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District unveils plans for preserves

Environmental groups push for end to grazing

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SUNOL -- The East Bay Regional Park District has released a draft plan outlining how it proposes to manage the largest parks in its jurisdiction -- the Sunol and Ohlone wilderness regional preserves -- for the next two decades. The two parks, which total more than 16,000 acres, are nine miles south of Livermore and Pleasanton and five miles east of Fremont. The park district will accept public comments on the 173-page draft plan at an Oct. 8 public meeting in the town of Sunol.

The draft 20-year land-use plan details the district's intentions to improve trails, add acreage to the parks, protect rare plants and animals and minimize fire risks. But before the plan was even released, the park district was facing criticism from environmental groups such as the Alameda Creek Alliance that want to phase out cattle grazing on the property.

The park district allows cattle to roam in most areas of both parks, charging ranchers a fee to cover expenses like water and fencing. There are 72 cattle ponds scattered throughout the parks. The new land use plan envisions that grazing will continue as part of the district's strategy to cut the risk of fire, minimize non-native plants and keep brush from taking over open grasslands. Fire is a concern because of frequent drought conditions and temperatures that can soar into the 100s.

Environmental groups say those goals can be accomplished without allowing cattle in the parks, pointing to nearby Mount Diablo State Park, where grazing was eliminated in 1989.

The groups -- including Livermore Flyfishers and the Southern Alameda County chapter of the Sierra Club -- have proposed their own plan, which advocates a gradual phasing out of grazing and the removal of unneeded roads.

One objection environmental groups have to grazing that cattle may be damaging streambeds where rainbow trout breed.

Advocates of a plan to restore a run of oceangoing steelhead trout to Alameda Creek and its tributaries say the rainbow trout -- which are genetically related to the steelhead -- may serve as suitable breeding stock for the restoration effort. Alameda Creek and its tributaries have been identified by the National Marine Fisheries Service as "critical habitat" for the threatened steelhead trout.

In conjunction with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, the park district plans to build a fence along Alameda Creek to keep cattle out of the streambed. The fence also is intended to stop erosion caused by cattle when clambering in and out of streams.

Sunol and Ohlone preserves are in the middle of the 700-square mile Alameda Creek watershed, and the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission owns 36,000 acres around the parks -- including 3,000 acres in Sunol Preserve the park district leases from San Francisco.

Other elements of the park district's plan include:

Converting some former dirt roads to narrow trails. Sections being considered for "downsizing" include stretches of Eagle View Road and McCorkle Trail east of Canyon View Trail in Sunol Preserve. In Ohlone, parts of Rocky Ridge Trail, Stroemer Spring Trail, Springboard Trail, Toad Rock Trail, Cougar Trail, Mid-Wauhab Trail, Steep and Easy Trail, Billy Goat Road and Mid-Road east of Billy Goat Road may be narrowed.

Placing solar- or battery-powered emergency cell phones at intervals along the Ohlone Wilderness Regional Trail. The phones will be designed to be unobtrusive and installed on a trial basis to evaluate maintenance costs and visual impacts.

Creating new camps, including a 50-person group site at Leyden Camp. The San Francisco PUC, which owns the property, would have to sign off on the plan. The 50-person High Valley Group Camp also may be expanded to handle 100 or as many as 150 people. Up to 10 new picnic tables, four toilets and food preparation facilities would be needed.

The district also is considering building four new backcountry camps for hikers along the Ohlone Wilderness Regional Trail, with two to three camp sites at each location. One restroom and water faucet would be installed at each location.

Allocating money to open the 2,760-acre Wauhab Ridge land bank. The area will require a full-time ranger, and opening it will cost \$250,000, plus more than \$90,000 in annual maintenance costs.

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 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 8, 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 94605. The plan is available for viewing at the park district headquarters; at public libraries in Livermore, Pleasanton and Fremont; and online at www.ebparks.org