

Tri-Valley Herald

Impact of grazing in Sunol to be studied

Environmental groups pushing

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SUNOL -- Environmental groups tonight will ask the East Bay Regional Park District to embark on a costly, time-consuming study of the district's plan for the Sunol and Ohlone Wilderness Regional Preserves.

The Alameda Creek Alliance and other groups say the park district hasn't fully assessed the environmental impacts of allowing cattle to continue grazing in the preserves.

The impacts will be substantial enough, the groups say, that under California law the park district is required to prepare an Environmental Impact Report, or EIR.

Park district staff members have concluded that their draft plan for managing the preserves during the next 20 years may have some environmental impacts. But the impacts can all be reduced to a "less than significant" level -- making a more extensive review unnecessary, the park district maintains.

Depending on the level of complexity, EIRs can cost tens of thousands of dollars and take months to complete. But groups that favor phasing out grazing -- including Livermore Flyfishers and the Southern Alameda County chapter of the Sierra Club -- believe an EIR will demonstrate that cattle are more destructive to native plants and animals than the park district has acknowledged.

The park district is accepting comments on its draft land use plan for the 16,000-acre area, which details how the park district intends to improve trails and add acreage to the parks while protecting rare plants and animals.

The draft land use plan advocates grazing as a cost-effective method to reduce the risk of fire, control non-native plants, and keep brush from choking grassland.

The park district's board of directors is tentatively scheduled to approve the land use plan on Dec. 2. But if the board decides to approve the 20-year plan without conducting an EIR, it could face a legal challenge, said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

Although the group hasn't yet decided to sue, it has hired a lawyer to study whether the park district is meeting its obligations under the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, Miller said.

Harry Batlin, a retired state park district superintendent, and Steven Shackley, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, have written letters to the park district expressing their opinion that an EIR is required.

The East Bay Regional Park District will hold a public meeting on the Sunol and Ohlone Wilderness Regional Preserves draft land use plan at 7 tonight at Sunol Glen School, 11601 Main St., Sunol. Written comments will be accepted until Oct. 31 c/o Dan Sykes, East Bay Regional Park District, 2950 Peralta Oaks Court, Oakland, CA 94605. The plan is available for viewing at the park district headquarters; at public libraries in Livermore, Pleasanton, and Fremont; and at www.ebparks.org on the Web.