

AESO/SE
02-21-05-I-0749

August 24, 2005

Mr. Gene Blankenbaker
Forest Supervisor
Tonto National Forest
2324 East McDowell Road
Phoenix, Arizona, 85006

Dear Mr. Blankenbaker:

Thank you for your correspondence of July 6, 2005. This letter documents our review of the Hicks-Pikes Peak Grazing Allotment, in Gila County, in compliance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.). Your letter concluded that the proposed project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) and its proposed critical habitat, and razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*) and its designated critical habitat. You also concluded that the project would not jeopardize the experimental, non-essential population of Colorado pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus lucius*). We concur with your determinations and provide our rationale below. You also concluded there would be no effect to the Arizona agave (*Agave arizonica*), Arizona hedgehog cactus (*Echinocereus triglochidiatus var. arizonicus*), bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum cactorum*), loach minnow (*Tiaroga cobitis*), spikedace (*Meda fulgida*), and Gila topminnow (*Poeciliopsis occidentalis occidentalis*). Species with no effect determinations do not require review from the Fish and Wildlife Service, and are not addressed further.

BACKGROUND

This project is to evaluate proposed cattle grazing and allotment management plan for the Hicks-Pikes Peak Allotment (67,223 acres), Globe Ranger District, Tonto National Forest, for a 10-year period of time. The allotment ranges in elevation from 2,200 feet at the Salt River to 6,600 feet near the Apache Peaks. The Salt River upstream of Roosevelt Lake (Redmond Flat/Horseshoe Bend) forms the northern boundary of the allotment and Pinal Creek partially forms the western boundary. Permitted number of cattle could range from 25 to 200 head of adult cattle or a combination of adult cattle and yearlings (300 to 2400 animal unit months) in a yearlong deferred rest rotation type season. Two grazing permits will be issued, one for the Hicks and one for the Pikes Peak Allotment. Permitted grazing for this allotment translates to an 81 percent

reduction from historical permitted use, and a 70 percent reduction from actual use over the last 10 years. Large pastures (Shute Springs and Ortega) that include the Salt River and a significant portion of adjacent upland habitat (totaling 23,176 acres of the allotment) will be closed to grazing for the duration of the 10-year permit. Upland pastures will be grazed at 30 to 40 percent use, and will be monitored to stay within proposed limits. A complete description of the proposed action is found in your July 6, 2005, biological evaluation and assessment.

DETERMINATION OF EFFECTS

We concur with your “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” determinations for the following reasons:

Southwestern willow flycatcher and its proposed critical habitat

- As a result of removing grazing from the Salt River, it is unlikely that the proposed project will directly adversely effect any riparian vegetation used by southwestern willow flycatchers.
- As a result of removing about 35 percent (23,176 of 67,223 acres) of the upland acres immediately adjacent to the floodplain from grazing, and grazing conservatively in the remaining upland and riparian areas, any watershed effects to downstream occupied flycatcher habitat are insignificant and discountable.
- As a result of grazing occurring greater than 2 miles from any future habitat on the Salt River over the term of the permit, currently occupied habitat along Pinal Creek or Roosevelt Lake, and due to influence local private ranchers on cowbird populations at Pinal Creek, the effect of this grazing allotment on parasitism to flycatchers is believed to be insignificant and discountable.
- The removal of grazing from the Salt River floodplain, and from about 35 percent of the upland acres immediately adjacent to the floodplain, along with the conservative use of remaining grazed acres, will eliminate any direct or indirect effects to the proposed primary constituent elements of flycatcher critical habitat. Therefore, any effects to critical habitat are believed to be insignificant and discountable.

Razorback sucker and its critical habitat

- It is extremely unlikely that the species currently occurs in the action area of the proposed project based on lack of stocking of razorback suckers in the action area since 1993 and the lack of any confirmed records for survey information, habitat availability, etc. Therefore, any potential direct or indirect effects on the species are discountable.

- The removal of grazing from the Salt River floodplain, and from about 35 percent of the upland acres immediately adjacent to the floodplain, along with the conservative use of remaining grazed acres will eliminate any direct effects, and therefore any indirect effects to the proposed primary constituent elements of flycatcher critical habitat will be unlikely. Therefore, any effects to critical habitat are believed to be insignificant and discountable.

Colorado pikeminnow

- Reintroduced pikeminnow are designated as a nonessential experimental population under the Endangered Species Act, which allows for greater management flexibility than would be possible if the fish were classified as fully endangered. Because of their status as an experimental, non-essential population, fish are treated as though they are proposed for listing for section 7 consultation purposes. By definition, a “nonessential experimental population” is not essential to the continued existence of the species. Therefore, no proposed actions impacting a population so designated could lead to a jeopardy determination for the entire species.

Thank you for your continued coordination. No further section 7 consultation is required for this project at this time. Should project plans change, or if information on the distribution or abundance of listed species or critical habitat becomes available, this determination may need to be reconsidered. We also encourage you to coordinate the review of this project with the Arizona Game and Fish Department. In all future correspondence on this project, please refer to consultation number 02-21-05-I-0749. Should you require further assistance or if you have any questions, please contact Greg Beatty (x247) or Debra Bills (x239).

Sincerely,

/s/ Steven L. Spangle
Field Supervisor

cc: District Ranger, Globe Ranger District, Tonto National Forest, Globe, AZ
Chief, Habitat Branch, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, AZ