Editor's note: This is the 10th article in a 13-part series exploring public lands grazing in the West, using the Tongue District of the Bighorn National Forest in north-central Wyoming as a case study.

BY ROBERT WAGGENER

JONATHAN Ratner and other environmentalists who want to end public lands grazing love it when ranchers continually fight federal land management agencies over livestock grazing programs and when ranchers themselves are at odds with each other. That makes the missions of these groups a little easier.

A case in point is the Bighorn National Forest in Wyoming, one of many areas in the West that is being closely monitored by the environmental group that Ratner works for, Western Watersheds Project. It has become a big thorn in the sides of many ranchers and even the agencies that oversee grazing on federal lands.

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Ratner, WWP’s director for Wyoming, Utah and Colorado, says he’s well aware that some ranchers holding permits to graze livestock on the Tongue District of the Bighorn are taking steps to improve rangelands and watersheds, and they are doing their best to work with the U.S. Forest Service.

But, Ratner contends, a few permittees have overgrazed their allotments for years and have battled the agency every step of the way, which has divided the ranching community. The Tongue dispute and similar situations across the West, he adds, make it that much more difficult for ranchers and their close allies, as a whole, to protect public lands grazing.

“Many permittees have a certain hatred for the federal government. It’s sort of a standard Western Libertarian view,” Ratner says. “Their business model depends on federal subsidies and handouts, but at the same time they loathe the federal government.”

That, combined with poor stewardship of the range on the part of some permittees, says Ratner, angers many, including ranchers and federal agency personnel who are trying to do the right thing, the general public and some politicians.

Ratner says he spends his summers monitoring rangelands and watersheds in Wyoming, and his winters perusing USFS and Bureau of Land Management documents and photos obtained through the federal Freedom of Information Act.

“I have found that the entire Bighorn National Forest and many other public lands in Wyoming have been heavily degraded by livestock grazing over the past 130 years. It really wasn’t until the late 1970s that USFS and BLM began to think about changing this.”

Ratner says that when the Tongue District started extensive range monitoring in the 1990s and found that many areas fell far short of standards and guidelines, some ranchers were immediately on the fight with the district. He specifically mentioned Chas Kane and several members of his family, who hold three grazing permits that are in jeopardy because of noncompliance. (As reported earlier in this series, Kane died suddenly in June while attending a meeting of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association.)

“Kane and a couple of his sons have been highly vocal, stirring up the situation,” Ratner said late last year.

On the flip side, he emphasized at the time, permittee Bob Berry voluntarily started reducing stocking rates and adjusting the time and timing of grazing, knowing that short-term cuts would pay long-term dividends in a variety of ways. These include improved conditions in riparian areas and uplands, increased forage for livestock and wildlife, and better relations with both USFS and the public.

“I don’t know Bob, but you can tell by reading agency documents and looking at...”

BIG CHANGE: Riparian areas and uplands continue to improve across many areas of the Tongue District of the Bighorn National Forest in Wyoming because of changes in livestock grazing management. Some of the improvements are drastic, like this small spring-fed tributary to the North Fork of the Tongue River. The first photo was taken in September 1999 and the second in August 2014 after significant management changes were made by permittee Bob Berry of Wolf, Wyo., in cooperation with the Tongue District of the Bighorn. The changes included adjusting the stocking rate from about 1 acre per animal unit month to more than 3 acres, and varying the timing of grazing. Many of the bare areas in the spring bottom now support a healthy population of desirable plants, including sedges, while the uplands contain a growing number of desirable wheatgrasses and needlegrasses used by livestock and wildlife, including elk.