

Cows return to Bear Creek

By: Jim Eaton

One of the most spectacular parts of the proposed Cache Creek Wilderness is a former ranch, 12,000 acres of land recently added to the public domain and managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In the Bear Creek valley west of Highway 16 and south of Highway 20, these lands are home to a band of tule elk as well as black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, and other animals. The open, grassy oak woodlands are in stark contrast to the steep, chaparral-covered slopes that dominate much of the region. Hikers, equestrians, hunters, and bird watchers are using the area in increasing numbers.

Ecologically, however, not all is well. More than a century of overgrazing by cattle have left a legacy of exotic plant species which have been choking out many native species. Yellow star thistle, medusahead, and barbed goatgrass are among the worst offenders.

For several years, the BLM has been conducting small prescribed burns and spraying herbicides on some areas heavily infested with yellow star thistle. While there has been some success in knocking down the exotic weeds, only a few hundred acres have been treated when thousands of acres need work.

BLM's solution? Bring back the cows.

Last fall I was busy working on behalf of Tuleyome to prepare an administrative appeal to BLM's plan. But there was one factor I hadn't counted on—the rancher who was going to conduct the grazing, Chet Vogt.

Chet is a very persistent man. We went out together to look at the area, along with folks from the BLM and other range experts. He twice came to Davis to meet with board members of Tuleyome to hear our concerns about cattle grazing. And he listened. We did, too.

In the end, we agreed not to appeal the plan, and Chet and the BLM accepted many of our suggestions.

Our initial fear was that like in the past, 500 cattle would be brought to the area in November and turned loose for nine months. The cows would tend to congregate in certain areas, usually places with water, resulting in more erosion, trampling of the land, and obliteration of the trails. Left to the own, the bovines usually prefer to graze on the native perennials rather than the weed species. They would become part of the problem, not the solution.

But Chet's proposal was far different. His plan for intensive, short duration rotational grazing puts the livestock on small plots of land for less than two weeks before moving the animals to the next parcel.

Electric fences are used to keep the cattle from straying, and a herder is there six days a week to assure that everything goes as planned. After being grazed, an area will have several months to recover before the cows return. Each plot will be grazed only twice during the eight months the cattle are used.

Aside from actually eating the weed species when young and palatable, the cows also trample the thick thatch which results when the medusahead is not burned or stomped upon. Untreated, this thick layer of residual mulch can prevent native species from germinating.

We were concerned about the impact of this grazing project upon the many recreationists now using the area. Our agreement is for posters to be displayed at trail heads explaining why the cattle area here and what the grazing should accomplish. Visitors also will be told where the cows are so they can plan their visit accordingly.

Most importantly, a detailed monitoring plan is in place. We wanted to be assured that scientific monitoring would determine if grazing actually is reducing or eliminating the target weed species. We also want to know what impact the grazing is having on oak tree seedlings, sensitive animal species, and native plants.

Ideally, the cattle would be on the land for a short time in the winter to trample the thatch and then brought back only when the weed species are young and appetizing. But as a rancher, Chet has to be able to conduct this grazing project without losing money, although he may not make any. The BLM is waiving the nominal fee usually charged to graze public land, but transporting the livestock, hiring a herder, and paying for materials such as electric fencing, all add up to some significant costs.

There are other concerns. The use of off-road vehicles and the need to maintain roads for this project is something Tuleyome finds less than ideal. And will this project result in a healthy landscape where livestock are not needed in the future, or will cows be needed every year to control the exotic weeds? Only time will tell.

So if you are out hiking or riding your horse this spring and run into cows near Bear Creek, I hope you will understand why they are there. Let's all hope that these bovines will help make this land a healthier place in the coming years.

Jim Eaton is treasurer of Tuleyome, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the wild heritage and agricultural heritage of the Putah Creek and Cache Creek watersheds for existing and future generations. This column appears monthly.