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Ranch agrees to end grazing near park

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Part of a federal grazing allotment south of Yellowstone National Park that was a hot spot for problems with bears and wolves has been retired.

The National Wildlife Federation and other groups brokered the deal between the Diamond G Ranch of Dubois, Wyo., and the Shoshone National Forest.

The agreement will end grazing on about 35,000 acres of federal land and will pay the Diamond G Ranch \$150,000 to secure grazing elsewhere.

The deal is the 29th of its kind since 2002 aimed at reducing conflicts in the Yellowstone ecosystem between livestock and predators in prime wildlife areas. So far, about 550,000 acres of federal grazing allotments have been retired, said Hank Fischer, special projects coordinator with the National Wildlife Federation.

"This is all voluntary. We don't twist anybody's arms. The reason why this works is we're only focusing on allotments that have long-term, chronic conflicts," Fischer said.

The Dunoir grazing allotment, along the east and west forks of the Dunoir River, certainly has had its share of conflicts.

Stephen Gordon, Diamond G Ranch president, estimated losses to predators in the hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. That includes cows, horses, family dogs snatched from the front porch and a young colt killed in a corral, he said.

"It's really been hell for us," he said Thursday. "We're 27 miles as the crow flies from the southeast corner of Yellowstone, so we're really right in the line of fire."

Since 1991, wildlife officials have confirmed 31 cows killed by grizzlies, and the actual losses may be three times higher, he said. Although the ranch has a very high density of bears, ranch managers found ways to work around them.

The arrival of wolves after reintroduction in 1995 and 1996, though, proved too much, Gordon said. Over the past 13 years, verified losses to wolves include 27 cows, eight dogs and four horses. The actual number of depredations may be about eight times higher, Gordon said.

"The increasing number of wolves in this area makes future ranching operations difficult at best and could

eventually lead to sale or subdivision of our property," said Gordon, who once sued the federal government to have wolves removed from the ranch.

The deal reached between the Shoshone Forest, Diamond G and the wildlife federation would retire the upper portion of the allotment - the area with abundant wildlife and the most roadless habitat - and allow grazing to continue on the lower 14,500 acres connected with private property.

Gordon said they're now scaling back their ranch operation. The decision to have part of the grazing allotment retired was done "with some reluctance."

Fischer said the retired area is "spectacular" for hiking and recreation as well as its wildlife.

Over the past 20 years, wildlife trackers have counted at least 52 individual grizzlies using the area. It also has been occupied since 1999 by the Washakie wolf pack, which now has 11 members. It's also rife with elk in the fall, bighorn sheep in the winter and moose year-round.

Last year, the groups brokered a deal to retire about 178,000 acres of national forest southeast of Grand Teton National Park. Other deals involved about 74,000 acres south of Big Timber and 84,000 acres in the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

With the latest agreement on the Dunoir allotment, four of the five allotments with the most intense livestock/predator conflicts in the Yellowstone ecosystem have been retired.

In all but one of the deals, the ranchers have used the money from the conservation groups to move grazing operations elsewhere, Fischer said.

"I don't think we're so much eliminating livestock grazing as we're redistributing where it occurs so it's away from conflict areas," Fischer said. "I think that's good for everybody."