

Big grazing allotment reserved for wildlife

Rancher voluntarily retires 178,000 acres northeast of Jackson.

By Cory Hatch

Bridger-Teton officials and members of the National Wildlife Federation teamed up with a livestock producer in January to set aside a roughly 178,000-acre grazing allotment for wildlife protection.

Located northeast of Jackson, about half of the Bacon Creek/Fish Creek allotment will be closed to livestock grazing. The remainder of the parcel will be available for grazing, but with restrictions. It will be divided into a 60,000-acre winter range forage preserve where livestock would be allowed to graze to improve forage conditions, and a 24,000-acre predator conflict reserve where predators wouldn't be killed for harassing or killing livestock.

According to National Wildlife Federation spokesman Hank Fischer, conflicts with grizzly bears and wolves have plagued the grazing allotment for years. The permittee, Scott Stanko, voluntarily gave the permit back to the Forest Service.

"This is an extremely important wildlife area, both for wintering big game and large carnivores," said Fischer. "There has been chronic conflict between livestock and wildlife."

In a November 17 letter to local ranchers and other interested groups, Stanko gave his support for the closure, saying that the parcel is an uneconomical place to raise livestock.

"The Bacon Creek and Fish Creek grazing allotments have had a marked history of predator problems," Stanko wrote. "The predator problems and other costs of running the operation were indeed insurmountable."

In 2003, Stanko said, he lost 194 of his 1,223 head of cattle. "A large portion of these losses were no doubt from predators," he said.

As part of the deal, Stanko will receive \$450,000, roughly \$2.50 an

acre, in compensation.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department also lent its support to the deal. In a December 14 letter, Game and Fish director Terry Cleveland wrote, "Such an option would serve to significantly reduce large carnivores/livestock conflicts, yet allow for periodic livestock grazing as a tool to enhance forage conditions for wintering wild ungulates."

"Due to the increased potential for wildlife/livestock conflicts and the historic importance of the wild ungulate winter ranges, we support your pursuit of a partial closure/partial forage reserve as the preferred option," Cleveland wrote.

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NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION SPOKESMAN

Fischer agreed. "The agreement honors long-standing Forest Service commitments to give priority to wintering wildlife in this area," he said. "It follows direction in the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy that directs the Forest Service to resolve conflicts in favor of bears. This is also an area that the State of Wyoming has identified as a place it wants to manage for grizzly bears."

Fischer called the decision a good deal for everyone involved. "It isn't like we're putting livestock raisers out of business," said Fischer. "We really see it as a win-win for both parties. These things haven't been very controversial as a consequence."

Stanko, who now works as a lawyer in Chicago, said it ultimately came down to a business decision. "It's a pretty daunting task," he said. "Wolves and bears are chasing them all over the country."