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Deal expands wildlife habitat

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Cattle will no longer graze on a prime chunk of habitat for elk, moose, grizzlies and wolves south of Yellowstone National Park, according to a recent agreement.

The deal involves 178,000 acres of national forest land southeast of Grand Teton National Park that's been identified as one of the best places for wintering elk. It's also been the source of long-running conflicts between predators and livestock.

The National Wildlife Federation brokered a deal to retire grazing allotments in the area as part of a larger effort in the Yellowstone ecosystem to find ranchers willing to accept payment to no longer graze livestock in prime wildlife areas.

With the latest deal, the group has put together more than 20 agreements covering nearly 500,000 acres.

"We're not trying to get rid of all grazing in the Yellowstone ecosystem," said the group's Hank Fischer. "We're focusing on places where there's been conflict year in and year out."

The latest effort involves a \$450,000 payment to Fish Creek Cattle Co. owner Scott Stanko for the Bacon Creek and Fish Creek allotments on the Bridger-Teton National Forest in the Upper Gros Ventre drainage, Fischer said.

About 100,000 acres will be closed to grazing. The remaining portions will allow infrequent grazing, but the emphasis will be on providing forage and habitat for wildlife.

According to Steve Kilpatrick, a habitat biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in Jackson, the area is used regularly by wintering elk and moose. He said it is home to bighorn sheep, Canada lynx and wolverines and is part of the epic migrations of pronghorn in one of the longest animal treks in the lower 48.

The area is so important to wintering elk that it was once suggested that it ought to be home to the National Elk Refuge, which is just outside Jackson.

"It just benefits a huge array of wildlife species," Kilpatrick said. "It's got the whole complement of wildlife species of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem."

Three wolf packs and scores of grizzly bears also roam there.

Between 1999 and 2004, there were 36 confirmed cattle losses to grizzlies - and more than \$1 million

in filed damage claims - and undoubtedly more losses that were never confirmed, officials said.

Rancher Dan Ingalls, who previously had the grazing permits, sold them in 2003 after numerous problems with bears and wolves. Those conflicts have persisted.

Grazing on the permits could have been profitable but the predator problems and other costs were insurmountable, Scott Stanko said in a letter provided by the National Wildlife Federation.

Though retiring the permit raises "many political and ideological implications," it made sense from a business perspective and provides money to purchase a grazing allotment elsewhere, he said.

Fischer stressed that the deal for the Bacon Creek and Fish Creek allotments, like previous agreements, was voluntary.

"It isn't like we're putting anybody out of business. In almost every circumstance, they've used the money to secure new grazing," he said.

The National Wildlife Federation has brokered 23 similar deals in the Yellowstone area.

Besides the latest agreement, the largest have been 84,000 acres retired in the Blackrock/Spread Creek area of the Bridger-Teton National Forest and 74,000 acres retired last year in the Gallatin National Forest south of Big Timber.