By Barbara France
Staff Writer

One of the fastest growing dog sports in the Western part of the country is competitive cow dogs. Dog enthusiasts of all kinds will gather at the Wilson Ranch in Alturas Thursday-Sunday, Aug. 9-12, to watch cow dogs show their stuff at the second annual World Championship Cow Dog Challenge.

The challenge is sponsored by the Western Cow Dog Association, which "promotes and celebrates the working stock dog, whose origin on Western ranches allows us to support ranching and its Western heritage."

The world's best cattle dogs and their handlers will vie for the title of World Champion Cow Dog. The competition is limited to 100 dogs. More than $32,000 in cash and prizes will be shared by winners, one of the largest purses ever for a stock dog trial.

Competition is expected to begin about 8:30 a.m. all four days. The first three days, Aug. 9-11 are the preliminary rounds. The finals will be held Aug. 12.

Dogs will be timed while moving five cows through a series of obstacles into pens with handlers on horseback. Teams will earn points for moving cows through obstacles. Tie breakers will be based on the lowest time. Runs will take between five and nine minutes, depending on the obstacle and distance.

The handlers must be mounted on horseback. A handler's horse may not break out of a walk during competition. Any other gait more than one horse length will result in a no score for that obstacle.

Each year, working cow dog trials are held in many states around the country. The competitive format at the trials is designed to show the skills needed by actual working dogs performing everyday at the home ranch.

The first annual challenge was March 2000 in Reno and drew 2,000 spectators. The challenge was moved this year so the cow dogs could show their intelligence and talents on an actual working ranch.

The cows used in the competition have been raised on the ranch and they are used to being moved by dogs and respect the dogs.

The Wilson Ranch owned by Bill and Carolyn Wilson is home to 1,500 mother cows. The Wilsons have a 3,000-acre cow-calf and yearling operation, where they raise about 2,000 tons of hay annually.

Along with the competition there will be vendors, a trade show, Calcutta and a junior handlers challenge for handlers age 18 and younger.

Information about the Cow Dog Challenge is available by contacting the Wilsons at 233-5370 or the Western Cow dog Association at 894-3347; e-mail at info@westerncowdogassociation.org or their web site at www.westerncowdogassociation.org