

Environmentalists seek injunction to halt ranch planning in Point Reyes National Seashore

Mark Prado, *The Marin Independent Journal*, 8-17-16

Several environmental groups are seeking an injunction to prevent the National Park Service from moving ahead with a ranch management plan seeking to extend leases to livestock operations that dot the Point Reyes National Seashore.

The groups filed for an injunction Friday in U.S. District Court in Oakland to stop any work associated with the management plan. A judge could take up the injunction issue in October.

The environmental groups -- Resource Renewal Institute, Center for Biological Diversity and Western Watersheds Project -- worry that without a halt order from a judge, the park service will move ahead with its plan before issues surrounding ranch operations can be heard in court. Those issues were raised in a lawsuit filed by the same groups in February.

"Our national park deserves better than a special-interest ranching expansion plan that short-circuits our conservation laws, and the public deserves the long-overdue park planning and environmental review of activities that could harm the park's wildlife and natural areas and infringe on the recreational experience," said Chance Cutrano, of the Marin-based Resource Renewal Institute, in a statement. "The park service should be accountable to the American people who own the national parks rather than prioritize commercial interests."

John Dell'Osso, assistant superintendent in the national seashore, said park officials could not comment on pending litigation.

The February lawsuit claims that cattle are causing erosion, polluting waterways with manure, harming endangered salmon and other species while blocking public access.

Unless the injunction is granted, the park service intends to "short circuit" the court proceedings over the lawsuit by completing the ranch management plan and issuing long-term ranching leases, according to the Friday filing.

"This would compromise any future (general management plan and environmental review processes) and effectively deny plaintiffs any chance at meaningful relief," according to the filing.

The groups' suit alleges park service officials are violating federal law because they are moving forward with a ranch plan without conducting adequate environmental studies on how the thousands of cows are affecting the seashore's scenic resources. Nor have officials updated their 36-year-old park management plan to consider other options, such as reducing the number of ranches in the park or the size of the cattle herds, the lawsuit contends.

Looking to provide West Marin ranches with more security and opportunity, the park service was in the middle of a planning process for working beef cattle and dairy ranches within the Point Reyes National Seashore when the suit was filed. Longer leases for ranchers is the cornerstone of the plan, dubbed the "Ranch Comprehensive Management Plan/Environmental Assessment."

It was the park service that didn't renew a lease for the Drakes Bay Oyster Co., another business within the seashore. Ranchers in the park worried they might be next to be shut down. But when the order came down in November 2012 to not renew the oyster company's lease, then-Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said existing ranching operations within the national park would continue.

He directed the park service to pursue extending the terms of agriculture permits for up to 20 years to provide greater certainty and clarity for the ranches operating within the national park's pastoral zone and to support the continued presence of sustainable ranching and dairy operations. Friday's filing took issue with Salazar's orders.

"Former Interior Secretary Salazar -- a cattle rancher himself -- unilaterally and out of the blue instructed the park service," according to the filing. "Secretary Salazar's surprise directive was not supported by any environmental analysis, nor informed by public notice and comment, as the law requires."