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Editorial: Cracking down at the Dish

After decades of little action to protect foothills environment, Stanford plans to limit use and ban dogs

Stanford University has developed a new concern over the condition of the foothills popular among hikers, joggers and dog owners, announcing last week that it would take major steps to halt further damage and to restore habitat.

The timing of Stanford's actions, coming in the middle of county review of its land use plans for the next decade, raises questions about the university's motivation. Stanford officials insist, however, that the new policies are consistent with the plan and that they should be commended, not criticized, for taking the initiative to address a long-developing problem.

The new rules, which will be in full force by September, will continue to allow access to joggers and hikers but will largely restrict them to the paved service roads that form a "loop" past the Dish from Junipero Serra Boulevard and from Piers Lane near Alpine Road. Use of the many rogue trails that crisscross the foothills and provide access from other points will be prohibited.

The change that will stir the most controversy is the ban on all dogs, since the Dish lands are one of the few large open space areas where dogs are allowed. The university says even leashed dogs will be prohibited, since enforcement of leash rules is difficult and the mere presence of dogs creates the illusion of predators for wildlife in the area.

After decades of Stanford-sanctioned, high-impact use of the foothills by cattle, horses, Stanford community members and the general public, what gives rise to this commendable concern over habitat protection and restoration?

Apart from Stanford biologists' concern over the increasing use of the foothills and the progressive erosion and other intrusion on the lands, the university faces a peculiar dilemma relating to its plans to build substantial new housing on campus.

The housing is proposed for sites near Lake Lagunita that are habitat for the tiger salamander, a species that the federal government considers a candidate for listing as threatened or endangered. In order to win approval for its new housing sites, Stanford will be required by federal law to establish new habitat for the tiger salamander, which in the winter breeds in Lagunita and in the summer seeks safe places like gopher burrows.

Stanford's only option for complying with the mitigation required to build the housing is to turn some of the Dish area into a new conservation district, restoring part of the lands as replacement habitat that includes new vernal pools.

The probable good news coming out of all this is that it almost ensures that the close-in foothills will receive permanent protection from future development, something Stanford has been unwilling to do on its own initiative.

The bad news is for dog owners, and on that score we think Stanford must reconsider. There is no evidence that a leashed dog at the Dish poses any significant problem. Banning leashed dogs from the Dish loop will merely displace them to other, more sensitive areas like the Arastradero Preserve or further back into Stanford's foothills.

Stanford should establish a trial period during which dog owners can demonstrate their ability to self-

police a leash requirement with the knowledge that failing to do so will result in banning all dogs.

The university could have taken steps a long time ago to get people off of dirt trails and raise user consciousness about environmental protection of the foothills, but better late than never. Here's one case where the need for more housing will result in the restoration and protection of some valued open space.