

## Tri-Valley Herald (Pleasanton, CA)

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**Section:** More Local News

### Park officials say cows are here to stay

Environmentalists say bovines hurting creeks, but planners say they help with fire prevention

*Matt Carter, STAFF WRITER*

SUNOL -- Banning cows from the two biggest parks in the East Bay would make it difficult to control fires and non-native species, managers of the land say. The East Bay Regional Park District has no intention of heeding calls from a coalition of environmental and fishing groups to phase out grazing in the Sunol and Ohlone Wilderness Regional Preserves.

The groups, including the Alameda Creek Alliance, the Center for Biological Diversity and Livermore Flyfishers, say cattle are harmful to fish and sensitive species of animals and plants. Cows can wreak havoc in streams, for instance, disturbing gravel beds where fish lay eggs and causing erosion that silts up waterways.

The environmental groups want the park district to follow the lead of state officials, who ended cattle grazing at Mount Diablo State Park in 1989.

"Sunol and Ohlone Preserves are the crown jewels of the East Bay Regional Park system and deserve a similar high level of protection," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

The call to end grazing in Sunol and Ohlone comes as the Park District is drafting a 20-year land management plan for the parks. A draft plan is expected to be released next month, and public meetings will be held in Sunol and Oakland, said Brian Wiese, chief of planning and stewardship. Wiese said the plan is being drafted with protection of protected species in mind, including the Alameda whipsnake and California red-legged frog. Both parks -- all 16,500 acres -- have been designated as "critical habitat" for the future survival of the red-legged frog.

"A lot of the recommendations in the plan are concerned with enhancing habitat for those species, particularly some of the raptor species, such as golden eagles and hawks" that live in and around the parks, Wiese said.

The land management plan will recommend eliminating some of the old ranch roads that criss-cross the parks, for example, and narrowing others to single-track trails, Wiese said. Wetlands, particularly those along Alameda Creek, will get added protection, including fences to keep out cattle.

The Alameda Creek Alliance and other environmental groups say cows degrade streams and wetlands that are habitat for rainbow trout, frogs, salamanders and turtles.

About 3,000 acres of the Sunol Wilderness is owned by the city and county of San Francisco, which has extensive land holdings in the Alameda Creek watershed that are part of a vast water delivery system.

The land management plan would make vegetation management along Alameda Creek the responsibility of the San Francisco Water Department, and require fences to be installed to keep out livestock.

The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working with water agencies including the San Francisco Water Department to restore runs of ocean-going steelhead trout to Alameda Creek and its tributaries.

The park district's management plan proposes that maintenance activities in streams that support migratory fish be restricted to three months during the summer and early fall, and that the timing of water releases from Calaveras Dam be coordinated to benefit fish and amphibians.

Although the Park District collects about \$450,000 in fees from ranchers each year, it's not making a profit on grazing. The money may not even cover all of the district's cattle-related expenses.

"It's true that we're not making money on grazing," Wiese said. "What we hope to do is break even on expenses like water and fences."

The Park District welcomes cows because they help keep brush and non-native grasses from crowding out indigenous vegetation -- in the process, cutting the risk of fire.

"We believe there is a benefit to the land and habitat," Wiese said. "Our studies so far have shown that to be the case." Because the parks are near urban areas, "we have, and the cities have, major concerns about fire."

Wiese said removing "fuel" by hand would be prohibitively expensive, and disking with tractors environmentally destructive.

An alternative land management plan unveiled by environmental groups last week recommended that the park district rely on more controlled burns. If studies show a ban on cows in the parks actually has a detrimental effect, the groups want the district to try "alternative grazers, such as elk, goats or horses."

In addition to phasing out cattle grazing, the alternative plan calls for removing unneeded roads, culverts, fencing and barriers in streams, and ending the use of pesticides and herbicides.

"The goal of this proposal is to make wilderness preservation the top management priority for Sunol and Ohlone Preserves," the alternative plan states.

"If the Preserves are not going to be managed for wilderness attributes and values, they should not be designated as 'Wilderness Regional Preserves.'"