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Congress Investigates Deal to Oust Historic Ranching Community at California National Park

A buyout that settled decades of land use conflicts in Point Reyes has come under scrutiny over lack of transparency and environmental impacts.

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Cows eat a mixture of alfalfa, hay and corn at a dairy in Point Reyes Station, Calif., on June 12, 2007. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images



By [Beige Luciano-Adams](#)

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LOS ANGELES—The U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources on Thursday announced it is investigating a controversial [settlement](#) among ranchers, conservationist groups, and the National Park Service that will largely end multi-generational organic dairy and cattle ranching at the Point Reyes National Seashore in Northern California.

Republican members of the committee sent letters to five conservation groups involved in the January settlement determining the future of the national park, citing concerns over a “lack of transparency surrounding the settlement” as well as potential environmental and legal consequences, and requested extensive discovery related to the matter.

“These groups are attacking our Western way of life—and also attacking American agriculture and the people who are actually feeding the country,” committee chairman Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.) told The Epoch Times.

Ranchers who accepted a buyout to leave the park, the committee notes, have publicly expressed hesitation to participate, but were “muzzled” by nondisclosure agreements and pressured to keep quiet by the National Park Service and other officials.

“We’re just wanting justification and explanation and transparency as to why the Department of Interior and these groups push these unnecessary measures in the name of conservation,” Westerman said, suggesting a campaign to force ranchers off the land violates the congressional mandate that founded the park.

“Point Reyes National Seashore was specifically established to protect ranchers and their lands and their livelihoods,” he said.

Unlike many fights over grazing on federal lands in the West, the battle over Point Reyes has pitted environmentalist against environmentalist in one of the most liberal enclaves in the country, and raised questions about sustainable agriculture and the future of conservation.

Ranching on the peninsula, about an hour north of San Francisco, began in the early 1800s, before the founding of the state of California. Congress established the national seashore in 1962, with a mandate

for continued agricultural production, and ranchers have been leasing their lands since.

The abiding vision, they say, was one of balance among agriculture, wilderness, and community.

But in recent decades, conservationist groups filed a series of complaints against the National Park Service, alleging mismanagement and claiming ranching operations posed a threat to wildlife and sensitive habitats within the park, as well as broader biodiversity in the state.

“Point Reyes National Seashore is one of the most biodiverse places in one of the most biodiverse states, and has all of these habitats that have seen a dramatic loss,” said Chance Cutrano, director of programs at the Resource Renewal Institute, one of the groups that sued the National Park Service.



Tule elk graze at Point Reyes National Seashore Elk Preserve in Point Reyes Station, Calif., on April 19, 2015. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

The idea is that restoration of Point Reyes might contribute to a larger-scale restoration statewide, to “stave off the worst of the extinction crisis and biodiversity crisis we’re experiencing,” Cutrano said, noting a third of California’s species are at risk of extinction.

In particular, conservation advocates objected to efforts to cap or cull tule elk herds, a once-endangered species that competed with cattle for food on the park’s vast coastal grasslands during historic droughts.

The settlement agreement was voluntary, but much remains undisclosed about the years-long negotiations. The deal was brokered behind closed doors by the Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit, which reportedly raised \$30 million to \$40 million to buy out 12 of the 14 ranches and dairies, following years of legal battles over the future of wildlife management and agriculture in the park.

The decision rankled locals in a region with deep agricultural heritage and pride, widely known for pioneering organic, humane, and sustainable practices and producing high-quality dairy and meat.

“It’s hard to even find anybody that actually supports this decision,” said Kevin Lunny, a multi-generational rancher who agreed to leave by 2026. “This is in complete and direct opposition to what’s good for the gateway community. On a federal level, the National Park Service is failing here.”

The terms of the settlement also call for the eviction of around 100 ranch subtenants, including many children and some ranch workers who have labored on the land for more than three decades. The Nature Conservancy has also committed to raising \$2.5 million to \$3 million to compensate tenants, while several dozen have joined a complaint against the park.

The National Park Service did not respond to requests for comment from The Epoch Times.

The Nature Conservancy said in a statement Thursday that it had received the letter, is reviewing it, and will respond to the committee. The organization pointed to its long history of partnering with ranchers and farmers, calling them “some of our greatest conservation allies,” and said that it was asked by all of the Point Reyes litigating parties—including the ranchers—to join their mediation as an “honest broker.”

