

Kristin Ruether
Advocates for the West

I took my PILP stipend to Idaho to work for Advocates for the West. This nonprofit law firm represents environmental groups to challenge destructive projects on some of the wildest tracts of public land in the west. It was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot about public lands law and the stark, beautiful high desert that our office focuses on protecting.

My main project for the summer was working on a lawsuit to stop a giant timber sale on Idaho's Clearwater National Forest. This included reading a ton of Forest Service documents, visiting the Forest Service to dig through more documents, bushwhacking through the timber sale area, talking a lot with our environmentalist clients, and drafting a complaint.

When I wasn't working on that, I worked on challenging public lands grazing. This is the major focus of the office. I spent several weeks researching creative ways to challenge public lands grazing by dusting off some ancient causes of action. I sat in on a week-long administrative trial in which we were representing environmentalists against the BLM over a grazing permit reissuance. It was truly fascinating to participate in my first trial process, which was complete with cross-examinations of BLM employees and environmentalist experts.

My favorite part of the trial was when the BLM cross-examined our expert witness, who had offered one picture of a cow-damaged creek which happened to contain a swimming dog. The BLM lawyer pointedly asked if she wasn't causing more damage herself by letting a dog in the creek. After the laughter in the courtroom subsided, our witness somewhat incredulously explained that the impact of a 35-pound dog is not comparable to that of a half-ton cow, and besides, she had been trying to get the dog out of the creek because the water quality was so bad. Somehow that question epitomized to me the BLM's defense of its grazing program.

I adored working with my dedicated, inspired coworkers and clients who delighted in answering my questions and being mentors. Another great part was my frequent field trips, which taught me to appreciate the high desert for the first time. At first, it seemed dry and dead to me. After a summer of trips with people who love the land, my mind was completely changed. Now, when I go to the "sagebrush sea" and smell that hot air heavy with the sweet scent of sage, I look for how much sagebrush and grass there is to provide cover for the sage grouse and pygmy rabbit. I look to the skies for the sage thrasher. I look to the horizon for antelope. Then I look to the water troughs for the cows, and think about suing the BLM to get them off. Thanks PILP!

