

Contra Costa Times (Walnut Creek, CA)

June 4, 2000

Section: Contra Costa

Edition: Final

Page: A29

WEST'S WAR OVER COWS HITS HOME

AS EAST BAY PARK OFFICIALS REEVALUATE GRAZING ON AREA LAND, ONE DANVILLE RESIDENT CHRONICLES BOVINE DAMAGE TO HIS FAVORITE NATURAL SPOT

Mike Taugher

For the past 10 years, Greg Schneider has been trekking into Sycamore Valley several times a week looking for a bit of peace.

So the Danville engineering consultant did not appreciate it when he started noticing last year that cattle were wallowing in the streams and breaking down trails.

"This was a place to get away from it all before jumping into traffic," Schneider said during a recent ridgeline hike.

Cattle, he said, changed that.

"You couldn't sit down and read a book without smelling their feces," he said. "It's quiet now, but when they're in here, you hear them whining."

The East Bay Regional Park District has received so many complaints from environmentalists and hikers like Schneider in recent months that it has begun a yearlong review of its grazing policy.

Should there be fewer cattle? No cattle?

What changes should be made in the way cattle are managed on the 50,000 acres of public parkland that are open to grazing in the East Bay?

Those questions go to the heart of what it is that East Bay residents want from their regional parks. Hikers, more and more, are complaining about the presence of cattle. But others, such as passing motorists, enjoy the pastoral influence that bovines bring to an otherwise suburban landscape.

"The regional parks have kind of a grand experiment here, and that is to run big regional open spaces right next to people," said Beverly Lane, who is chairing the park district's grazing task force.

Cattle spurred Schneider to action. He started taking pictures of trampled streambeds, damaged shrubs and cowpies that were fouling some of his favorite places.

Then he started contacting environmental groups and heard about the damage ascribed to cattle in public lands throughout the West. He wrote a report on his findings, in which he described the arrival of cattle as "a bad dream."

Others, including park district officials, have no beef with cattle in the East Bay.

Park district officials say that cattle grazing beats back less desirable exotic grasses and allows more ground for native plants to grow.

Grazing also keeps grasses low to the ground, thereby preventing the spread of fire.

"We're doing it because it is the least expensive, and most efficient, way to have organic lawnmowers," said Bob Doyle, the park district's assistant general manager in charge of land acquisitions.

And Doyle added that Schneider's favorite haunt is a remnant of large tracts of ranchland that at one time were slated for development. Cattle grazing was something that residents involved in saving these ridgelines from development wanted to keep.

"It was always planned to be grazed," Doyle said.

Cattle, which had been absent, finally returned to Sycamore Valley last year after the park district put up fences to keep the animals in their pastures, said Ned Wood, a Contra Costa rancher whose cows use Sycamore Valley for part of the year.

"The place was a big weed patch before the cows were put out there," he said. "These guys get paid a lot of attention because they're making a lot of noise. They need to rely on scientific facts, and the scientific facts support grazing."

For more than a decade, many environmentalists have been fighting to curtail and even end cattle grazing on huge oceans of public land in the interior West vast spreads of national forests and publicly owned federal range and desert where ranchers can feed a cow-and-calf pair for \$1.35 a month.

The controversy has helped develop a body of scientific evidence that cattle are degrading habitat for wildlife and driving some species toward extinction, and has raised questions about the subsidies that ranchers working federal land receive.

But ranching in the East Bay is different, according to ranchers and park officials.

For one thing, the 37 ranchers using East Bay park lands pay grazing fees 10 times higher than those on federal land. About 6,000 head of cattle graze East Bay parks at various times of the year.

And park district officials contend that while grazing may be harmful in other areas, it is ecologically beneficial in the oak woodlands and grasslands of northern California that have been grazed by cattle for hundreds of years.

"The debate here is about I don't like how it looks," said Doyle. "Some of the people who are very involved in grazing in desert and forest don't understand that this is oak woodland and grassland, and it's very different. It's ecologically different.

"We don't have scientific evidence yet on what the actual impacts of grazing are on these species," Doyle added.

Some environmentalists say that is because park officials have not looked hard enough.

"There's potentially some benefits from grazing, but there's a lot more negative impacts," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance, which is adamantly opposed to grazing on public lands. "You have huge numbers of cows in the streams, which have a huge impact on aquatic and riparian species. They (cattle) look fine from the highway, but some of these streams resemble sewers."

Still, environmental groups themselves are divided on the East Bay's bovines.

Miller's group and others that are focused on biological diversity and the preservation of rare plants and animals tend to be more critical of cattle grazing.

Others more concerned with the preservation of land from development maintain that cattle actually help preserve open space by helping ranchers stay in business. These environmentalists contend that even if grazing damages wildlife habitat, pavement is more permanent and destructive.

"Many of them can stay in business only by grazing public lands," said Seth Adams of Save Mount Diablo, an East Bay environmental group. "It's to our benefit to keep ranchers in business as long as possible.

"Our parks, our wildlife, the views that we all enjoy, all depend on huge areas of private land between and around our parks," Adams added. "There's no question the park district can do a better job of grazing management. They need to bring more money and staff to the issue."

Adams' argument that allowing ranchers to use public parkland makes it less likely they will sell their private land to developers is also a subject of debate.

"I think that it's a very real possibility," said Sarah Mora, director of the Contra Costa County Farm Bureau. "It takes a lot of land to graze animals, and there's not a lot of land left."

Others have doubts.

"It would certainly hurt their operations, but whether they would subdivide it is a leap," said Tom Mikkelsen, the park district's assistant general manager. "But people certainly talk about it in those terms."