

NEWS

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Oregon Natural Desert Association

*To Protect, Defend, and Restore Forever,
Oregon's Native Deserts*

Conservation groups sue BLM over federal rangeland health regulations

PORTLAND, ORE. — The Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) and Western Watersheds Project filed suit on Monday, March 8, against the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), alleging that the agency has failed to comply with rangeland health regulations in the Louse Canyon Geographic Management Area (LCGMA) in southeast Oregon. The lawsuit alleges that the BLM illegally withheld action to change management in the Louse Canyon Area. The BLM's own regulations, the Fundamentals of Rangeland Health (FRH), require livestock management changes before the next grazing season when livestock are determined to be the cause of failure.

The Louse Canyon Area is located adjacent to Idaho and Nevada in a landscape dominated by elaborate rhyolite canyons. Much of this land is in the headwaters of the Owyhee Wild Rivers and directly affects water quality and redband trout habitat.

The BLM's recent assessment of the area, which encompasses over 500,000 acres, is several hundred pages long and quite revealing. The agency determined that standards were not being met, and that livestock were the cause of the failure, on six of 21 pastures in the LCGMA. These six pastures account for approximately 220,155 acres of public lands, which is about 42 percent of the 523,000 acres of land the LCGMA encompasses. Other results are equally shocking: Close to 50 percent of the streams in the LCGMA are not meeting riparian and wetland standards. In addition, 75 percent of the meadow/wetland complexes in the LCGMA are not functioning due to livestock grazing.

"The BLM should be held accountable when they promise to get something done," said Bill Marlett, Executive Director of ONDA. "We expect BLM to keep to its word, and if the agency can't monitor the health of our public lands being grazed by livestock, then we have serious problems."

The BLM has yet to issue a final decision with regard to changed grazing management that will cure the failure to meet FRH standards in the Louse Canyon Area. By allowing status quo livestock grazing on the public lands it is charged with protecting, the agency has fallen well short of its duties to maintain the ecological health of the land.

The lawsuit also claims that, despite the adoption of FRH regulations nearly a decade ago, and the fact that the BLM is to have all assessments completed by the year 2008, the BLM's Jordan Resource Area has yet to finalize a single process.

"If BLM needs more staff to get the job done in a timely manner, they need to let their boss, Secretary Norton, know," said Marlett. "This level of performance is not acceptable; the public deserves accountability."