

Thursday, October 9, 2003

EBRPD Asked to Conduct Environmental Review

Environmentalists expected to push the East Bay Regional Park District to prepare an Environmental Impact Report ("EIR") for a proposed Land Use Plan for Sunol and Ohlone Regional Wilderness Preserves at a public hearing held yesterday in Sunol after the Independent's deadline. A coalition of local environmental and flyfishing organizations proposed an alternative management plan, emphasizing the restoration of wilderness values and advocating cessation of commercial cattle grazing in the Preserves.

"The single greatest environmental impact in the parks is continuation of cattle grazing leases, which causes untold damage to streams and wildlife habitat," said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "The Park District absolutely must conduct an EIR for the Land Use Plan. The use of a Negative Declaration is illegal and will be challenged. The proposed Negative Declaration ignores substantial information about cattle damage to endangered species habitat and considers no alternatives to grazing for managing these Preserves."

The Alameda Creek Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity, Livermore Flyfishers, Mission Peak Fly Anglers, Regional Parks Association, and Sierra Club presented an alternative Land Use Plan to the Park District in August. The wilderness proposal, Alternative W, calls for phasing out commercial cattle ranching operations in the Preserves, protecting stream habitat for sensitive species, removing unneeded roads and other infrastructure, and initiating an adaptive management plan to restore habitat for native species and to preserve the wilderness values of the parks. Over 76% of Sunol and Ohlone Preserves is currently leased for private commercial cattle grazing, causing significant damage to habitat in Alameda Creek for native trout and amphibians, and degrading habitat for other sensitive species, according to the environmentalists.

"Mount Diablo State Park ended commercial cattle grazing in 1989, providing a local model for prioritizing natural ecosystem protection in parklands while managing for recreation, fire control, and other concerns," said Miller. "Sunol and Ohlone Preserves are the crown jewels of the East Bay Regional Park system and deserve a similarly high level of protection."