

Dakota Grasslands

Ranchers are punished for good behavior with the threat of a wilderness designation, this time in South Dakota.

By Carrie Stadheim

The scenic plains of southwestern South Dakota are rugged, sparsely populated, yet full of wildlife. The rolling hills and river breaks are lush and green after a spring rain but appear stark, abandoned in the bitter days of winter. These acres of rangeland fill the gap between the bleak South Dakota Badlands and the famed Black Hills.

Wild, natural, wide open spaces? Yes. Untouched and unsettled? No.

Longtime rancher Marvin Jobgen from Scenic, S.D., says that although the pristine beauty of the land is no doubt worthy of postcards or magazine covers, it is not unsettled or untouched. Yet about 10 years ago in their new forest management plan, the U.S. Forest Service (FS) recommended two areas for wilderness designation, a federal title that gives absurd protection to a chosen piece of property. Property that is, according to the Wilderness Act itself: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Jobgen’s cattle graze an allotment bordering one of the proposed areas. He says that the chunks of the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands recommended by the FS, known as the Indian Creek and the Red Shirt areas, once were home to at least 12 homesteaders. “Some of it was farmed at one time. Fences, wells, even a windmill are visible, if you know where to look.” The property known as national grasslands was bought by the U.S. government in the 1930s and 1940s to help stabilize the local economy. “It is intended for responsible grazing. The emphasis is range.” But that can change, says Jobgen, who has witnessed acres and acres of Park Service property near his ranch become annihilated by prairie dogs. “If they change the emphasis from range to wildlife then grazing is trumped and ranchers can turn their cows out there, but there may or may not be grass for them to eat.”

An example is the Conata Basin, near Jobgen, which is a 40,000-acre ferret reintroduction site that was approved by the state and



© carrie stadheim



photo courtesy kathy jobgen

Riders choose their path carefully along the rugged terrain of the Chalk Hills proposed wilderness area as they head south to the Knuppe Ranch. The diverse landscape of the proposed wilderness areas includes lush grasslands and cedar canyons in addition to the shale clay slopes seen here in mid-September. LEFT: Marvin Jobgen ranches on the edge of the Indian Creek proposed wilderness area. He and his neighbors have good reason to doubt the land-management ability of the federal government as they’ve watched over a million acres in the Conata Basin turn into a desolate dust bowl resulting from overpopulation of prairie dogs.

federal government on national grasslands. The emphasis of the land management went from grazing to wildlife. There are now over a million acres included in the project, added administratively with no public comments, and the site is almost completely void of vegetation because prairie dogs have mowed the grass to dirt. The dust blows as if it were a plowed field. “This land was supposed to be for the public to enjoy but it is so desolate and barren that tourists end up looking elsewhere for a scenic drive,” Jobgen says. “That is another concern we have with wilderness designation. The grasslands are accessible to the public—rock hunters, deer hunters, hikers or any other nature lovers. If the land is designated as wilderness, those folks will no longer

be allowed to use it and they will be forced to start asking private landowners for access to their land or demand that the government purchase more land for public use.” Jobgen believes it is self-defeating for the federal government to own land intended for public use and then shut the public out of it.

According to Jobgen, local townships, county commissions, even the state legislature and governor have taken official action against the designation. More than 25 organizations have made their opposition public. And the state’s two senators and one congresswoman had never made a move to introduce legislation—until recently.

In May, Sen. Tim Johnson (D) introduced legislation (S. 3310, the Tony Dean Cheyenne



Scott and Veronica Edoff and family have raised cattle along the scenic Cheyenne River for decades. They understand that predators, fire, noxious weeds, pests and other problems will take over the delicate landscape of the proposed wilderness areas without proper management. Pine beetles, weeds and prairie dogs have decimated other local wilderness areas due to the lack of intervention by the federal government. **BELOW:** Rancher Ken Knuppe calls a neighbor as he checks this neighbor's pasture for his own stray cattle that may have drifted through a river gap. The grassy bottoms of the Chalk Hills benefit from the responsible grazing management of local ranchers.



River Valley Conservation Act of 2010) that would designate the Indian Creek, Red Shirt and Chalk Hills areas as wilderness. According to the legislation, grazing and many other activities could continue. But Jobgen and another local rancher, Scott Edoff of Hermosa, say that the government has a bad track record with assurances like this.

"I've read the congressional grazing language and I understand that grazing is technically allowed in wilderness areas, but I'm afraid of death by a thousand cuts," Edoff says of Forest Service decisions certain to slash livestock numbers due to its inability to control prairie dogs, noxious weeds or fires.

Jobgen has spoken with local states attorney Lance Russell, who explained that when the federal government bought the land, the state reserved existing trails and section line right-of-ways as public roads, open for public

use. Jobgen wonders how this issue will be addressed since the Wilderness Act forbids mechanized travel.

