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Jemez Wetlands Grazing Under Fire

The Associated Press

Two environmental groups have appealed a decision by the Santa Fe National Forest to let grazing continue on wetlands and near archaeological sites in the Jemez Mountains.

Forest Guardians and the Center for Biological Diversity appealed the grazing decision for the 100,000-acre San Diego Range allotment.

They say the U.S. Forest Service has failed to adequately protect habitat for the bald eagle, the Mexican spotted owl, the northern goshawk, the Rio Grande cutthroat trout and other species.

Under the decision, cattle could be grazed on about 74,000 acres, including pastures and wetlands along two creeks that the environmentalists believe should be closed to grazing.

"We would love to see the whole thing closed, but realistically, we would like to see some of the pastures, like one along Cebolla Creek, closed to grazing," said Billy Stern, Forest Guardians grazing coordinator.

Currently, 264 cattle are allowed in the allotment during summer and fall and 128 are allowed during the winter and spring, according to the environmental-impact report for the project.

Those numbers are 80 percent below

historic stocking levels, according to the Forest Service.

The allotment contains more than 1,680 identified archaeological sites, including ancestral Jemez Pueblo sites, within areas where grazing will be allowed.

The report notes that cattle grazing may damage archaeological sites.

Only 220 sites are afforded protection from the impacts of livestock grazing, according to Forest Guardians.

Another 17 sites on the National Register of Historic Places will be in pastures where grazing is allowed.

"They're going to use brush piles to keep cows away," Stern said. "We honestly don't think it will work."

The Forest Service met with officials from the pueblos of Jemez, Cochiti, Zia and Santo Domingo, area residents and the local livestock association while working on the project.

The environmental groups claim the decision violates the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Forest Management Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Administrative Procedures Act and the National Historic Preservation Act.