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Experimental Washington state grazing program put on hold

A controversial cattle-grazing program on state wildlife lands has been put on hold for the 2010 season after a sharp rebuke by a Superior Court judge.

By **Lynda V. Mapes**
Seattle Times staff reporter

A controversial cattle-grazing program on state wildlife lands has been put on hold for the 2010 season after a sharp rebuke by a Superior Court judge.

The experimental Department of Fish and Wildlife grazing program, begun in 2005 in Southeast Washington, drew criticism from conservationists concerned about damage to native plants, streams and threatened fish runs. The Western Watershed Project, based in Hailey, Idaho, sued in 2008, challenging permits for the program.

Thurston County Superior Court Judge Paula Casey ruled last month that the department had no scientific basis for granting permits for grazing the lands on the promise that the program would benefit wildlife, including elk. The theory was that grazing cattle would stimulate growth of grasses and other plants that wildlife, such as elk, could eat.

"As I began to review the record, I was quite shocked," the judge said, according to a transcript of the proceedings. The department's own scientists had very harsh criticism of the program, the judge found, yet managers making the decisions about the plan "instead of responding with any scientific information countering the information advanced by the biologists seemed more about minimizing the effect of the warnings," the judge said.

Since the ruling, the department has decided to rest the lands grazed under the so-called Pilot Grazing Program. No decision has been announced at the department as to whether to appeal the judge's ruling.

A second, separate grazing effort in Kittitas County is also on hold for lack of funding and staff. That effort is also under challenge by the same group.

Phil Anderson, who recently became director of the agency — long after the experimental program started — said the department is going to take a step back and assess the pilot program before continuing it. For now, he says, he does not favor initiating any more grazing on lands that have not been grazed in the past 10 years, as the pilot program allowed.

"There were a lot of lessons learned," said Jennifer Quan, a lands-division manager in the department. "We could have shored up the research better at the beginning," she said. Also under evaluation are decisions to use lands for the program that were steep, near streams with protected fish, and to the agency's surprise, included large stands of a federally protected plant, Spalding's catchfly.

The pilot program was started with the support of Gov. Chris Gregoire as a way to help the Washington Cattlemen's Association. In November 2005, the department signed an agreement with the cattlemen to

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launch the experimental program, allowing the cattlemen to run their cows on public wildlife lands at no charge.

The Legislature appropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars for the program. Agency staffers put in nearly 4,000 hours on grazing plans, attending meetings, monitoring, and herding cattle. They installed more than 5 miles of fence, nearly 3 miles of pipeline and five troughs on wildlife lands.

The department had some bad luck and bad outcomes. Two employees were severely injured while stringing fencing. And the state's own reports on the program found missteps in implementation, with ranchers putting out too many cattle or letting them graze too long in one place, damaging habitat.

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