



March 19, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, and Leader McCarthy:

We appreciate the urgency you have displayed to address the disruptions posed by COVID-19. The Public Lands Council (PLC) remains actively engaged in efforts to provide continuity in operations for agriculture throughout the supply chain. PLC is the only national organization dedicated solely to representing the roughly 22,000 ranchers who hold federal grazing permits and operate on federal lands. PLC is comprised of thirteen western state affiliates and three national affiliated organizations, including the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, American Sheep Industry Association, and the Association of National Grasslands.

As you discuss various legislative vehicles to provide further economic support to industries, we urge you to also support critical functions of federal agencies that do not necessarily require additional economic support at this time. During this time of intense negotiation, we would ask that as you seek legislative action to address immediate market needs, you also provide continuity for the longer-term impacts COVID-19 is bound to inflict on the beginning on the supply chain.

Across the West, livestock producers are preparing to turn their cattle and sheep out for seasonal grazing. For producers who hold federal grazing permits administered by the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), turnout activities are dependent on issuance of grazing permits, timely completion of analyses under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and completion of annual meetings with agency field staff. These permittees provide a valuable service, both for the agencies and for the American people. Livestock who graze on public lands decrease fine fuel loads which helps to mitigate catastrophic wildfire, promote improved wildlife health, and generally improve the health of the lands held in trust for the American people. Federal grazing permits are also integral to the long-term vitality of the domestic cattle and sheep industries, as well as the nation's food security during this time of crisis. A significant portion of cattle and sheep spend some time on public land during the production cycle, so continuity in administration of federal permits is top of mind for these producers.

To that end, we have requested that BLM and USFS leadership provide flexibilities to their local and district offices to ensure that turnout on these allotments is not interrupted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we recognize the need to provide staff with workplace flexibility to protect staff and permittee health, federal grazing permits are integral in maintaining consistent market conditions. In cases where staffing levels or teleworking policies interfere with annual meetings that are part of the typical permit administration process, USFS and BLM should have those meetings by phone, where practicable. In cases where meetings with permittees cannot be completed prior to turnout dates, agency staff should operate according to historic precedent, ensuring that permittees in good standing be allowed to turn out.

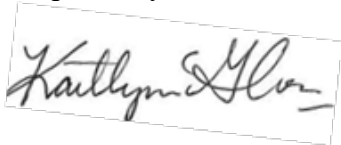
Further, USFS and BLM should prioritize expeditious consideration of permit issuances and renewals. Given the longstanding permitting backlog, it is incumbent upon the agencies to mitigate any further or compounding delays. Further administrative delays would result in significant future financial and labor resources that the agencies should not be required to expend. Permit administration contains a number of monitoring and resource management activities where permittees can play a valuable role. To the maximum extent practicable, agencies should optimize their coordination with permittees to gather forage data and other important ecological inputs.

We therefore request you consider the following related to the livestock industry as you debate industry supports during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Encourage agencies to work with permittees to conduct crucial rangeland and forage monitoring, including reinforcement of coordinated resource management across private, state, and federal jurisdictions;
- Support agencies to provide permitting flexibility to access allotments to conduct grazing activities that support wildlife health and reduce wildlife risk;
- Support agency tools to prepare staff, seasonal firefighters, and volunteers during the upcoming fire season, including hiring facilities to bring on seasonal/temporary firefighting staff; and
- Support agency efforts to implement efficient legislative and regulatory tools that improve the timeliness of permitting administration.

As you and your colleagues seek to provide continuity and support for domestic industries and the American people, we appreciate your attention to industries that safeguard the most basic needs of our citizens. Consistent access to safe, nutritious food is dependent upon a strong supply chain, and federal grazing allotments are an important piece in that puzzle. We stand ready to work with Congress, and with Federal agencies, to provide for a strong future for our collective natural resources and food supply both in these trying times and well into the future.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kaitlynn Glover", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kaitlynn Glover
Executive Director
Public Lands Council