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Western Watersheds Project Wins A Federal Court Injunction Stopping Livestock Grazing on over 450,000 Acres of Public Land in Southern Idaho

Greater sage-grouse, pygmy rabbit and Slickspot peppergrass have won a reprieve from livestock grazing which has decimated their populations and destroyed their habitat. Late yesterday, Chief Judge B. Lynn Winmill of the federal District for Idaho held BLM, various Simplot corporate entities, and other corporate ranching operations to the terms of an earlier agreement, and again enjoined livestock grazing on 17 livestock grazing allotments in southern Idaho.

“Instead of negotiating a reasonable compromise to allow some grazing to continue in these areas, BLM, Simplot and other ranchers gambled and they lost,” said Todd C. Tucci, senior attorney for Advocates for the West, who is representing plaintiff Western Watersheds in the case. “We have been seeking common ground for the eight months, and their idea of compromise was complete capitulation. We are gratified that the court held BLM and Simplot to terms of our agreement.”

In 2005, the federal court enjoined livestock grazing on 28 grazing allotments, after finding that Bureau of Land Management (BLM) violated the National Environmental Policy Act, the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act, and the BLM’s Fundamentals of Rangeland Health. Western Watersheds Project, ranchers and the BLM then entered into an agreement allowing some ongoing grazing and requiring the BLM to develop a new Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the Jarbidge Field Office as well as an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for that plan. The EIS would examine the impacts of grazing on public lands in the Jarbidge Field Office of the BLM. In the interim five years, BLM has failed to issue the required EIS and RMP.

“The sage-grouse populations in the Jarbidge Field Office are in collapse,” said Jon Marvel, Executive Director of Western Watersheds Project. “This reprieve – which comes at the start of the sage-grouse nesting period – will help ensure that adequate habitat exists for this keystone species. BLM cannot keep allowing the same grazing over and over, and expect a different result,” said Marvel.

Recent data from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game shows that sage-grouse populations in the Jarbidge Field Office are in a free fall, with declines of over 90% since 2006 alone. For example, in the Browns Bench area of the Field Office, total male sage-grouse lek counts are down from 185 in 2006 to 29 in 2010, and some areas are in an even steeper decline.

“It is long past time for these corporate ranching operations to take responsibility for the impacts of their grazing on wildlife habitat throughout the Jarbidge Field Office,” said Katie Fite, Biodiversity Director for Western Watersheds Project. “These corporations have refused to modify their grazing practices to adapt to the needs of these imperiled wildlife species, even in the face of undisputed scientific evidence,” said Fite.

Maybe, just maybe, this injunction will restore some order and balance to public lands grazing in the Jarbidge Field Office,” said Tucci. “We can only hope.”