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Suit Says Cattle Destroying East Bay Habitat

Group sues to halt grazing on park grassland

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The range wars are breaking out again over cattle grazing on East Bay park land.

Two environmental groups allege in a lawsuit filed yesterday that cows are trampling young oaks, destroying habitat for wildlife and polluting streams on 50,000 acres of East Bay Regional Park District land.

The Alameda Creek Alliance and the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity seek an environmental review of the district's long-standing practice of leasing land to ranchers.

Their suit, filed in Alameda County Superior Court, challenges 11 grazing leases in 10 parks or open space preserves.

"I doubt many people go to parks to see cow pies and barbed wire," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Ranchers are benefitting from the degradation of public land."

Park district spokesman Ned McKay said cattle eat grass that create a significant fire danger on undeveloped land.

"Grazing, when properly managed, is beneficial to the environment," McKay said.

Without cows, park lands would develop a dense thatch of old grass that suppresses the growth of native plants and wildflowers. Then grasslands give way to areas of impenetrable brush that is inhospitable to wildlife.

During the grazing season between November and June, about 2,000 to 3,000 cows are rotated among different plots of park land to prevent overgrazing, McKay said. Not all 50,000 acres available for grazing in the 88,000-acre park system are leased.

The grazing leases cover land including Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline, Contra Loma, Las Trampas and Black Diamond Mines in Contra Costa County and Chabot, Del Valle and Wildcat Canyon in Alameda County.

Miller said the cattle alter the course of streams and pollute them with the parasites giardia and cryptosporidium, a microorganism implicated in the deaths of AIDS patients and others with compromised immune systems.

He said the district's grazing policy should be reviewed by outside experts under the California Environmental Quality Act.

A similar debate arose in 1992 during a standoff between the state parks system and rancher Tom Brumleve, who grazed cattle on Mount Diablo State Park, over a policy eliminating grazing from state parks.

Contra Costa fire departments supported Brumleve's allegation that his cattle reduced the fuel load for wildfires on the mountain. But the state ultimately prevailed.

McKay said his district's grazing program is exempt from environmental review because it is operated under a management plan developed by biologists and professors in cooperation with ranchers. The leases bring in between \$275,000 and \$325,000 a year.

Miller said grass could be reduced by mechanical means or through grazing by native browsers, like elk, or the park district could reintroduce fire-resistant native plants.

The environmental groups also seek an injunction to suspend the 11 grazing leases while the court battle is pending.