



Kettle Range

CONSERVATION GROUP

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Feds Must Re-Analyze Impacts of Colville N.F. Cattle Grazing on Endangered Species
Agencies Acknowledge Shoddy Biological Assessments in Response to Litigation Threat

SPOKANE, Wash.—The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [informed](#) three conservation groups this month that in response to their litigation threat, it will conduct a new assessment of the impacts of cattle grazing on endangered species in the Colville National Forest.

In November 2022, The Lands Council, Kettle Range Conservation Group, and Western Watersheds Project [submitted a notice](#) to the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of their intent to sue under the Endangered Species Act. The notice challenged the agencies for their failure to adequately evaluate the impact of a new 10-year permit for the LeClerc Creek grazing allotment on grizzly bear, bull trout, and bull trout critical habitat. In response, the agencies committed to correcting this failure by performing a new assessment of the impact of the permit. The agencies also pledged to include an examination of the impacts on the newly listed whitebark pine.

“The Forest Service has long known that cattle are degrading bull trout habitats on the Colville National Forest but have done little to correct problematic grazing,” said Josh Osher, public policy director for Western Watersheds Project. “It’s time for the federal government to get serious about recovering bull trout, grizzly bears, and other endangered species in northeastern Washington, and we hope the agencies’ commitment to a new analysis will result in stronger protections against damage from cattle.”

The LeClerc Creek allotment spans 23,412 acres in the LeClerc Creek watershed in Pend Oreille County, within an area designated as a grizzly bear recovery zone and containing critical habitat for the bull trout. Grazing has a well-documented impact on riparian areas, adding sediment and pollution to the water, destroying vegetation, and increasing water temperature.

“This is a step in the right direction to address certain areas of the Colville National Forest that are particularly sensitive to cattle grazing,” said Adam Gebauer, the public lands program coordinator for the Lands Council. “Grazing in the LeClerc Creek watershed has degraded water

quality in this crucial bull trout habitat in the Pend Oreille river watershed. The state of this area's habitat is also of incredible cultural importance to local tribes. The Forest Service needs to work with Fish and Wildlife and cattle producers in the region to improve habitat and reduce impacts to endangered species.”

The LeClerc Creek allotment is managed under an Allotment Management Plan from 1982, despite the 1993 designation of the area as a grizzly bear recovery zone, the 1999 listing of the bull trout as a threatened species, the 2010 listing of part of the allotment as critical bull trout habitat, and the 2022 designation of the whitebark pine as a threatened species. In 2018, the Forest Service canceled the process for developing a new management plan for the allotment, after several entities submitted comments indicating that continued grazing in that area would have destructive impacts on bull trout habitat, including the Kalispel Tribe, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Environmental Protection Agency. However, instead of discontinuing grazing, the Forest Service issued a new grazing permit in May 2021 under the 1982 plan.

“In performing this new assessment, I hope the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will examine the science and fulfill its responsibility to protect endangered species,” said Timothy Coleman, director of Kettle Range Conservation Group. “Grazing in these riparian areas reduces streambank grasses and shrubs to bare rock and dirt, leading to pollution, sedimentation and warming of streams that is potentially lethal to bull trout. The agencies’ decision to reinstate consultation under the Endangered Species Act is a signal that it understands its vulnerability to litigation. I hope it is also a signal that it understands that it must take corrective action to protect grizzly bear, trout and whitebark pine.”

Northeast Washington’s remote and rugged forests are critical to the continued survival of numerous rare and imperiled species. The three conservation groups have [pending litigation](#) that challenges the Forest Service’s failure to reduce overall grazing in the Colville National Forest following its determination in 2019 that only 31% of the Forest was capable and suitable for grazing.

The conservation groups are represented by Claire Loeb Davis, from the Washington law firm Animal & Earth Advocates.

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