More questions loom. There are two state-owned school sections within the Indian Creek parcel that are not fenced. "They claim that they wouldn't put them in the designation but one of them is landlocked in the middle of the proposed area," says Jobgen. There would be no way to access the school section, which means it can't be leased, and the schools would lose funding. "There is a lot of private land interspersed within the proposed area. One parcel of private land is in the middle of a land exchange with the Forest Service and when the federal government does a land exchange, it doesn't trade mineral rights, so the landowner will retain his mineral rights but will be unable to access them. Will this lead to a lawsuit?"

The large ferret reintroduction area in the Badlands borders the Conata Basin ferret reintroduction area, which borders the proposed Indian Creek Wilderness, which borders the Red Shirt Wilderness, which borders the proposed Chalk Hills Wilderness, which is near Wind Cave National Park. Over two million acres could be under restrictive rules that make controlling pests, predators and fire next to impossible. There will likely be very limited grazing or access of any kind. Some sportsmen are under the impression that a wilderness designation will improve hunting access. The opposite is true. Jobgen says, "This takes a huge chunk of the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands and makes it inaccessible to the public."

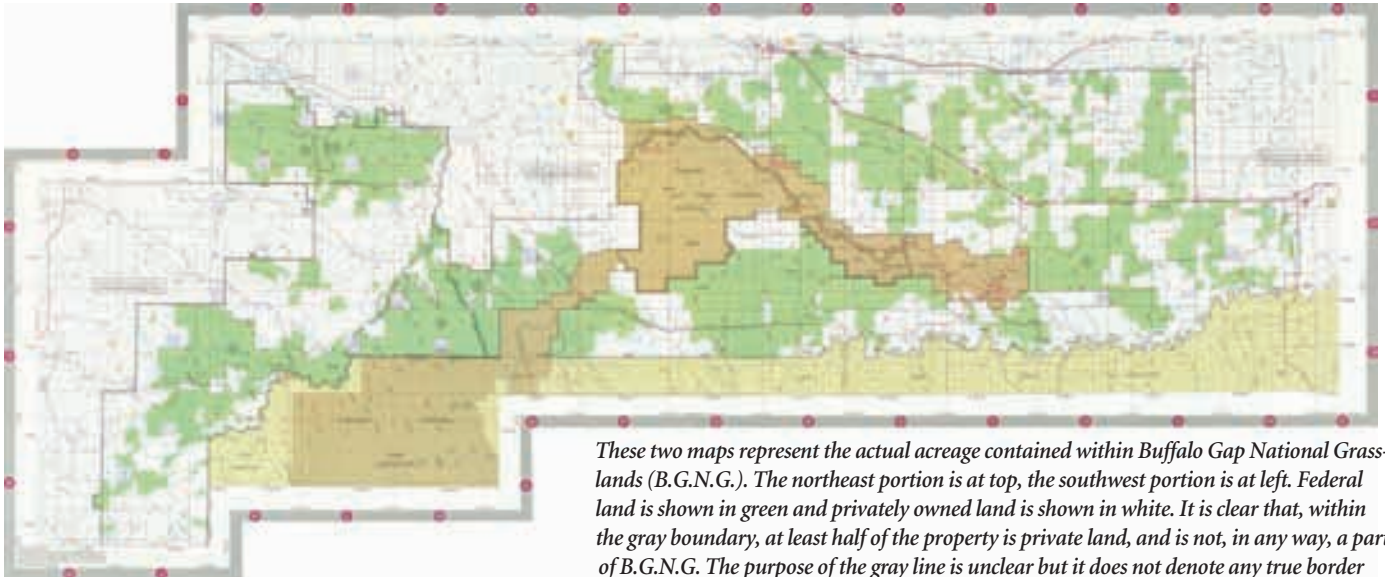
Why do wilderness groups and the Forest Service insist that the area should receive the wilderness designation even though the land is known to have been inhabited? According to Edoff, who grazes cattle on the Indian Creek proposed wilderness area, the FS has managed the land as wilderness ever since the 2002 travel management plan was approved. "It is frustrating," he says. "The land is not designated, legislation has just barely been introduced, never mind passed, and yet the effect is the same."

Federal land-management agencies are directed to immediately begin managing any property as wilderness as soon as it is recommended. If legislation is passed, Edoff says the current management would become permanent and would be funded "out of a different jar of money." The onerous restrictions that come with a wilderness designation have already been enacted on two parcels, making it difficult for ranchers to clean out dams or maintain their fences.

"It is ironic. Obviously the land has been very well taken care of or it would have never been nominated for the wilderness designation," says Edoff. "Nobody has been able to explain to me what the legislation would protect it from. Even without a designation, those areas will still be rugged, remote, and inaccessible. That's just the character of the land."