“Our approach has always been non-partisan and non-adversarial, focusing on voluntary resolutions and community engagement. That was just as true in Point Reyes, where the ranchers and other litigants looked to us to help them reach a voluntary resolution that everyone could agree to,” the statement read.

The other recipients include the Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watershed Project, and the Resource Renewal Institute, which sued the National Park Service, and Advocates for the West, which represented them.

All five organizations have until April 24 to respond to the inquiry.

A representative for the Center for Biological Diversity declined to comment; the other organizations did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Facing the prospect of unending litigation, as well as broader industry pressures, ranchers say they had little choice but to accept the terms of the settlement after the Park Service failed to defend its decision to grant them long-term leases.

Citing water issues and other economic pressures, conservationists pushing for the end of ranching on the point argue the ranches would have closed anyway and that the settlement only hastened their departure.

Lunny and others are concerned about the impacts on local food supply and security, with the closures translating to a loss of about 20 percent of Marin County's agriculture, and upending a "critical mass" in the organic sector.

"It's an untenable situation, where we're losing our farms, our food and our communities," said Albert Straus, owner of Straus Family Creamery and a renowned pioneer in sustainable organic production, who sources from several Point Reyes dairies. He argues the closures will impact critical infrastructure that small family farms need to continue producing local organic food.

Conservationists who fought to rewild the park say this is a battle between private commercial interests and public access to federal lands.



Point Reyes North Beach, about 35 miles north of downtown San Francisco. Keegan Billings/The Epoch Times

“There’s so much well-documented damage that the ranching has done out there, from spreading weed to soil erosion to water pollution. I don’t know why a consumer who cares about the environment would want to call that organic or support that,” said Jeff Miller, a senior conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, among the groups that sued the Park Service.

After the settlement was announced in January, the National Park Service updated its general management plan, converting around 16,000 acres of a historic Pastoral Zone into a Scenic Landscape zone—and effectively ending ranching on the peninsula for good.

A ranching family that was not party to the litigation or the settlement has since filed a new complaint against the National Park Service.

Internal Department of Interior emails made public in March by a Freedom of Information Act request and [published](#) on Substack showed National Park Service officials celebrating the settlement as “a major win” for the department, the park, and for conservation.

Westerman, who had not seen the emails, said he would question the ethics of federal employees advocating for something that goes against a law passed by Congress. “Any kind of wrongdoing by administration officials in this matter, we will pursue that,” he said.

The settlement was completed in the twilight of the Biden administration, and many are hoping a second Trump administration, far more sympathetic to the concerns of ranchers and farmers, might intervene.

“We want the park to remain in its use as it was agreed upon,” Westerman said. “And I don’t know when an agency has the authority to come in and usurp a law passed by Congress. It’s the kind of executive overreach that I think has really aggravated Americans across the country.”

The issue remains a divisive one; only Republican members of the bipartisan committee have joined the investigation. In addition to Westerman, Reps. Doug LaMalfa (R-Calif.), Paul Gosar (R-Ariz.), Tom Tiffany (R-Wis.), Mike Ezell (R-Miss.), Mike Collins (R-Ga.) and Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.) signed the letters.

“Rather than understand the [Point Reyes National Seashore] enabling legislation’s purpose of facilitating multiple land uses, the environmental groups chose [to] throw every unsubstantiated preservationist argument at the wall in court and see what stuck,” the letter reads.

The committee points to the fact that federal lands have long been governed by a multiple-use doctrine, and “more importantly, [Point Reyes National Seashore] was specifically established to protect the livelihoods and lands of ranchers in the area while allowing for multiple use.”

Westerman said if the organizations do not respond, the committee may pursue the issue with hearings or subpoenas.

“Usually when we send organizations letters, they respond, and if they don’t, it actually raises more questions on what they’re hiding,” Westerman said. “There’s a lot of ways we can go, but hopefully they’ll just respond.”

CORRECTION: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated the position of The Nature Conservancy. The Epoch Times regrets the error.



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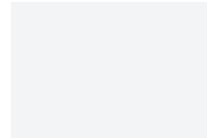
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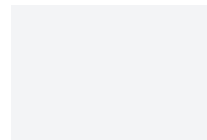
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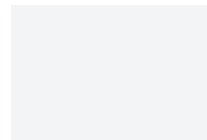
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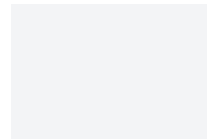
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