

## Expansion of cattle grazing stopped

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A cattle grazing increase on the Big Sur coast has been halted at least temporarily after environmental groups argued that the practice is harming endangered species and habitats.

Prompted by an appeal by groups including the Ventana chapter of the Sierra Club, the U.S. Forest Service withdrew an earlier decision to expand cattle operations in the Los Padres National Forest. The Forest Service agreed to conduct additional review before allowing ranchers to run their herds on additional forest land.

Property that was already being grazed, some for as long as 50 years, will be unaffected, at least until the review is complete, said John Bradford, U.S. Forest Service ranger for the Monterey District.

In December the Forest Service issued notice authorizing continued livestock grazing in the Gorda, Alder Creek, Salmon Creek and San Carpoforo areas and authorized new grazing allotments on the Kozy Kove, Sur Sur and Sea Vista ranches.

In January, the Sierra Club, the Ventana Wilderness Alliance, Los Padres ForestWatch and the Center for Biological Diversity appealed that decision on grounds that there had not been adequate environmental review.

The groups argued that grazing threatens several endangered species, including the Smith's blue butterfly, South Central Coast steelhead trout and California red-legged frog, and disturbs ponds and rare plants, according to Jeff Miller of Biological Diversity's San Francisco office.

Environmentalists are demanding the Forest Service conduct additional environmental review. Bradford said the service will first re-examine the original decision to determine if more review is necessary.

"We are going to redo this review as rapidly as possible," he said, "but right now we do not have a timeline in mind."

While the grazing decision was withdrawn March 1, Miller said, grazing is still going on, "illegally, in our opinion," on some forest land.

Bradford said federal law says grazing that was previously permitted can continue while additional environmental review is conducted.

Some of the lands proposed for expanded leases, Miller said, are newly acquired tracts purchased or donated to the Forest Service. All are on the Big Sur Coast.

Ranchers in the Salinas Valley don't tend to run cattle in Los Padres, said longtime rancher Mary Orradre, who was attending a county Cattlemen's Association meeting in King City.

"It's a two-fold issue, part environment, part economics," she said.

Grazing fees provide revenue to the Forest Service, she said, and a cattle operation brings people and wages to remote areas.

"I think the Sierra Club and the biodiversity people ought to think how to make up for those losses."

In addition, Orradre said, cattle grazing keeps down the fire danger in grass and brushlands, and fire could pose more of a danger to endangered species than cattle.

"I think it's about time we realized that this is part of our food supply," she said. "It's important that it stays domestic, not go on foreign soil like our fossil fuel has, thanks to the Sierra Club."

Her family has ranched in Monterey County since 1872, she said.

"Farmers and cattle people are true environmentalists. If we don't take care of the environment, we don't have a business."

Mark Massara, director of the Sierra Club's coastal programs, said ranchers are allowed to run so few cattle on forest land that it ends up costing the government more to operate the program than the ranchers profit, and "invaluable environmental habitat is grazed into oblivion" as a result.

"The Sierra Club is committed to protecting Big Sur's unique and world famous environment," he said. "And when it comes to public lands, cattle grazing has been shown to be both destructive and unproductive in terms of

economics.

"To the extent (the ranchers) get the land for free, it's not a good deal for the public," he said. "It's economically unproductive. This is the rare instance where science has prevailed over politics... and ranchers as well as the public should feel good about this."