Grazing decision under fire
Property owners claim foothill foraging bad for environment

by Chuck Mueller, Staff Writer

APPLE VALLEY - The rolling foothills near Round Mountain, south of here, are considered ideal pasture land for cattle in the view of federal officials, but private landowners in the area disagree.

A decision by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management authorizes up to 221 cows to forage on 18,090 acres administered under the bureau's grazing allotment program, from Dec. 1 through March 31.

Property owners and a conservation group said they will appeal the ruling by Roxie Trost, the bureau's Barstow area field manager, on grounds grazing would damage the region's fragile environment.

Trost based her decision on an environmental assessment, concluding that renewal of a grazing lease previously granted to Big Bear City rancher Jon Stone is appropriate. The lease would be for 10 years.

Range cattle haven't grazed on the land for five years, following the devastating Willow Fire, which burned through 65 percent of the allotment in August 1999.

Before the fire, streams flowed in the area in the winter, providing a haven for various forms of wildlife, including deer, said Mary Murray, who with husband Jerry owns 40 acres near Round Mountain.

"These sensitive riparian areas need to be protected,' she said. "I have seen every stream in my area trampled (by grazing cattle) and polluted into a sticky mudpatch that dries into a thick hard-baked crust.

"Creation and preservation of cattle range seems to be the BLM objective ... taking a precious wilderness belonging to the world and turning it into a commercial enterprise benefiting about a dozen people.'

Stone has not yet applied to renew the grazing lease, which would be issued on an interim basis until the West Mojave land-use plan is given final approval, said Anthony Chavez, BLM rangeland management specialist. The plan includes the allotment area.

A final environmental impact statement for the planning area is nearing completion, he said, and a decision on the grazing lease is expected to be issued soon.

"People protesting the decision would have 30 days to appeal it,' Chavez said.

He said Round Mountain is one of the most productive allotments managed by the bureau's Barstow field office, as far as forage is concerned.

"Grass is knee-high and riparian areas are extremely lush,' he said.

A previous grazing lease for the allotment expired in February, 2000, and was then renewed for a five-year period. However, grazing was not allowed because fences and water sources had been vandalized, Chavez said.

Stone declined to comment on his plans.

Earlier he said the question would depend on "a financial decision.' After acquiring his original lease, he shifted a herd of crossbred cattle to other pastures, he said. The herd consisted of a mix of Angus, Herefords and Brahmas.
Mary Murray said livestock grazing has degraded the land from a forested state to a virtual desert.

But Stone said environmentalists and others are misinformed about damage attributed to cattle.

"More laws pertain to grazing on federal land than any other activity," he said. "Under proper management, cattle don't harm the environment."

"Environmental groups have a bumper-sticker mentality. They don't look at issues in-depth."

The Murrays and a half dozen other land owners have joined the Center for Biological Diversity, a watchdog environmental group, in protesting the grazing decision.

"The area around Juniper Flats and Round Mountain is a unique place a transition zone between the desert and the mountains," said desert ecologist Daniel Patterson with the Tuscon, Ariz.-based biological center.

"It doesn't make sense to allow grazing there. It's not economically viable. There's a lot of private property, and it would be the landowners' responsibility to put in fences, which are expensive."

The allotment contains 2,525 acres of private land.

Patterson calls grazing "a one-two punch" on top of widespread off-road vehicle activity in the Round Mountain area.

Chavez said cattle grazing during winter months typically results in minimal impacts to springs and riparian areas. Further, cattle drink less water in the winter, and do not concentrate as frequently along streams as in the summer.

Apple Valley resident Jon Northrup, who lives near Round Mountain, has protested the grazing decision on grounds that cattle would degrade the area's water table.

"Cows eat what little grass covers the area, and water levels are dropping every year," he said in a written protest. "Our well is downstream from one of the cows' favorite hangouts, and this doesn't help the (declining) water level or the taste of the water."

Another area resident, Robin Maltas, said grazing cattle would add additional stress to drought-stricken foothill lands where streams have dwindled and wildlife has fled.

"We must protect the remaining riparian areas or they will remain barren," he wrote the Bureau of Land Management.

Jerry Murray sees irony in the four-month grazing season established by the Bureau of Land Management.

"That is exactly the time that young grasses and seedlings are starting to shoot up as winter rains fall," he said. "Why allow cattle to graze at this crucial time in the life of these plants?"

Formal protests could open the way for an appeal of the decision, Chavez said. An appeal must spell out why the appellants disagree with the order.