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EAST BAY PARKS' ENDANGERED SPECIES CITED SUIT SEEKS STUDY OF CATTLE GRAZING GROUPS FILE LAWSUIT TARGETING GRAZING IN EAST BAY PARKS

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Alleging that the future of endangered species is at stake, two environmental groups filed a lawsuit Friday in an effort to make the East Bay parks district study the effects of cattle grazing on 10,000 acres of parkland.

The suit, filed in Alameda County Superior Court in Oakland, seeks a court order to immediately stop cattle grazing in the parks. It also seeks to force the East Bay Regional Parks District to examine the grazing program in 10 of its parks.

"We're particularly concerned about the impacts of grazing on endangered species in the park, water quality and just the aesthetics of what our parks look like. A lot of our parks are pretty trashed," said Jeff Miller of the Fremont-based Alameda Creek Alliance, one of the plaintiffs.

The lawsuit says that according to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the park district should have studied the potential negative environmental effects of the grazing in April before renewing the leases for the parks, which include Del Valle and Lake Chabot regional parks, Las Trampas Wilderness Regional Preserve and Anthony Chabot Regional Park.

But the park district maintains that the state environmental law doesn't apply in this case. "We follow environmentally sensitive policies in our grazing," said Ned MacKay, a district spokesman. "And we believe we are CEQA-exempt so there is no need to go through the CEQA process."

The district uses cattle grazing as a land management tool to reduce the fire hazard on about 50,000 of its 88,000 acres, MacKay said.

The Alameda Creek Alliance and the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based group with offices in Berkeley, allege that cattle are overgrazing the land, threatening the existence of the California red-legged frog and the Alameda whipsnake. Both are on the federal endangered species list.

Miller said the cattle grazing also could cause water contamination by the parasites cryptosporidium and giardia, as well as increased erosion and sedimentation of creeks.

But Joe DiDonato, a park district wildlife specialist, cited research by the district on how its land management practices and projects affect plants and wildlife. Ongoing research started eight years ago has found that the distribution of the red-legged frogs in ponds exposed to cattle-grazing is about the same as for ponds not in grazing areas, he said. DiDonato also said bass, sun fish, bullfrogs and feral pigs are a far greater danger to the red-legged frogs than cattle. In fact, cattle create better habitat for some species, he said.

For example, he said, when cattle eat brush, they clear the ground and so help squirrels to burrow. And squirrels are the prime food source of the golden eagles and the red-tailed hawks. Cattle grazing also helps protect the habitat of the whipsnake and the burrowing owl, DiDonato said.