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Groups try to stop park grazing

By Chris Metinko
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SUNOL - A half-dozen local environmental and fishing groups are hoping to get the grazing out of two large district parks and make them more like true wilderness areas.

The coalition of groups is submitting what they call "Alternative W," a management plan for Sunol and Ohlone regional parks. Called "W" for its emphasis on the restoration of wilderness, this alternative is supported by the Alameda Creek Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity, Livermore Flyfishers, Mission Peak Fly Anglers, Regional Parks Association and Southern Alameda County Chapter Sierra Club.

The groups want commercial cattle ranching operations phased out in the parks in order to protect stream habitat for species such as the steelhead trout. They also advocate removing unneeded roads, initiating a plan to restore habitat for native species and preserving the wilderness.

The district is beginning an environmental review on a proposed land-use plan in the parks for the next 20 years. Dan Sykes, a park planner II for the district, said the district's plan -- under way since 2001 -- is almost complete. It is expected to be finished in the next month or so and be followed by a public comment period before its move to the park's board of directors sometime in the fall.

Miller hopes the groups' "W" proposal is either somehow incorporated into the plan the board will see or is picked by the board as an alternative.

"This is definitely a critical time from our point of view," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "These parks deserve our attention."

According to Miller, more than three-quarters of the 16,500 acres in the parks are used for commercial cattle grazing. This grazing causes "significant" damage to habitat in Alameda Creek for native trout and amphibians, Miller said, including making parts of the streams uninhabitable to steelhead trout due to added nitrogen from cattle waste and the flattening of some parts of the creek by the cows.

Under the coalition's plan, commercial cattle grazing would be eliminated from the parks one-third at a time, allowing three to five years after ridding the first one-third of the grazing to monitor the results. If the elimination of cattle in that area is a success, another one-third would be eliminated and studied after six to 10 years. If the parks have an improved habitat after that period, grazing would be eliminated altogether.

The groups also would like to eliminate some of the roads, fencing and other infrastructure not needed for emergency or public access, and end poison use in the Sunol Preserve. The district uses poisons in Sunol Preserve to prevent ground squirrel overpopulation.

Sykes believes the district's plan already includes some of Alternative W's ideas, but said he could not go into detail about that because the district's review is not complete.

However, the biggest disagreement appears to be over grazing. Sykes said the district believes grazing helps reduce fire risks, while Miller said studies have shown grazed lands and natural wilderness burn at almost equal rates.

"It's just an ideological difference," said Miller, adding that Diablo State Park ended commercial cattle grazing in 1989 while managing and weighing concerns of fire and other hazards.