

PUBLIC LANDS:

Grazing may have harmed a quarter of federal rangeland

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At least a quarter of federal rangelands don't meet land health standards, according to newly released data from the Interior Department.

The [data](#) give a broad overview of the health of 154 million acres managed by Interior's Bureau of Land Management for wildlife and livestock. It shows that more than 40 million acres don't meet standards that address everything from soil permeability to species diversity.

BLM has also never assessed 59 million acres, meaning the agency has not taken samples in those areas to see whether livestock grazing has damaged the land. The agency leases out the land to ranchers in 13 Western states for grazing livestock.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility released the data yesterday. The watchdog nonprofit had filed an administrative complaint when BLM discontinued releasing the land assessments after 2012. But earlier this year, the agency reversed that decision and recently handed PEER data for 2013 through 2015.

It shows that in 2015, grazing may have damaged 29 million acres, which are now classified as "not meeting all standards" for rangeland health and not making significant progress. Another 11.6 million acres also do not meet standards, but BLM attributes that to reasons other than livestock grazing.

BLM declined to comment.

PEER Advocacy Director Kirsten Stade asserted in a statement that the data "paint a grim picture." BLM does not have a category for lands that meet standards; instead, the agency classifies 54.5 million acres under a single category that combines lands that meet standards with areas that are "making significant progress."

That number is not much of an improvement over recent years. Between 2013 and 2015, about 3 million acres were added to the category. PEER also released [data](#) showing annual rangeland assessments.

PEER wants BLM to change how it assesses and reports the health of rangelands, pointing to a grazing reform "white paper" BLM employees developed in 1995.

"It does not require rocket science to track the damage done by grazing cattle," Stade said. "Back in 1995, a network of BLM range specialists called for major reform of the agency's livestock program in the very first 'white paper' issued by PEER. Unfortunately, it appears that little has changed in the last twenty years."

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