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GRAZING POLICY REVIEW

ENVIRONMENTALISTS SAY CATTLE ARE DAMAGING THE RED-LEGGED FROG HABITAT,
BUT RANCHERS SAY THEY HELP PREVENT EAST BAY GRASS FIRES

Denis Cuff and Andrew Gordon

Worried that cattle may be essentially stomping out endangered species, the East Bay Regional Park District plans to reassess its grazing policy.

The re-examination promises to rekindle an ongoing controversy in a park system that protects vast natural areas and also serves as the area's biggest landlord for ranchers. Cattle graze on 51,500 of the park district's 91,000 acres.

Environmentalists contend grazing hurts oak trees and the California red-legged frog, the once abundant but now threatened species that inspired Mark Twain's tale of the frog jumping contest of Calaveras County.

Several parks also serve as home for the endangered San Joaquin kit fox and the threatened Alameda whipsnake.

"This is good news, and a review is long overdue," said Jeff Miller, spokesman for the Alameda Creek Alliance. "I hope they examine the issues thoroughly. They seem to have been in severe denial about the need for this for some time."

Ranchers contend well-managed grazing suppresses grass levels and fire dangers while causing little environmental damage.

"We expect a lot of interest in our review of our grazing," said Ted Radke, an East Bay Regional Park District board member from Martinez. "We have clear standards that were established roughly 10 years ago. It's time to revisit them."

Radke said he thought it would take from six months to a year to prepare a revised grazing policy. Tim Koopmann, president of the Contra Costa-Alameda County Cattleman's Association, said while a review of the policy is a good idea, the current policy "is certainly adequate."

"As a rancher, I hope the park district will continue with its grazing policy," he said. "Grazing is the most economic and efficient form of vegetation management. It's a natural part of the ecosystem."

Koopmann added that opponents to grazing are a small, but vocal group.

Miller said the two biggest issues are "getting the park district out of the ranching industry, since their main priority is protecting habitat," and examining the economics, which he said does not outweigh the ecological damage.

Miller said the biggest example of cattle damaging the environment is in creeks. He said cows often trample creek beds and banks, eat the vegetation, increase sediment and defecate in the water, all of which threatens amphibious and aquatic life.

The red-legged frog can be especially vulnerable to grazing because thirsty cattle tromp down the creekside plants that provide shelter for frogs.

"The new status of these species make it important to review district land management practices," said Pat O'Brien, the park district general manager.

He said the district land managers and biologists already have begun an internal review of the grazing policies. The review may have implications for a possible park maintenance tax that may be put on the November ballot.

Some critics who campaigned against a similar park tax measure in 1998 have said the district shouldn't go for a tax without strengthening grazing restrictions.

Grazing controversies have besieged the district for the past few years. In October 1998, the Alameda Creek Alliance and the Southwest Center for Biodiversity, now called the Center for Biological Diversity, filed a lawsuit claiming the district did not conduct environmental reviews of its grazing policy. In March 1999, Alameda County Superior Court found that the policy did not violate the California Environmental Quality Act.