



CED8-241

March 9, 1978

B-114815

The Honorable Paul Laxalt
United States Senate

Dear Senator Laxalt:

Your February 10, 1978, letter expressed concern over the content of our report entitled "Public Rangelands Continue to Deteriorate" (CED-77-88, July 5, 1977) and the general direction of Federal land management in the western States, particularly as related to the 1976 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Organic Act.

You stated that the photographs on pages ii and 14 were misleading. As you recall, we previously responded to you regarding the photographs in the report in a November 3, 1977, letter (CED8-49) from the Director of our Community and Economic Development Division. Since our position on the photographs remains the same, I will reiterate the essence of our previous comments.

We agree that a more suitable picture could have been used on page ii to portray rangeland deteriorated from overgrazing. We believe, however, that the picture does not significantly misrepresent conditions of overgrazed land. In subsequent discussions with Bureau officials, we were advised that there exists overgrazed land far more serious than that illustrated in our report. The officials said that, although the land in the photograph had been subjected to a "chaining" operation, this would not have significantly affected the condition of the land as far as the low-lying vegetation was concerned. Because the land was undergoing restoration, it obviously was deteriorated and, therefore, warranted corrective action.

Regarding the pictures on page 14 of our report contrasting overgrazed and good rangeland, we pointed out on the preceeding page that we had visited the grazing areas pictured and that the Bureau had permitted grazing year after year throughout the entire forage-growing season. The field manager showed us several areas where overuse had killed most of the forage. Other land in the general area had hardly been used, even though

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there were no physical barriers to prevent the livestock from using them. The field manager told us this had occurred because livestock rarely graze in areas where there is no nearby water supply. He said this situation could have been avoided by forcing the livestock to graze in the unused area by direct daily supervision.

You also stated that our report title--"Public Rangelands Continue to Deteriorate"--is unsubstantiated and contrary to BLM's statistics reflecting improvements. On page 3 of our report, we note that continued rangeland deterioration caused the Bureau of Land Management to increase its emphasis on livestock grazing management in 1950 by dividing the public rangelands into grazing allotments--areas designated for use by a prescribed number and type of livestock. In the mid-1960s however, Bureau studies showed that range conditions continued to decline. As a result, the Bureau instituted another management concept in 1965 which prohibited livestock grazing on certain lands during periods of the growing season or during 1 or more years. This concept provided the basis for the Bureau's current intensive management system known as allotment management planning.

Bureau statistics do indicate that more land is improving in condition than is declining (19 percent vs. 16 percent), however, the fact remains that significant rangeland deterioration is still occurring. As stated on page 4 of our report, there was a 2-percent increase in declining land between 1964 and 1974, which demonstrated that deterioration was still occurring. While it is true that, according to Bureau data, a vast majority of public rangeland is in fair or better condition, 50 percent of the land is in only fair condition. According to the Bureau's definition, range in fair condition "is unsatisfactory since both soil and plant cover are in a deteriorated state." Only 17 percent of the land is classified as good or excellent--conditions which the Bureau considers to be satisfactory.

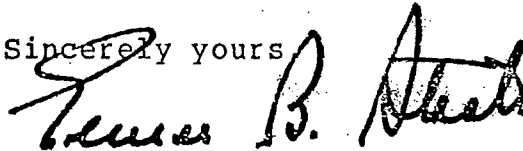
You also referred to a letter to us of November 30, 1977, in which the western agriculture experiment station and extension directors were of the opinion that our report was misleading. I am enclosing a copy of our response to that letter for your information.

In summary, I believe our report findings are adequately supported. Based on the results of our review, we concluded that the Bureau needed to manage the rangelands more aggressively and effectively. Our report made what we consider to be appropriate recommendations to the Bureau to help deter further deterioration of our Nation's public rangelands. For the most part, the Bureau agreed with our recommendations and, as discussed in our report, plans to take a number of corrective measures. Accordingly, I do not believe a comprehensive restudy of this specific area is warranted at this time.

I want to reassure you that the wise management of our Nation's public lands is a matter of continuing concern to the General Accounting Office. We are planning to initiate a comprehensive assessment of BLM's land management activities and focus on changes in management practices which have resulted from implementation of the 1976 Organic Act. Your particular concerns will be addressed as we get into our assessment of land management activities.

I appreciate your continuing interest in the work of the General Accounting Office.

Sincerely yours



Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure