Feral Abandoned Cattle Grazing on Two National Wildlife Refuge Islands in Alaska

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Two islands within Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge (AMNWR), Chirikof and Wosnesenski islands, are entirely refuge owned and have uncontrolled feral, abandoned cattle grazing without any federal permit, grazing lease or collection of grazing fees. Wosnesenski Island is off the coast of the Alaska Peninsula in the Pavlov Group, and Chirikof Island is on the southern end of the Kodiak archipelago. Overgrazing by feral livestock is the most destructive biological force against natural biodiversity on Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge islands. Livestock on these and other islands continue to cause damage to wildlife and habitat resources and historical and cultural sites. Feral cattle interfere with nesting of native birds by causing disturbance and trampling of nests and reducing the quality of nesting habitat and cover. Policy and regulations are clear the AMNWR cannot let this damage continue and still fulfill their Fish and Wildlife Service mission and refuge purposes. Cattle removal from these two islands will allow natural vegetation recovery to begin and restore nesting habitat for multiple species of birds, improve salmon spawning streams and slow erosion of important cultural sites. About 750 cattle roam freely and unattended on Chirikof Island (29,000 acres), and are descendants of a history of failed ranching. Chirikof Island has potential to be a major breeding area for waterfowl and ground/burrow-nesting seabirds. Approximately 200 cattle roam freely and unattended on Wosnesenski Island (7500 acres). Once a village site, homestead, fox ranch and cattle ranch, Wosnesenski Island is now uninhabited and grazing is no longer viewed as compatible with refuge purposes. Cattle removal is controversial and the refuge is currently considering alternatives to managing this issue, consistent with National Environmental Policy Act guidelines. This presentation will describe these two refuge islands, grazing history and impacts, and proposed management alternatives.
Cattle Grazing on Two National Wildlife Refuge Islands in Alaska
Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge

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Alaska Invasive Species Conference
Fairbanks
7 Nov 2013
Cattle grazing on refuge islands is ecologically destructive, economically irrational, and contrary to laws and policy of the USFWS, yet it still occurs on Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge.
Refuge Lands with Grazing

Cattle
Horses
Reindeer/Caribou
Sheep
Bison

≈ 13 islands
Livestock and Game Ranching On Refuge Lands
Free Roaming Cattle

7 islands
4 mixed ownership
3 all-refuge status
The Refuge was not meant to be a BARNYARD!
The Refuge wants its island back.

“Upon the expiration or termination of this permit” . . . "the permittee must also remove any other of his/her property” . . . and . . . “Upon failure to remove any of the above items within the aforesaid period [60 days], they shall become the property of the United States.”
Running cattle on somebody’s land without permission is a kin to STEALIN’
Subpart B—Feral Animals

§ 30.11 Control of feral animals.

(a) Feral animals, including horses, burros, cattle, swine, sheep, goats, reindeer, dogs, and cats, without ownership that have reverted to the wild from a domestic state may be taken by authorized Federal or State personnel or by private persons operating under permit in accordance with applicable provisions of Federal or State law or regulation.
Grazing Impacts

- Soil compaction
- Destruction of plant cover
- Down cutting of streams
- Severe erosion
Soil compaction, loss of ground cover

Plant community changes
Trample nests, disturbance
Active dunes near hovercraft landing. Cattle may contribute to lack of vegetation cover.
Sanak Island sloughing of bluff
Just one more thing. . . If the cattle were feral, unmarked, unattended, trespassing and causing damage, why didn’t you remove them sooner?
Cattle removed from 3 islands.

... and reindeer removed from 1 island.
Simeonof Island Ranch


Foxes eradicated 1994, but ground squirrels remain.
Simeonof Island Sand Dune Changes

1973

1981

1995
Reindeer stocked in 1944
Increased from 29 to 6,000 in 19 years
Lichens eliminated
Population crash in winter 1963

Old polar bear trail

41 years after the reindeer die-off, still no lichen recovery
Two Overgrazed Refuge Islands

Wosnesenski

Chirikof
Wosnesenski Island

7500 acres

4.5 mi
Wosnesenski: Communities

Air Miles
Sand Point 35 mi
King Cove 38 mi
Cold Bay 50 mi
Dutch Harbor 230 mi
Kodiak 385 mi
Homer 480 mi
Anchorage 590 mi
Ranch abandoned by 1978
Chirikof Island

29,000 Acres

Ranch abandoned by 1996
Chirikof: Communities

Air Miles:

- Akhiok (Kodiak Island) 100 mi
- Kodiak City 180 mi
- Homer 310 mi
- Anchorage 430 mi
- Sand Point 190 mi
- Dutch Harbor 450 mi
“Plant removal (overgrazing) on sandy coastal area followed by wind erosion and reduced moisture resulted in “blow out” of 500 acres on northern end of island.” - Stephen Talbot FWS Botanist
“The erosion is intense, some of the most dramatic ever witnessed by members of the 2005 survey crew, and it continues unabated. The scale and severity of this problem are staggering.”

–Saltonstall 2005
“If it continues unabated, the majority of the island’s known prehistoric and early historic settlements will vanish in just a few decades.” – Saltonstall 2005
Typical Ungulate Control Methods

• Fencing – to fence-out of sensitive areas, or rounding up, or to facilitate shooting
• Live animal removal – round up for relocation or slaughter
• Shooting – aerial, from ground
• Sterilization (deer, horses)
Please!
Keep Off The Grass

These are wildlife refuge islands, grazing is incompatible.

Ranches are abandoned, cattle are free-roaming.

Stakeholders and agencies will be consulted.