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UT Section

### The Disappearance of America's Rangelands

America's rangelands are one of the greatest resources in this country and are disappearing at an alarming rate as they are converted into cropland and urban developments. Rangelands are important because they provide grazing land, wildlife habitat, watersheds, mineral resources, and recreation areas. Some solutions to the loss of rangelands include more benefits for proper use of rangelands, more government protections for rangelands, and more educational programs aimed at informing the general public of the importance of rangelands.

The main use of rangelands is grazing for livestock. However, they serve many other purposes. Rangelands support many diverse plant and animal species, including endangered species such as the Gunnison grouse and Dwarf bear-poppy ("Gunnison" and "LISTED"). They also serve as important watersheds for both urban and rural use. "Rangeland in a state of good health will provide...a high quality water source [and] promote infiltration for ground water recharge" ("Rangeland Watersheds"). Another use of rangelands is for mineral resources. "Western rangelands are rich in deposits of minerals and fossil fuels" ("Mining"). As the population increases so does the demand for these resources. When addressing the importance of rangelands it can be easy to focus on their tangible benefits, but they also provide a location for recreational activities such as hunting and hiking. Rangelands are found in vast quantities across the country and give people the chance to be out in nature and appreciate the natural beauty of the landscape ("Grasslands").

Urbanization refers to an area becoming more developed. The human population is expanding and while people do still flock to cities, they also crave wide open spaces. Rangelands

provide these spaces and especially in western states, right outside every subdivision is prime rangeland waiting to be built upon. “Recent studies suggest that urbanization, accompanied with a shrinking land base, presents the gravest threat to western ranching” (McGinty). While rangeland is being lost directly due to urbanization, it is also being attacked by it on another front. As cropland is lost due to urbanization, rangelands are converted into cropland (Emili and Greene).

Rangelands represent vast amounts of arable land that is sorely needed as the demand for food grows with the population. Operating rangelands in a way that still preserves it as wildlife habitat and also a watershed is no longer very profitable when compared to agriculture. Many large ranches are being sold as smaller parcels that are being converted to farms (Emili and Greene). It is easy to say that rangelands have an important value in their natural state, but much harder to face the financial fact that selling the land or converting it to agriculture will result in more profit.

To combat urbanization and the advance of agriculture into rangelands it must be made more profitable to operate rangelands in ways that preserve their uses as grazing land, wildlife habitat, watersheds, and recreation sites. For increasing profit, Colorado rancher Kit Pharo recommended more conservative herd sizes and implementing a rotational grazing system (Littlefield). There are also programs such as the Conservation Stewardship Program with the Natural Resources Conservation Service that provide financial assistance to ranchers to increase profit and conservation on their land (“Conservation”). In addition to increasing profitability of rangelands, increased government regulation in the protection of rangelands will prevent the advance of agriculture and urban development.

As with solving all problems, education is one of the most important steps. Many people simply do not know enough about rangelands to see the value they have. It is when the uneducated masses do not care or do not care to learn more about these invaluable lands that real damage can be caused. When attending conferences, just like the one held this week, it is easy to forget that the majority could not identify what a rangeland is, let alone what makes them important. Simply by educating more people and introducing them to these places, a huge difference can be made in the treatment of rangelands.

Rangelands hold extreme value in their grazing value for livestock and wildlife as well as their use as watersheds, mineral deposits, and recreation areas. These lands are unfortunately being lost at an unprecedented rate due to increasing rates of urbanization and conversion to agricultural use. For agriculture and urbanization, the best solution is to make operating rangelands in their current state more profitable by making smart changes to management practices and taking advantage of government programs. Protections for rangelands also need to be strengthened through government regulation. And finally, education is perhaps the most important step in protecting rangelands. By increasing awareness of the importance of rangelands, people can begin to make a difference in their treatment of the land. By following some of these steps, the loss of America's rangelands can be greatly reduced and it can be ensured they will provide their important benefits for hundreds of years to come.

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