



WASHOE COUNTY

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STAFF REPORT

PARK COMMISSION MEETING DATE: July 7, 2015

DATE: July 6, 2015
TO: Open Space and Regional Park Commission
FROM: Eric Crump, Operations Division Director
THROUGH: Dave Solaro, Director
SUBJECT: Presentation, discussion and possible action on the temporary closure of the multi-use pasture at Rancho San Rafael Regional Park due to severe drought conditions

SUMMARY

This item is a presentation, discussion and possible recommendation on the temporary closure of the multi-use pasture at Rancho San Rafael Regional Park. Due to the severe drought conditions and lack of irrigation water, and in an effort to protect the multi-use pasture for future use, the area has been temporarily closed to all uses with the exception of two pre-scheduled special events occurring in September 2015.

BACKGROUND

The multi-use pasture at Rancho San Rafael Regional Park was historically a grazing and hay pasture and dates back to the original ranch. The ranch was purchased through a bond issue by Washoe County voters in 1979. Washoe County discontinued the grazing of cattle in the early 2000's, but the pasture is still used for hay production today. The pasture is flood irrigated from the Highland Ditch, a diversion of the Truckee River. The ditch typically runs from the mid-May through September. In 2015, the ditch was turned on earlier in anticipation of being turned off early due to drought conditions in the Truckee River watershed. The Highland Ditch is the only source of irrigation for the pasture. The Federal Water Master determines the schedule for all Truckee River diversions.

The multi-use pasture has been identified in the park's 1990 master plan and the subsequent 2002 Rancho San Rafael Regional Park Implementation Plan. Throughout the Implementation Plan, there is reference to preserving the values of the last ranch in Northwest Reno, preserving the visual open space, and all development maps show the pasture as being preserved.

Given Rancho San Rafael Regional Park is a public park, the multi-use pasture is not managed solely for hay production. This is illustrated with the decision to designate the area "off-leash" over 10 years ago. This multi-use has occurred with relatively minor



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conflicts, and has provided the citizens of our community an exceptional place to bring their pets while preserving the character and resource of the park.

The mission of Washoe County Regional Park and Opens Space is to provide exceptional parks, open space and recreational opportunities while preserving our natural, historical and cultural resources. As recreation providers and land managers of our County's public lands, we are responsible with balancing recreational uses while protecting and preserving the public's asset for future generations. It is for this reason that a decision was made to temporarily close the multi-use pasture, for the long-term sustainability of the area. This decision was not taken lightly and was based on best practices for pasture management derived from science and consultation with a host of professional experts. These experts hold undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degrees in various natural resource management fields including many staff with decades of field experience in managing park land.

Though the management of the multi-use pasture is unique in that it is not managed solely as a grazing pasture or a grass hay pasture, the managing principles for protecting and sustaining viable pastures are the same. The protection and survival of the plant crown is most important. The plant crown is where the plant stores its energy in the form of sugars. The best way to protect the plant crown is to limit access and use. References supporting this can be found throughout published pasture management resources.

In anticipation of the closure, signage was placed at the entrances of the pasture noticing people of the upcoming closure and listing the locations of other dog parks within the community. A press release was sent to various media outlets, and the story was covered by a couple of local news channels. An FAQ sheet was also developed (attached), and has been posted available on the County's website.

There will be an impact to the multi-use pasture from the Great Reno Balloon Race, however the Great Reno Balloon Race has committed to Washoe County and has the resources both logistically, and financially to implement measures that will reduce the long-term impacts of the event. The Balloon Race as an event is extremely difficult to relocate and is certainly an economic driver for this region, for those reasons it has been decided to allow the event on the pasture. The mitigation strategy is being developed and may include pre and post watering, a modified traffic/circulation plan for the multi-use pasture, scarifying and reseeding, and fertilization.

Staff did evaluate other options within Rancho San Rafael Park, but none are viable. Trying to irrigate the pasture without the Highland Ditch would require a significant capital outlay just to get water to the area, and then there is the issue of water rights.

Bringing in water trucks isn't a practical option either, as it would require over 250 trips per day from a standard water truck to irrigation properly. Staff did look at designating other areas within the park as off-leash, but could not come up with a workable location.



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The closure of the multi-use pasture is a temporary condition to meet the long-term demands of the area. The decision of when to open the pasture will be made based on several factors including primarily the moisture content of the soil, the health of the pasture grasses and its ability to withstand use.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Open Space and Regional Park Commission support the temporary closure of the multi-use pasture at Rancho San Rafael Regional park due to severe drought conditions, and in an effort to preserve and protect the area for future use.

POSSIBLE MOTION

Should the Commission agree with the staff recommendation, a possible motion would be:

"Move to support the temporary closure of the multi-use pasture at Rancho San Rafael Regional park due to severe drought conditions, and in an effort to preserve and protect the area for future use."