

Whoa! Hold on

Our stand: Arizona needs tighter control on money given to ranchers

Arizona taxpayers paid ranchers \$2 million for not running cattle on federal land.

Whoa! What's going on here?

The money comes from the Growing Smarter fund, which voters approved to help pay for preserving State Trust Land.

But the referendum was worded to trigger a state law allowing up to 10 percent of the fund to go to ranchers and farmers to encourage conservation.

And then, in 2000, the Legislature gave priority to ranchers leasing state or federal land who are required to reduce their herds.

So 61 ranchers collected as much as \$90,000 apiece. They included auto dealer Hal Earnhardt and Gaylan Flake, a rancher and the cousin of House Speaker Jake Flake. In many cases, the herd cuts were required because there's just nothing left on the range for cattle to eat. That makes these payments drought relief, folks, not conservation.

The Legislature is about to pass a bill, Senate Bill 1071, that offers some hope of turning this into a system that does more to promote conservation and less to simply dole out money.

The money earmarked for ranchers and farmers would be set aside in a separate fund. The state Department of Agriculture would administer the money, making grants for conservation-based management and preserving open space.

The next step is crucial: The department will hold public hearings when it sets the criteria for getting grants. This is the chance to add accountability and make sure that our tax dollars are truly paying for conservation.

In addition, ranchers should not receive taxpayers' money for the simple act of grazing fewer cattle. There may be benefits to running fewer cows in an area, but we just don't have the money to pay someone year after year for nothing more than *not* grazing some animals. Any payment for herd reductions should be part of a larger, well-justified conservation strategy, such as removing cattle from an area to burn away invasive plants.

It's too bad that the bill doesn't exclude federal land. There are limited dollars for conservation. The referendum authorizing this money was aimed at preserving State Trust Land, and that's where our money should go.