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Babbitt unveils plan to double grazing fee

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Interior Department today announced sharp increases in grazing fees on Western federal land, new controls over water rights and more regulations on rangelands.

The department, in a string of new regulations, said it planned over three years to more than double the monthly fees ranchers pay to use the federal land, from the current \$1.86 per animal unit month to \$4.28. The fees are based on an animal unit month (AUM), which is the amount of forage a cow and her calf, or five sheep, consume in one month.

The changes are being imposed administratively after years of resistance in Congress to increase grazing fees. Earlier this year the Clinton administration talked of incorporating higher fees in the Interior Department budget it submitted to Congress, but then backed off because of strong resistance from western lawmakers.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt acknowledged that Congress could step in and block the fee increase he now plans to impose administratively.

The new rules as well as the higher fees still must go through formal government rulemaking, including public hearings, a process that could take 18 months to two years.

Babbitt called the higher fees "a reasonable balance between the need to sustain the health of rangeland and the need to sustain the economic health of rural Western areas."

The higher fees immediately were

denounced by Western lawmakers. Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., called the higher fees "misguided" and said it would drive many marginal ranching operations out of business.

The announcement was the first of a series of steps the Clinton administration planned to increase federal control of public lands. Babbitt said he planned to announce reforms of federal mining laws as they apply to federal lands, probably in September.

The grazing rules, which are not expected to become final until late 1994, apply to 270 million federal acres that are managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.

"This proposal delivers on President Clinton's promise that taxpayers will be treated fairly when it comes to the use of their natural resources," said Babbitt at a news conference.

Babbitt produced charts showing that fees for grazing on private lands already ranges from \$5.53 a month per animal unit in Arizona to a high of \$14.83 in Nebraska. The average is about \$10 a month per animal unit, compared to the less than \$2 federal fee.

Ranchers have argued that it is not accurate to compare federal and private fees because private pastures cannot be compared to the arid brush land of the West. Private landowners also provide services such as fencing and water that the government does not.

Nevertheless, environmentalists

have for years complained that some ranchers — as well as middlemen who lease public land and then rent it out — are unfairly profiting at taxpayer expense. The new fee regulations would impose a steep surcharge for such transactions.

The department said it also will impose new controls on use of the public rangeland.

Babbitt said decisions on whether to issue grazing rights and the duration of the permit will take into account how a rancher has managed the land. A permit can range from a few years to up to 10 years, depending on a rancher's management history, he said.

In addition to the higher fees, the department will assume ownership and all claims for water rights on the public land, including ownership of any irrigation improvements made by the rancher. The government also will take over ownership of all other improvements made on the land.

These rights have rested with the rancher, who has been responsible for making the improvements.

The department also will create a new advisory board on rangeland management that will include a cross-section of interested parties from ranchers and wildlife managers to preservationists.

In addition, new standards and guidelines on range management will be drafted "to ensure that land management is conducted in a manner consistent with the overall health of the ecosystem," the department said.