April 12, 2021

The Honorable Robert Rivas
California State Assembly
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Assembly Bill 434 (Public lands: grazing leases) - Oppose

Dear Assemblymember Rivas:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters in California, we write to express our strong opposition to AB 434 as amended on April 7, which would expand and entrench commercial livestock grazing across our state parks, wildlife areas and state trust lands, threatening to turn some of California’s most prized wildlands into pastures.

This harmful legislation is a misguided attempt by the sponsors to leverage the unprecedented wildfire season in 2020 to extend long-term commercial grazing leases onto state public lands that were specially designated for biodiversity conservation and recreation, elevating resource exploitation over the public interest. This unnecessary bill would subvert responsible land management policy, thwart science-based fire mitigation strategies, undermine wildlife protection, and degrade recreational opportunities on parks, wildlife areas and other vital habitats statewide. Amendments to the bill do not remedy these fundamental flaws.

**AB 434 is unnecessary as California state agencies already have authority to use grazing for vegetation management.**

The Department of Parks and Recreation (California State Parks) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) already have authority to use livestock grazing as a land management tool on parks and wildlife areas, but where appropriate. Fuels management can be and is already an objective in existing grazing leases, contracts and permits. Similarly, state trust
lands administered by the State Lands Commission are already leased for grazing management where suitable, often as part of larger federal grazing allotments.

More importantly, there is no evidence that replacing these existing authorities with expanded commercialized grazing leases would make a meaningful contribution to statewide fire management strategies. Our parks, wildlife areas and state trust lands comprise less than three percent of California’s land base, and a large proportion of them are sparse deserts that experience wildfire infrequently due to their long fire return intervals.

**AB 434 is misguided and countermands existing state agency authorities and resource management goals.**

AB 434 would elevate commercial grazing everywhere on California parks, wildlife areas and state trust lands where grazing might reduce fire fuels, overriding existing law and practice that allows professional land managers and scientists to determine where prescribed, targeted grazing is the most effective management approach.

Currently, when prescribed grazing is part of an integrated management plan, it usually involves short-term, intensive use targeted at the appropriate time in the annual growth cycle to remove the desired amount of vegetation. Land managers often hire grazing/browsing animals to achieve this goal when it is determined to be the right tool for the job.

AB 434 would reduce this current management flexibility by requiring the use of long-term commercial grazing leases over other grazing management options. CDFW grazing permits would be eliminated in favor of commercial grazing leases that generally last five to 20 years, while the length of California State Parks leases would likewise be extended to 20 years. These long-term grazing leases would likely preclude other beneficial fuels reduction activities, such as mechanical methods, hand removal of larger diameter vegetation, and/or prescribed fire.

**AB 434 would be burdensome, impractical and counterproductive for addressing fire on state lands.**

Developing and implementing new commercial livestock grazing on state lands would be administratively onerous due to high enforcement and other costs, and impossible in much of California where state lands are isolated within other landownerships, including national parks, national preserves, national monuments and other federal reservations. Grazing on these parcels may be federally prohibited or otherwise subject to federal land management regimes. Moreover, attempts to graze state inholdings enveloped within national parks, national preserves and national monuments would directly conflict with a variety of federal conservation mandates for those surrounding lands.
Furthermore, a large proportion of California parks, wildlife areas and state trust lands are in the Mojave Desert, Sonoran Desert, and sagebrush steppe where livestock grazing has been demonstrated to exacerbate wildfire through the spread of invasive annual grasses that fuel larger, hotter and more frequent blazes than occurred naturally. In California’s extensive ponderosa pine forests, livestock grazing has dramatically reduced resilience to wildfire by eliminating the fine fuels that carry low intensity and rejuvenating ground fire, releasing dense thickets of competing ponderosa pine seedlings that drive high-intensity, devastating stand replacing crown fires that have become common in the state.

Where ecosystems have evolved with fire, state resource agencies are working to expand the use of prescribed burns for vegetation management, which is, by far, the most effective ecological process to promote biodiversity and a naturally attenuated fire regime.

**AB 434 would imperil native species and degrade sensitive habitats, watersheds and ecosystems on state conservation lands.**

The scientific record is replete with the myriad deleterious impacts of commercial livestock grazing and grazing infrastructure (e.g., fences, corals, troughs, etc.) on western ecosystems,

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including species imperilment; soil compaction and erosion; riparian degradation, channelization of wet meadows, and defilement of natural seeps and springs; reduced water quality (fecal coliform, sedimentation)\(^8\) and water quantity,\(^9\) and higher water temperatures; impacts to mycorrhizal communities;\(^10\) shifts in plant community composition,\(^11\) and introduction and propagation of invasive species.\(^12\)

Commercial livestock grazing systematically eliminates native vegetation and often during critical times of the year when wildlife need those resources for shelter, nesting, rearing young, foraging and escaping predators.\(^13\)

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\(^13\) Donahue 1999; Fleischner 2010; Fleischner 1994.
Along with acute and broadscale harm to native habitats and the wildlife that depend on them, AB 434 would also threaten imperiled species. For example, state public lands provide vital habitat for mountain lions, which are candidates for state endangered species status across a wide swath of the Central Coast and southern California. AB 434 would increase the likelihood of conflicts between domestic livestock and these imperiled carnivores, leading to increased mountain lion depredations on the very lands that were set aside for their conservation. The bill’s expansion of commercial grazing would also result in displacement of the native ungulates that mountain lions depend on for prey.

**AB 434’s fundamental flaws cannot be fixed with amendments.**

Amendments to AB 434 will not resolve its inherent policy problems. Regardless of the April 7 amendments or any additional changes the bill may undergo, it would still endeavor to elevate commercial resource use on California conservation lands, putting managers in a position where they would be pressured to allow grazing even where it may not be appropriate. This is antithesis to preserving these public lands for all Californians to enjoy.

Even though AB 434 was amended to remove the automatic presumption that commercial grazing is consistent/compatible with the purpose/use for which the parks and CDFW lands were acquired, the legislation still threatens to entrench long-term commercial use of these public lands that is *per se* incompatible with their conservation and recreational purposes. Though the amended bill references approved management plans with habitat objectives, such plans are not required, and even if they were, AB 434 would still be unnecessary and restrictive of current management approaches, risking far more environmental damage than potential benefits. Similarly, the amended requirements for some undefined form of monitoring do not solve underlying problems posed by the bill and introduce a host of additional questions, including whether and how grazing use might be modified based on monitoring where lessees now have an expectation of continued access to support their *commercial* grazing operation.

Both the presence of livestock and the damage that commercial grazing can cause to parks, wildlife areas and other public lands are well known and threaten visitor experiences and other public values. More productive fire management strategies are available, including prescribed burns. For all these reasons, we oppose AB 434.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rachel Norton, Executive Director  
California State Parks Foundation  
Neal Desai, Senior Director of Field Operations  
National Parks Conservation Association

Brian Nowicki, CA Climate Policy Director  
Center for Biological Diversity  
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