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PARK DISTRICT IS SUED OVER CATTLE GRAZING POLICY

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Overgrazing on East Bay Regional Park District lands imperils several endangered species and is causing the loss of native oak woodlands, but those effects are being ignored because the district has not done the environmental reviews required by law, according to a lawsuit filed Friday.

The suit says the district made an improper determination that its grazing program was exempt from environmental review when it approved 11 cattle leases in April.

Alameda Creek Alliance and the Southwest Center for Biodiversity filed the suit in Alameda County Superior Court.

The park district had not seen the lawsuit but plans to contest it, district spokesman Ned MacKay said.

Cattle leases bring the district about \$300,000 a year, but the primary reason the district allows grazing is because it provides effective fire suppression, MacKay said. By keeping grasslands from turning to brush, grazing also helps promote biodiversity, he said.

"The grazing has been in place for many years, and it's regulated by a lot of careful planning," MacKay said. "We regulate and monitor it so that grazing leaseholders live up to their contracts and aren't putting more animals on the land than they're allowed, and to ensure that lands aren't overgrazed."

The environmental groups counter that cattle harm sensitive riparian habitat, increase sedimentation in creeks and create conditions that spread nonnative, invasive plants throughout the parks.

"Grazing has been a tradition on these lands, and I think they've just let (the negative impacts) slide," said Jeff Miller, of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "We feel the time has passed when it needs to be addressed."

The district permits grazing on about 50,000 of its 88,000 acres through 47 different lease agreements, MacKay said. The grazing plan was reviewed by an independent panel that included experts in biology, forestry, ecology and ranching, he said.

Leases approved in April allow ranchers to run cattle in Bishop Ranch Open Space Regional Preserve, Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve, Wildcat Canyon Regional Park and seven other parks until November 2002. Another six leases come up for renewal in a few weeks.

Miller and others want the courts to order the district to conduct environmental reports for specific grazing plans and how they will affect individual parks, so that the public has a chance to review the reports and respond.

"We're saying, you may feel like this is a good fire management tool. We disagree, but let's at least have some public review and get the debate going," Miller said. "We feel that once an

environmental analysis is done, it will show grazing has done a great deal of damage to endangered species and native habitat."

At risk from cattle are the endangered California red-legged frog, the Alameda whipsnake, and a number of native plant species, he said.

The environmental groups may seek a court order barring cows from parklands while the case is pending, said attorney Brendan Cummings.