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CHRONICLE SECTIONS

## Home on Range Still Open for Cattle

### Alameda County judge upholds park grazing

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**EASTBAY** -- After the latest skirmish in a long-standing range war in Contra Costa and Alameda counties, a judge has ruled that the cows can keep on grazing.

Two environmental groups had challenged the East Bay Regional Park District program that allows cattle by the thousands to feed on about 30,000 acres of preserved parkland.

But in a written ruling mailed to all the parties yesterday, Alameda County Superior Court Judge James Richman said the grazing policy does not violate the California Environmental Quality Act.

``We're very pleased that our point of view prevailed in court," said Ted Radosevich, a lawyer for the district. ``While there is always room for improvement, we believe that the park district has an effective, well-monitored grazing program that is operated in the best interests of the public and the environment."

Environmentalists from the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity and the Alameda Creek Alliance could not be reached for comment. They have 60 days to appeal the ruling.

The groups filed a lawsuit in October challenging the park's 11 grazing leases with ranchers. They had asked that the court order an environmental review of the district's long-standing practice, which generates \$286,000 in revenue a year.

A similar debate erupted in 1992 between the state parks system and a rancher who grazed cattle on Mount Diablo State Park over a policy eliminating grazing from state parks. The state ultimately prevailed.

During the November-to-June grazing season, 2,000 to 3,000 cows are rotated among different plots of East Bay parkland. The district owns 90,000 acres -- a third of it appropriate for grazing -- in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

Grazing leases covering parks include Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline and Contra Loma, Las Trampas and Black Diamond Mines regional in Contra Costa County and Chabot, Del Valle and Wildcat Canyon in Alameda County.

The environmentalists argued that the bovines were trampling young oaks, destroying habitat for wildlife, polluting streams and altering their course.

But park district officials say that is bull.

Grazing, said spokesman Ned McKay, can be beneficial to the environment if properly managed. Without cows, parklands would develop a dense thatch of old grass that hinders the growth of native plants and wildflowers. Grasslands then become covered with thick brush that keeps some animals away.

Grazing cattle also devour grass that would create a significant fire hazard on undeveloped parkland if it were left untouched, McKay said.

Environmentalists have argued that the grass could be controlled with native animals like elk, by planting fire-resistant vegetation or by mechanical means.

McKay disagrees.

"I can't imagine mowing 30,000 acres of land," he said.