

Information about | roadless areas and ranching

Ranching has a long history in the West, and its continued survival is tied to the health of our public lands. Grazing and the use of forage and water that originates from National Forests is a key component of many ranching operations; protecting these resources is key to maintaining this traditional way of life.



Cattle graze on public lands in the Pike-San Isabel National Forest.

Photo courtesy of Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project

Protecting a Colorado Tradition

Ranching is a way of life that is intertwined with the history and development of the American West and its culture. Even today, it is a lifestyle that values tradition and continuity – one survey of western ranchers found that individual ranchers had spent an average of 31 years on the same ranch and had come from families that had ranched for an average of 78 years.¹ Preserving the ranching lifestyle is important to protecting what is unique about Colorado and our Western heritage.

Grazing on Public Lands

Colorado's public lands play a key role in preserving this ranching tradition, and it is roadless areas that provide the core landscape and the source of clean water on which ranching fundamentally depends.

- Forest and rangelands in the United States provide forage and browse for more than 100 million cattle and eight million sheep², with some 80-85% of all federal lands in the West used for livestock grazing.³
- In 1998, about 92 million acres of National Forest lands were in grazing allotments, 84 million of which were in active use. Over two million cattle and sheep grazed on National Forest grazing allotments in the same year.⁴
- About 20% of all beef cattle and 50% of all sheep in the United States are located in eleven western states⁵, including Colorado, and about half of all beef cattle and sheep rely on land managed by the Forest Service or by the Bureau of Land Management for grazing.⁶



An existing route provides access to this grazing allotment in the White River National Forest.

Photo courtesy of Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project

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Ranching and Roads

Preservation of roadless areas is fundamental to supporting our ranching heritage; in fact, the existence of intact networks of National Forest land free from roads is critical to the pristine watersheds and healthy ecosystem on which ranching operations depend. Roads provide ranchers with motorized access to their allotments in order to transport livestock and maintain fences and water supplies. Yet roads on public lands are rarely built for the primary purpose of access to grazing allotments; for the most part, the roads used by ranchers have been constructed for other purposes. Preservation of roadless areas would not deny ranchers access to their allotments using these existing routes, nor are there new access routes planned that roadless area protection would preclude. Further, by preventing the building of new roads, roadless area protection ensures the health of the vegetation used for forage and browse by limiting the spread of invasive species and maintaining healthy watersheds.

1 J.M. Fowler, 1994

2 USDA Forest Service 2000; L.A. Joyce 1999

3 Council for Agricultural Science and Technology 1996

4 D. Herman, USDA Forest Service 2000

5 Council for Agricultural Science and Technology 1996; T.G. Field 1990

6 L.D. Harris 1996

For more information, visit www.roadless.net or contact:

Matt Garrington 303.573-3871 x310
Environment Colorado

Michael Saul 303.441.5166
National Wildlife Federation

Colorado's Forest Legacy
Protecting our wild forests, wildlife, and water