

Group threatens suit over parks grazing plan

By Chris Metinko
CONTRA COSTA TIMES
October 30, 2003

A possible decision to let commercial ranching operations continue at two East Bay parks could leave the park district facing a lawsuit from at least one environmentalist group by the end of the year.

The Alameda Creek Alliance said its suit against the East Bay Regional Parks District is a possibility if the district approves a draft plan in December that outlines cattle grazing initiatives at the Sunol and Ohlone parks.

Last month, the parks district unveiled a proposed 20-year land-use plan for the Sunol and Ohlone regional parks. While the draft plan includes many of the usual things such as preserving wildlife, improving trails and implementing monitoring plans for rare and special-status plants and animals, it is the district's stance to retain commercial cattle grazing that has more than a half-dozen local environmental groups up in arms.

The district said it believes grazing helps to reduce fire risks while also helping to negate the effects of "nonnative" plant species. However, the coalition of environmental groups want grazing phased out in the parks to protect stream habitat for species such as the steelhead trout.

The Alameda Creek Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity, Livermore Flyfishers, Mission Peak Fly Anglers, Regional Parks Association and the Southern Alameda County Chapter Sierra Club submitted their own land-use plan to the district in August, calling it "Alternative W" because of its emphasis on restoring the wilderness.

Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, said the hope is to see the groups' "W" proposal either incorporated into the district's plan it will present to its board Dec. 2, or have the plan picked outright by the district's board of directors as an alternative, which is unlikely.

However, Brian Wiese, chief of planning for the park district, said he foresees no "major changes" to the land-use plan before it is submitted to the board.

Miller agreed, saying the only option probably would be a legal challenge. He said his group was "highly likely" to file a challenge under the California Environmental Quality Act because the district did not perform a full CEQA review of its land-use plan. Instead, the district said the impacts of the plan were insufficient to warrant such a review and instead conducted a much shorter and less detailed negative declaration review.

Miller said more than three-quarters of the 16,500 acres in the parks are used for commercial cattle grazing. That, he said, causes "significant" damage to habitat in Alameda Creek for native trout and amphibians, while the cattle themselves can cause damage and potentially threaten public safety.

SUNOL OHLONE LAND-USE PLAN

To review the draft land-use plan and environmental report online, visit www.ebparks.org.

The East Bay Regional Park District's deadline to accept public comments is Friday. Letters can be sent to Dan Sykes, Park Planner/East Bay Regional Park District, 2950 Peralta Oaks Court, Oakland, CA 94605 or faxed to 510-635-3478.