 4) a waste of federal funds. First, the report was not a government publication; CAST, which funded the project, is made up of more than 30 different scientific and professional societies plus many individual members. Only \$10,000 of federal monies were involved, a minor portion of the total cost. Second, the repetitiveness was deliberate, since the summaries are also used as stand-alone over-views for different purposes. This is true of all CAST reports. Third, and more important, we used all of the information available to us in developing our analysis, whether that information was in scientific journals, government documents or smaller studies. The conclusions represented a comprehensive consensus on grazing in public lands by an eminent group of senior scientists and range managers. The report does not argue for the status quo nor justify overgrazing; instead, this task force concluded, "proper grazing of rangelands is sustainable," and this conclusion is reiterated throughout our report.

Several additional points deserve a brief response, as well. For example, Keeler objected to all the grazed rangelands in the West being treated together. However, the value of covering the full spectrum of rangelands, including shrublands as well as grasslands, is that the patterns become clearer and the similarities in management more striking. In particular, Keeler objected to the inclusion of tallgrass prairie, because "90% of tallgrass prairie has been plowed." However, the remaining 10% represents a viable, productive and quite important vegetation type in the Great Plains. In addition, although Keeler missed the fee value in the economic analysis, it is presented (Table 5.2); this table includes the federal grazing fee as one comparison. Also, although the mislabeling of the blowout penstemon photograph is regrettable, the reviewer's assertion that penstemon "is reduced by improved range quality because it competes poorly with grasses useful to ranchers" misses a key point. The grasses involved are native species that are

“useful” to bison and native ungulates as well as cattle. The importance of grazing to grassland ecosystem structure and function has recently been reiterated in *Science* (Collins et al. 1998, Kaiser 1998), providing added support for the analysis presented in the CAST report.

In sum, I would like to urge anyone interested in the issue of grazing and the concept of multiple use, which is legally mandated for public lands, to read the CAST report and form their own judgment. We did our best to synthesize some difficult issues and present a balanced view.

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