The Forest Service is touting the proposal as the first of the national grasslands to be designated but, again, Edoff says that's not exactly true. "The Sage Creek Wilderness Area that was originally part of the National Grasslands System, was created in about 1964." The land sits south of Wall, S.D., just a few miles from the parcels now being discussed.

He adds that the push for the recent wilderness proposals didn't start as a local grassroots effort, but with national organiza-



These two maps represent the actual acreage contained within Buffalo Gap National Grasslands (B.G.N.G.). The northeast portion is at top, the southwest portion is at left. Federal land is shown in green and privately owned land is shown in white. It is clear that, within the gray boundary, at least half of the property is private land, and is not, in any way, a part of B.G.N.G. The purpose of the gray line is unclear but it does not denote any true border around the National Grasslands. It is obvious that only about half of the land within the gray line is federal land.

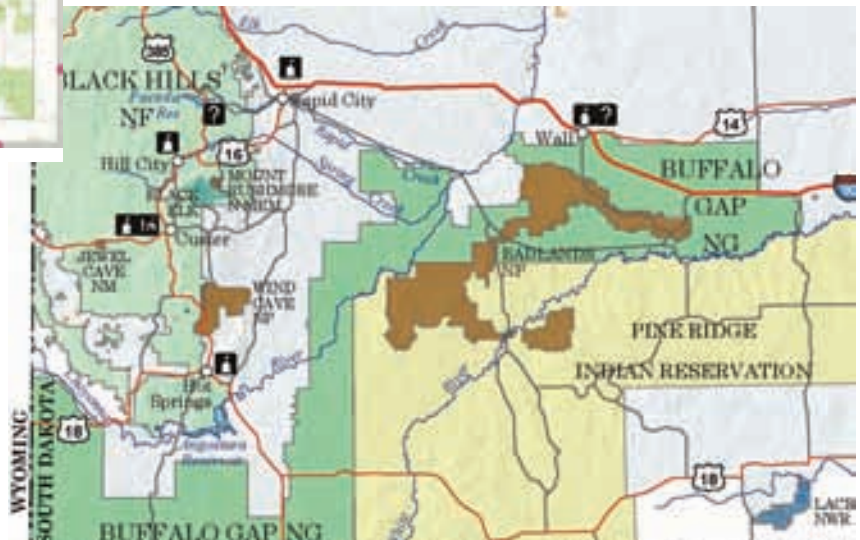
BELOW: So-called conservation groups use this false map to promote their wilderness agenda. The green color in this closeup incorrectly portrays B.G.N.G. as a solid block. Refer to the large-scale maps on this page to see the exact acreage of federal land that composes the B.G.N.G.—far fewer acres than this closeup suggests. Ken Knuppe says these Forest Service maps have caused confusion; he has spoken with hunters who refer to this map to find federal land to hunt. When Knuppe explained that private land actually makes up at least half of the marked “Buffalo Gap National Grasslands,” one hunter responded, “I wondered why there were ranchers living on public land.”



tions that asked people to sign postcards supporting wilderness on the road into Badlands National Park. They published slick brochures and then organized the mailing of thousands of postcards to the Forest Service during the forest plan revision.

Edoff is suspicious of the integrity of the Forest Service and wildlife groups which use half-truths to sell their ideas. He has found several federal laws that are being ignored, including: *The Forest Service is obligated to consider and provide for community stability in its decision-making process; The Forest Service must coordinate with equivalent and related planning efforts of local governments; and The Forest Service is directed to meet with local governments to establish process for coordination.*

Local rancher Ken Knuppe, whose summer pasture borders the Chalk Hills proposed wilderness area, has another beef with the proposal. The Forest Service maps used by conservation groups to promote their anti-ranching agenda are incorrect, leading people to believe that this large area is a solid block of national grasslands. Knuppe says the property is a checkerboard of about half private and



half federal land but the private land is not outlined on the Forest Service maps. “The public probably believes that private landowners don’t neighbor these areas, so they won’t be directly affected. Nothing could be farther from the truth.”

Jobgen, Edoff, Knuppe and others continue to speak out about the proposed wilderness designations in hopes of maintaining the status quo. “Bottom line is this,” Edoff says. “At the end of the day—if we mess this wilderness thing up—in 10 years we could lose our livelihood, our ranch, our house, and

maybe we can’t afford to send our kids to college.” Then he refers to government employees and wilderness groups lobbying in favor of the wilderness designations. “They still have their jobs, homes, retirement benefits; they didn’t gamble anything. I’d like to continue to make a living but I really need the government to stay out of my way.”

Carrie Stadheim and her husband raise cattle, sheep and kids on the western borders of North and South Dakota.