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Ecology fines Coulee City ranch for wetlands damage



The King Ranch in the Coulee City area has been fined for damaging protected wetlands both on its property and on nearby state land.

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By CHARLES H. FEATHERSTONE
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COULEE CITY — The Washington State Department of Ecology has fined a Coulee City-area rancher nearly \$268,000 for illegally damaging about two-dozen alkali wetland areas near Park Lake just south of Coulee City.

According to an Ecology press release, King Ranch — which breeds horses and raises cattle — damaged a little more than six acres of wetlands and an additional two acres of wetland buffer by excavating and filling. The ranch owns a patchwork of land near Park Lake in and around parcels owned by the federal government, according to data available from the Grant County Assessor’s website.

“They had damaged it by grading in and filling the wetlands buffer on a combination of private, state and federal land,” said Ecology spokesperson Stephanie May.

The department said in its press release 23 damaged wetlands were found, 18 of them on state-owned land, two of them on federal land, and three on land owned by King Ranch. As part of the fine, Ecology has also asked the ranch to restore the three wetlands on its property and provide access for restoration crews to the other affected wetlands.

Ecology spokesperson Brooke Beeler said alkali wetlands are relatively rare in Eastern Washington and are formed when water drains into a pool and has nowhere else to go, leading to a buildup of salt and other minerals. As they evaporate and refill over time, Beeler said an alkali pool can be distinguished by a white ring — similar to hard water stains — that forms on exposed soil and rocks.

“They form in the shrub steppe over time,” Beeler said. “We don’t know a ton about these particular wetlands because of their rareness.”

Beeler said the damage was reported to Ecology after being discovered by someone hiking on public land.

King Ranch did not respond to requests from the Columbia Basin Herald for comment in time for publication.

According to the press release, the ranch has until mid-March to pay the fine or appeal the department’s ruling to the state’s Pollution Control Hearings Board.

Charles H. Featherstone can be reached at cfeatherstone@columbiabasinherald.com.

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