

King Ranch Update: On September 25, 2026 a commissioner of the Washington Court of Appeals ordered a stay in the Washington Department of Ecology's case against the King Ranch.

In 2023, the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) alleged that Wade and Teresa King, owners of the multigenerational King Ranch, illegally excavated multiple wetlands and imposed a \$267,450 civil penalty and restoration requirements on the ranch. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which oversees revenue-generating state trust lands, subsequently canceled leases held by the Kings. The cancellations left the Kings unable to produce on portions of their own private property, which is unfenced and interwoven with state and federal grazing leases.

The dispute between the Kings and Ecology quickly raised questions about the definition of "wetlands" and which agencies have the authority to establish, administer, and enforce applicable rules. Ecology maintains that the Kings did not obtain the required authorization before conducting the excavations. The Kings, however, contend that they were performing routine maintenance on stock-watering ponds, as they have done for approximately 70 years to provide water for livestock and wildlife. The Kings also argue that the stock ponds do not meet the requirements for classification as wetlands.

The Kings were therefore faced with a choice: pay the penalty and comply with Ecology's orders or appeal the agency's action.

The Kings chose to appeal, bringing the matter before the Pollution Control Hearings Board (PCHB). By statute, the PCHB reviews a broad range of actions taken by Ecology, including civil penalties and administrative orders. The PCHB is a quasi-judicial, three-member board appointed by the governor. It conducts administrative hearings, considers testimony and evidence, and issues decisions based on the applicable legal standards. Unlike a traditional civil trial, however, PCHB proceedings do not provide for a jury trial.

That issue led the Kings to file a lawsuit in Grant County Superior Court asserting their right to a jury trial. In August 2026, a superior court judge dismissed that lawsuit.

As the matter proceeded before the PCHB, the dispute increasingly centered not only on the underlying disagreement over wetlands and stock ponds, but also on the Kings' claim that they are entitled to have their case heard by a jury of their peers under both the Washington and United States constitutions.

According to the Pacific Legal Foundation (PLF), which represents the King Ranch, Washington Court of Appeals Commissioner Hailey L. Landrus found that the Kings would suffer "irreparable" harm by being required to proceed before the PCHB. PLF characterizes the board as an "unconstitutional factfinder." Following the ruling, PLF attorney Allison Daniel said, "Today the commissioner recognized that being forced through an unconstitutional proceeding is itself an injury. The Kings deserve to defend their ranch before a jury of their peers."

Ecology's penalty and administrative case against the Kings has not been resolved. The case is currently stayed while the Court of Appeals considers whether the dismissal of the Kings' lawsuit asserting a right to a jury trial was proper.

If the Kings ultimately prevail on their constitutional claims, the case could have broader implications for the use of administrative proceedings in Washington and the circumstances under which a government agency may adjudicate alleged violations without a jury. Wade King has described the issue as "immoral."