

# Applegate public land grazing in need of environmental review: Part One

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

Public land grazing is a controversial subject in the American West, including the Applegate Valley. Public-land grazing allotments in the Applegate are collectively referred to as the Applegate Grazing Complex, which includes the following US Forest Service (USFS) allotments: Glade Creek, Wagner, Beaver-Silver, Carberry (inactive), Elliott, and the Upper Big Applegate. The Bureau of Land Management also has the Lower Big Applegate Allotment. Altogether permits allow approximately 1,000 cows to graze on 166,452 acres of public land in the Applegate each year from April through October. In 2019 the paltry fee for this privilege was just \$1.35 per head month (HM) for one cow and her calf.

Most of these grazing allotments have not had updated Allotment Management Plans (AMPs) since the 1960s; in fact, they haven't been updated since before humans first set foot on the moon in 1969. A lot has changed in that time, including our understanding of the ecological impacts of public land grazing. These allotments are in desperate need of environmental analysis using modern science and updated field knowledge gained over the past 50 years.

## Historical context

USFS documents confirm that as early as 1918 Silver Fork Basin, below Dutchman Peak, was overgrazed. Massive, unsightly, and damaging terraces were bulldozed across upper Silver Fork Basin to control the erosion caused by overgrazing. The impacts to native plant communities during the height of grazing on the

Siskiyou Crest were severe, and they continue today.

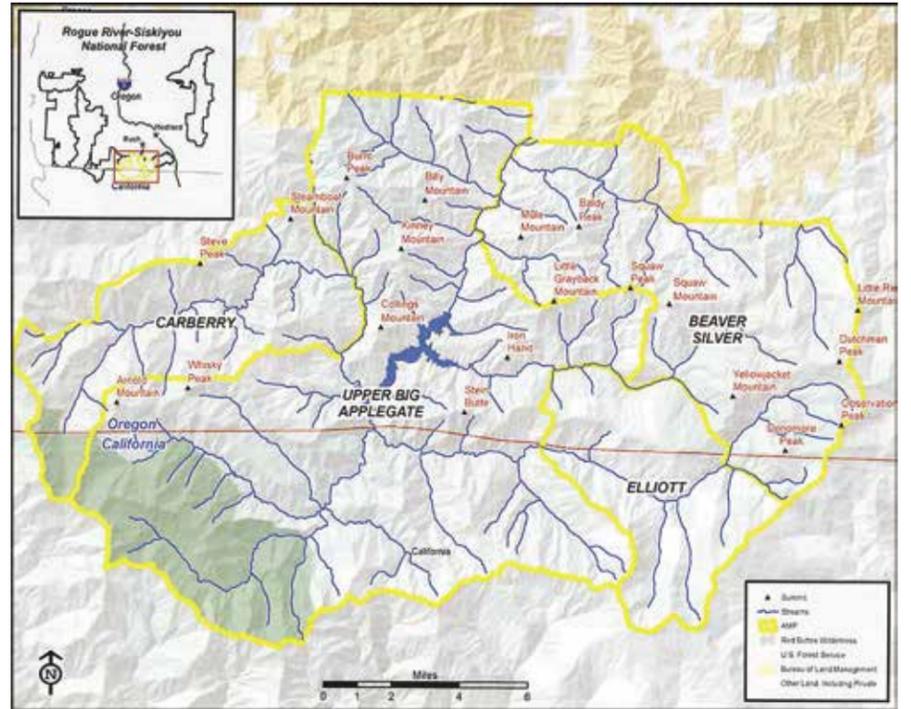
According to *Stories on the Land* (Frank, 1996), in 1903, 103,000 sheep and 7,500 cattle grazed the Siskiyou Crest between Siskiyou Summit and Highway 199. C.E. Brown, in his 1971 USFS document, *History of the Rogue River National Forest, Vol. II*, explained that, in 1918, 12,000 sheep were permitted between Studhorse Creek and Donomore Meadows. "At the end of the season," Brown says, "the whole area was a dust bed."

## Ecological impacts

Public land grazing affects hydrology, water quality, wildlife habitat, botanical resources, wilderness values, fisheries, pollinator habitat, and more. Concentrations of cattle are denuding willow habitat along streams in many meadows on the Siskiyou Crest, in some places completely destroying habitat for the willow flycatcher, a sensitive bird species. Rare aspen groves in the Applegate are unable to reproduce, as cattle eat down every shoot that tries to grow. Public land grazing not only diminishes the ability of native plants to reproduce, since cattle eat flowers and thus prevent pollination and seed development, but also drastically alters the composition of native plant communities on a large scale. When wildflowers are unable to set seed, forage for native birds and other seed-eating species is diminished.

The alteration of native-plant communities also affects important pollinator habitat, including that of at-risk species such as Franklin's bumblebee and the western bumblebee. The Sierra Nevada blue butterfly relies solely on the Sierra shooting star, which grows in moist meadows as a larval host plant. Cattle often eat these sensitive plants before the butterfly larvae can reproduce.

Public land grazing also contributes to the spread of invasive plants into intact native-plant communities. Cattle are contributing to the spread of the nonnative purple



This map depicts four of the Applegate public land grazing allotments on USFS land. It does not show the Wagner, Glade Creek, or Lower Big Applegate Allotments.

houndstongue around Wards Fork on the Siskiyou Crest.

## Native wildlife graze differently from nonnative cattle

Nonnative cattle eat very different plants from native wildlife, as determined in *Diet Overlap and Social Interaction Among Cattle, Horses, Deer and Elk in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, southwest Oregon* (2007, Hosten, Whitridge, Broyles). Fecal analysis studies, performed to further understand the impacts of livestock grazing in the monument, showed that wetland plants comprise 45 percent of cattle fecal matter, whereas deer and elk show very little wetland plants in their fecal matter. Clearly wetland plants are preferred by cattle and should receive special protection, as livestock grazing compacts wetland soils, denudes riparian vegetation, and contributes to sedimentation and bacterial contamination of headwater streams.

## Areas of special concern

Cattle congregate in preferred areas in high concentrations, affecting some areas more than others. Areas that have been overgrazed and are in need of grazing cessation and long-term rest include Silver Fork Basin, Kettle Belly Glade, Yellowjacket Springs, Yellowjacket Ridge, Observation Peak, "cattle barrens" between Wards Fork and Condrey Mountain, Donomore Meadows, Alex Hole, Alex Creek, Studhorse Creek, Mud Spring, Middle Hell, Tamarack Meadows, and Miller Glade.

Suzie Savoie  
Conservation Chair, Siskiyou  
Chapter NPSO  
klamathsiskiyou@gmail.com

**Note:** Part Two will be published in the next Applegater and will focus on the environmental analysis and AMP changes needed to bring public land grazing in the Applegate into the 21st century.

Cows on a public land grazing allotment within the Applegate Grazing Complex.





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