

USFWS Will Hold Open House on Chirikof Cattle

Monday, 06 January 2014

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/1401006.chirikof_cattle.mp3{/audio}

Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be in town this week to hold public meetings about what to do with cattle on remote islands south of Kodiak. Chirikof and Wosnesenski islands have been uninhabited for years, unless you count the herds of cattle that have been roaming the combined 36,500 acres since the 1880s.

The islands are part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and in December, the wildlife service announced plans to remove the cattle, which it said are damaging natural ecosystems and habitat through grazing.

But not everyone thinks the cattle need to be removed. During Thursday's Borough Assembly meeting Lorne White spoke on behalf of the Kodiak Farm Bureau in favor of keeping the cattle on both islands.

"And we would like to request that the assembly either do something in the form of a resolution, or at least make a motion to support an old resolution that you had on Chirikof Island. The Chirikof Island cattle are being threatened again for removal by the federal government, Fish and Wildlife Service. In the past, Resolution 2002-18 was prepared by Assemblymember Turner and the borough assembly took a position that recommended actually that there be a land trade in order to preserve that herd on Chirikof Island."

The Fish and Wildlife Service will hold an open house at the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center tomorrow at 4 p.m. to answer questions about the cattle and discuss different options regarding them. White said he hopes the assembly members attend that, and then take a position on the matter, preferably in favor of preserving those cattle herds. White said the cattle have a lot of historic and genetic reasons for preservation.

"The Russians originally brought that herd onto the island years ago and it has significance for the community culturally. And it's actually important for us in agriculture to have a stock, an animal that came from Siberia that's very unique that survives under awful conditions. Survived there for a couple hundred years. Was there long before there was a state of Alaska, long before there was a Fish and Wildlife Service."

Assemblyman Dave Kaplan said he was told the reason the cattle are being removed was because they are encroaching on the nesting areas for certain bird species.

“But what I thought was that they determined that the critical nesting areas were kind of in the rocks and on the cliffs, and that the cattle are not even really near it.”

White said he believed some folks had been down to the island recently and suggested the cattle were everywhere.

“There’s a lot of questions right now as to how many cattle there really are on the island. I know it’s a good gene pool for all purposes and hearty areas, but I don’t know a lot about it. And there are not a lot of people on this island that have been there, it’s a tough place to go, it’s a long ways to fly. It’s never penciled out for ranchers to try to run that herd, that’s what it really boils down to.”

White said estimates on the number of cattle on both islands range from a few hundred to a thousand, but those are based on surveys done a number of years ago and populations could have increased or decreased since then.