

Addressing Unauthorized Cattle Use on Wosnesenski and Chirikof Islands: Frequently Asked Questions

Who owns the land? Chirikof Island (29,000 acres) is federal land as is almost all of Wosnesenski Island (7500 acres). Both are designated as part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. On Wosnesenski Island 2.4 acres, the site of a former church, is owned by the Orthodox Church of America. The Aleut Corporation has selected, but not yet received title to, a 10.04 acre 14(h)1 site (historic site). The refuge has an explicit legal directive to manage refuge land to benefit native fish and wildlife species.

Are cattle causing damage? Yes. On both islands, the vegetation is shorter than on nearby islands and certain wildlife species we would expect on the islands are either absent or scarce. Both islands contain large patches of bare sand dunes, a result of unauthorized grazing combined with wind erosion. The cattle are particularly damaging to birds which try to nest in the grass or in underground burrows. Salmon streams and wetlands on both islands suffer from trampling, trailing, and nutrient alteration due to the cattle. Archeologists and Alaska Native community members have expressed concerns to refuge staff that the cattle are damaging cultural and historic resources.

What wildlife will benefit if the island habitat is restored? While we can't know for sure what will happen in the future, we expect that grassland nesting birds such as various waterfowl and songbird species will benefit. Seabirds, including jaegers, tufted puffins, and storm petrels should find the island more suitable as nesting habitat once the unauthorized grazing is addressed. . We know that the surrounding marine environment is highly productive and capable of supporting huge numbers of seabirds; the nearby Semidi Islands, with no cattle present, support several million breeding seabirds including both puffins and storm petrels.

Where did the cattle come from? Both Wosnesenski and Chirikof Islands formerly had settlers on the island who brought cattle for milk, meat, and/or business opportunities. When people quit living on the islands, the cattle were left behind. For a time, the federal government granted permits authorizing continued grazing of livestock but no permits have been issued and no grazing fees have been paid on either island for many years.

Are there people or structures on the islands now? Both islands are uninhabited and have been for many years. There are no structures on Wosnesenski, just rubble where a house had been. On Chirikof, the former ranch house is still standing but in bad shape. There are also some small outbuildings in various stages of decay as well as a considerable amount of debris.

How many cattle are there? Nobody knows for sure. Our best estimate is somewhere around 800 cattle on Chirikof Island and 200 cattle on Wosnesenski Island but those numbers are based on surveys done several years ago; the actual cattle population could be higher or lower.

What will you do about the unauthorized cattle? It has not been decided yet. We are beginning a planning process and asking interested people for their ideas. (In government jargon, we will be evaluating the action of ceasing unauthorized cattle use through the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA; this will eventually lead to a draft and then a final document which lays out our preferred alternative.) Developing alternatives is an early step in our planning.

When will the unauthorized cattle grazing stop? We don't know yet. We do know that unauthorized cattle don't belong on a national wildlife refuge. We are in the early stages of planning. Only after a final plan is approved will we take action on the islands.

Who owns the cattle? The issue of cattle ownership will be addressed and clarified during the planning process.

Can I go take cattle from these islands now? The refuge will not authorize anyone to remove cattle until we decide on next steps through this planning effort.

How can I get involved? If you have concerns or ideas on how we should deal with the unauthorized cattle, you may provide comments electronically at fw7_akmaritime@fws.gov or by mail to: Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, 95 Sterling Highway, Suite 1, Homer, Alaska 99603; or by calling 907-235-6546.