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FOREST SERVICE FAILS TO PROTECT PUBLIC FOREST STREAMS FROM CONTAMINATION BY COMMERCIAL LIVESTOCK OPERATIONS

Today two conservation organizations filed suit against the U.S. Forest Service for allowing poorly managed grazing to pollute streams and to damage high elevation meadows and riparian areas in the Sierra Nevada. The groups have joined in a legal challenge aimed at reducing pollution of Stanislaus National Forest streams by livestock. [Sierra Forest Legacy \(SFL\) and the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center \(CSERC\) filed the suit to correct repeated violations of water quality standards in streams affected by livestock and to halt longstanding violations of the forest plan that have resulted in damage to sensitive meadows and riparian areas.](#)

“Seven years ago we provided the Forest Service with test results from an independent laboratory that showed repeated water quality violations in forest streams flowing through areas where cattle graze for weeks at a time. Year after year we’ve shared additional evidence of pollution that poses health risks to forest visitors. And year after year, the Forest Service has shrugged off the evidence of violations – instead suggesting that recreational visitors should bring water filters when they visit. Our groups have no choice but to press the Forest Service to place public health and safety above special interests,” explained John Buckley, CSERC’s executive director.

Speaking on behalf of SFL, Dr. Susan Britting agreed: “In three grazing allotments affecting 51,000 acres of public forest land, biologists have documented repeated water quality violations. But also of high concern, poorly managed livestock consistently degrade and trample habitat that is critical for threatened and endangered species - and many other kinds of wildlife. Yet after 10 years of agency planning for the three grazing allotments, the USFS recently decided not to take any action and to simply allow the status quo level of livestock use to continue. ...That’s after receiving extensive evidence of widespread resource damage and stream pollution by livestock.”

Livestock impacts on national forest land have been highly controversial for decades. Certain ranchers are permitted to bring cattle up into the national forests for the summer-fall season. Cows are dispersed to graze randomly, so livestock often concentrates along stream

areas with lush vegetation and easy access to water for the cows. (See attached photo examples of livestock-caused damage affecting public forest lands.)

Conservation group biologists have routinely submitted photo evidence to officials of the Stanislaus Forest that show examples of over-grazed meadows, denuded and trampled riparian areas, and chiseled stream banks that are in violation of the agency's own requirements. Many areas that suffer the worst livestock damage are riparian areas and meadow locations where each summer thousands of recreational visitors spend time in the public forest as they hike, camp, backpack, fish, play in the water, or otherwise recreate along the contaminated streams.

"The goal of this litigation is to protect water quality, public health, and at-risk resources -- not to halt livestock grazing on national forest land," Buckley noted. "But federal agencies such as the Forest Service need to comply with the Clean Water Act and appropriately protect water quality the same as anyone else. Laboratory results frequently detect fecal coliform pollution at levels above safe thresholds for recreational contact in streams affected by livestock. One laboratory test of a stream sample in 2016 showed stream pollution more than 100 times the threshold level. In contrast, tested streams without any permitted livestock presence routinely show acceptable water quality results. When it comes to water quality in mountain streams, pollution by livestock matters."

The conservation groups are open to discussion with USFS officials about steps that could settle this lawsuit. Key to any settlement would be agreement from the Forest Service to abide by its own resource regulations, to comply with environmental policies, to reduce livestock contamination of water, and to protect critical wildlife habitat when evidence of resource damage is documented.

"We support balanced public land management," emphasized Dr. Britting of SFL. "That means that one commercial use (such as livestock grazing) should only be permitted to the degree that it does not cause significant harm to water quality, public health, threatened plants and wildlife, recreation, and scenic values on public land."

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CSERC biologist Lindsey Myers is shown sampling a stream for water quality testing.



Recreational visitors waded in Bell Creek, one of the streams in the Stanislaus National Forest that tested at times with high levels of pathogenic bacteria.



Photo shows a tributary stream flowing through a forest meadow where livestock grazed intensely -- pocking the riparian area and trampling the streambanks.



In contrast ...A high elevation forest meadow without impacts from livestock.