

# Maritime Refuge Eyeing Invasive Cattle on Two Islands

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is looking for input from the public on how best to deal with about 1,000 head of cattle on two islands in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.

About 200 of the animals are on Wosnesenski Island, between Sand Point and King Cove, and another 800 are on Chirikof Island, southwest of Kodiak. The cattle were first introduced to the islands to provide food by a family on Wosnesenski in 1938, and for fox ranchers on Chirikof in the 1880s. Neither island currently has permanent human residents.

Steve Delehanty is the manager of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, based in Homer. He announced the start of a "scoping" process to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act before the cattle are removed or eradicated.

"Not that they're malicious creatures or anything. We need cattle in the world for sure. But in this case, they're consuming the vegetation, altering the vegetation, trampling, compacting the soil. It causes problems for nesting birds, salmon streams, for archeological sites that get degraded by the trampling and the vegetation removal. So it's isn't really a steady state — it's not that they did something back 100 years ago and now everything is fine. The biological potential of the island is at a low level, and will remain at a low level until we can bring it up through some sort of action we want to consider."

Though the cattle presence far predates wildlife refuges in Alaska, the animals are still considered invasive and not compatible with their environment in the eyes of the federal government.

"Any time we're dealing with a species that doesn't belong on a place, they generally tend to have unintended and undesirable ecological effects. And again you have to remember that Hagemeister along with the two islands we're talking about now, Chirikof and Wosnesenski, Congress set them aside and said "these places are special and should be managed for wildlife," and so we have an obligation to try and make them available and make them places where wildlife can thrive and people can go out and enjoy that wildlife."

Delehanty's reference to Hagemeister Island was an instance in the early 1990s when a large herd of reindeer was to be eradicated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the island near Togiak. It caused quite a bit of controversy and the refuge was forced to allow some of the animals to be rounded up and flown out to join a herd near Nome. The rest were shot.

Delehanty says the scoping process for the Wosnesenski and Chirikof cattle will determine how they are dealt with, though allowing them to remain seems like a long shot:

"We don't have a preferred solution — we have a preferred outcome, which is healthy refuge islands where wildlife can thrive. But by all means, if people want to say the best possible outcome is just leave things as they are now, that is a totally legitimate point of view. And if grazing were to continue, for example, there's law that requires uses like that to be found, to be determined to be compatible with the purposes for which the refuges was created. So as part of this whole planning

process, that is one other thing I need to be looking at is to say, 'Okay, is that an option?' Would that scenario comply with this standard of compatibility with refuge purposes.

The scoping process will include meetings with interested federal, state, and local agencies, federally recognized tribes, stakeholders and the general public.

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