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## Monument ranchers seek buyout

Cascade-Siskiyou cattlemen say they want out of their leases before a study determines how grazing affects the area

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ASHLAND -- On a hot August afternoon Mike Dauenhauer found his stray cattle exactly where he knew they'd be: beside the cool waters of a lake nestled in the brown and green hills outside Ashland.

He let out a high-pitched whistle, nudged his horse, Quincy, into a dusty gallop and herded the cows and their calves back to higher lands. Cattle have roamed this fence-free range for more than a century, and Dauenhauer, 43, has chased them since he was a boy.

The same places that draw cattle on summer afternoons are also havens for creatures found nowhere else -- the Keene Creek pebblesnail, the Jenny Creek redband trout and other species and subspecies so newly discovered that they have not yet been named.

In fact, this Southern Oregon landscape where Dauenhauer and about a dozen other ranchers run their cattle in the summer is so ecologically unique that President Clinton on June 9, 2000, proclaimed it the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

Immediately, mining and timber cutting inside the monument were prohibited. Grazing continued, but the president ordered a study of whether livestock, which can be hard on the land, threaten the ecology of the area.

The study won't be completed for a few more years. Ultimately, the answer will determine whether cattle - and cowboys -- will remain in these parts. But Dauenhauer and the other ranchers don't want to wait around for the results: They want out of their leases, and they want to dictate the terms.

They're asking the federal government to buy back the leases allowing them to graze cattle within the monument. And they want conservationists, who lobbied so hard and so successfully for the monument's creation, to share some of the buyback costs.

Under the terms of their current leases, the ranchers pay \$1.43 per month for a cow and her calf to graze within the monument. Nobody is saying yet exactly how much the ranchers want for their leases -- at this point the numbers mentioned range from \$1.5 million to \$4 million total.

In the end, the ranchers argue, it would cost taxpayers far less for the government to buy out the leases than for a multiyear grazing study and the legal battles that are likely to follow.

"It kills me to think I'd be part of a deal that would restrict grazing up here forever," Dauenhauer says. But he feels he has little choice. Without a buyout, his operation could lose critical summer forage with no compensation.

"Grazing on the monument will end up here at some time, in my opinion," Dauenhauer says.

Whether a buyout happens, he says, "has a heck of a lot to do with what I'm going to do with my future."

The Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument is the nation's first monument designated in recognition of its biological diversity. The Bureau of Land Management credits the area's "remarkable ecology" to its location at the crossroads of the Cascade and Siskiyou mountain ranges. It extols the 111 species of butterflies found here, including the rare mardon skipper.

But the BLM does little more than offer a color brochure to draw tourists to the area.

"It's not a monument we're promoting to visitors as a destination in itself. It's a special biological area," says Howard Hunter, assistant monument manager.

Besides, much of Hunter's time these days is consumed with the grazing study. The BLM has spent just under \$1 million to date, he says. Land managers have fenced off 13 1/4-acre test plots within the monument. A team of outside scientists has reviewed the BLM's study design.

The results of the study will not be available until 2006. Even then, Hunter says, it will likely be years before the government issues a final decision.

The World Wildlife Fund also has hired scientists to measure the effects of grazing on plants and wildlife in the area.

For rancher Bob Miller, 64, both studies are swords hanging over his head. In his mind, they threaten the final blow to his operation.

Miller, who grazes cattle on the south side of the monument, near the California border, pumps an angry fist in the air when he talks about people who claim the low rates ranchers pay to graze on public lands amount to "welfare ranching."

He argues that the government promised ranchers long ago: "If you come out and put your blood, sweat and tears into the lands, we'll give you the rights to graze."

But now Miller says stream and other wetland protections prescribed by the Northwest Forest Plan and additional restrictions tied to the monument designation make it difficult for ranchers to earn a living.

Over the years, ranchers have voluntarily decreased the number of cattle they graze on the monument to satisfy environmental restrictions, he says. Today, the BLM estimates that there are 605 cattle roaming about 51,000 acres of public land.

Aside from environmental regulations, Miller says, ranchers who run cattle in the area face "a mind-set" that's difficult to fight.

"There are people who have bought the program that says, 'Cows are bad for the environment.' And they don't want them under any circumstances on public lands," he says.

Four generations of Miller's family have run cattle on the oak savanna and in the old-growth conifer forests. Cattle used to roam through this area and they didn't bother anybody, he says.

Lately, however, complaints have increased along with the number of homes and vacation cabins being built on private parcels sprinkled throughout the monument.

"People who live up here don't want cows eating their petunias," says Joe Dauenhauer, Mike's father. "But they don't like fences either."

At age 90, Joe Dauenhauer says he remembers when cattle were the "kings and queens" up here.

"Now you can't drive cattle on the highways anymore," he says. "People get impatient."

Conservationists raised the idea of a buyout of grazing leases within the Cascade-Siskiyou monument years ago. But ranchers were both distrustful of and insulted by what they considered to be low-ball offers.

This spring, the ranchers started talking again to Dave Willis, executive director of the Soda Mountain Wilderness Council, and to Andy Kerr, once the most-despised forest activist in Oregon who now represents a coalition of environmental groups promoting a voluntary national buyout of grazing permits on public lands.

The longtime adversaries have discovered at least one mutual goal. Conservationists want cattle out of the ecologically sensitive monument. And the ranchers are ready to leave.

Both sides agree that the ranchers should receive compensation so they can lease or purchase other summer pasture.

"Making these guys whole is socially just," Kerr says.

The ranchers and conservationists have not yet agreed on whether the conservationists should cover some of the cost of the buyout.