



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Arizona Ecological Services Office
2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103
Phoenix, Arizona 85021-4951
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In reply refer to:

AESO/SE

22410-2005-I-0450-R001

September 10, 2013

Mr. Gary Hanna, District Ranger
Tonto National Forest
Mesa Ranger District
5140 East Ingram Street
Mesa, Arizona 85205

Re: Sunflower Grazing Allotment Management Plan, Mesa Ranger District

Dear Mr. Hanna:

Thank you for your correspondence of June 18, 2013, received in our office June 20, 2013. This letter documents our review of the Sunflower Grazing Allotment Management Plan (AMP) on the Mesa Ranger District, Tonto National Forest (TNF), in Maricopa County, Arizona in compliance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.). The biological assessment (BA) for this (AMP) addresses grazing on approximately 158,000 acres on the Mesa Ranger District, as well as the use of prescribed fire along the eastern portion of the allotment to enhance forage production and water yield while moving these vegetation types closer to the desired Fire Regime Condition Class. Your letter requested our concurrence with your determination that the proposed action on the Sunflower Allotment, may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) (MSO) and its designated critical habitat. You also requested conservation measures for the Sonoran Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*).

In addition, two federally listed species occur within the project area: Gila topminnow (*Poeciliopsis occidentalis occidentalis*) and the Desert pupfish (*Cyprinodon macularius*). Gila topminnow and Desert pupfish are known to occur in two locations; Mud and Hidden Water Springs on the Sunflower Allotment. Neither of the sites are within the prescribed fire analysis area or watershed. Mud Spring is located roughly 3 miles west of the westernmost portion of the proposed burn block, and Hidden Water Spring is approximately 7 miles south of the proposed burn block. Given these distances, you concluded that no effects from prescribed fire are anticipated for the fishes or their habitat. Additionally, the TNF has concluded that the Desert pupfish and Gila topminnow are still covered by our February 28, 2002, biological opinion (BO) (99-F-300) and our May 19, 2006 BO (05-F-450) which addresses effects of livestock grazing (K. Kessler, pers. comm., July 25, 2013). Therefore, these two fishes are not addressed further in

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this correspondence. We concur with your “may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect” determination for MSO and its critical habitat and provide our rationales below.

Background

The Sunflower Allotment encompasses approximately 158,000 acres northeast of Fountain Hills, Arizona extending from the Salt River and Saguaro Lake up along Four Peaks, ending just south of Sunflower, Arizona. The allotment lies on both sides of State Route 87, (SR 87) and is accessed by numerous forest roads, and is divided into four units: Cline, Cottonwood, Desert, and Dos. The allotment contains portions of Management Areas 3D (Four Peaks Wilderness), 3F (Lower Salt River Recreation Area), and 3I (General Management Area). A portion of the Heber-Reno sheep driveway runs through the Dos S Unit. Vegetation types include Sonoran desert scrub, mesquite bosque, semi-desert grassland, interior chaparral, and pockets of Ponderosa pine at upper elevations. There is also riparian vegetation around springs and along portions of Sycamore Creek, Mesquite Wash, Mud Spring, Log Corral Canyon, Picadilla Creek, Cottonwood Creek, Tehanos Spring, Alder Creek, Boulder Creek, Cane Spring Canyon, and their associated tributaries. The eastern portion of the allotment was burned in the 2005 Edge Complex Wildfire and smaller fires originating from State Route 87 are common.

Proposed Action

The Mesa Ranger District proposes to authorize livestock grazing on the Sunflower Allotment in a manner that is consistent with the Forest Plan standards, guidelines and objectives, and maintains or improves natural resources. This action will analyze existing environmental conditions and the expected effects of continued livestock grazing on the Sunflower Allotment. Livestock will be grazed as cow/calf herds using a deferred-rest rotational system in Dos S, Cline, and Cottonwood Units and seasonal grazing on a portion of Dos S Unit and all of Desert Unit. An upper limit of 500 head (cows, bulls) with carryover of natural increase (offspring) is proposed. Grazing would begin with a single reduced herd and, as herd size increases through carryover of offspring, multiple herds could be formed to better distribute livestock across units. According to the BA, planned use is described as conservative (30-40% of current year’s growth on herbaceous material, 50% or less on browse material). With this use, about one-half of the good and fair forage value plants would show signs of use by livestock, little evidence of concentrated livestock trailing would be seen across the landscape as a whole, and most of the accessible range would show some use. These guidelines are intended to demonstrate proper distribution of livestock across the landscape rather than concentration in specific areas.

In addition to livestock grazing, this proposed action includes prescribed burning techniques within an analysis area of approximately 18,300 acres. The proposed burn area includes the eastern boundary of the Pine Creek and Picadilla pastures of the Dos S Unit and the entirety of the Cline Unit, excluding the Four Peaks Wilderness. Although the analysis area includes roughly 18,300 acres, those acres suited for treatment within that block, will likely be less. Additionally, only 1,500 to 3,000 acres would be treated within any given year based on Forest targets, available personnel, pasture rotation schedule, fuel moisture, and weather. This action is needed to enhance forage production and water yield while moving these vegetation types closer to the Fire Regime Condition Class.

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Mexican Spotted Owl and Critical Habitat

There are two protected activity centers (PACs) designated within the adjacent Tonto Basin RD (K. Kessler, pers. comm. August 27, 2013). PACs are established around owl sites and are intended to protect and maintain occupied owl habitat. Most recently, the Buck Basin PAC was monitored in 2012 and was determined still to be occupied (audio response). The Four Peaks PAC was last mentioned in 1994, and had a pair with 3 young. The recovery (restricted) and designated critical habitat lies within Critical Habitat Unit (CHU) Basin and Range West 4 (BRW-4). Approximately 34,000 acres of suitable habitat lie within the Mesa RD, specifically along the eastern allotment boundary. However, of the 34,000 designated acres, roughly 4,000 acres or less, primarily along Four Peaks, contains the key habitat components of recovery/restricted habitat and the primary constituent elements related to forest structure, maintenance of adequate prey species and canyon habitat. The following conservation measures will be implemented as part of the project to minimize effects to MSO and their habitat:

- To minimize disturbance (smoke) to resident owls, unless non-breeding is inferred or confirmed that year per the accepted survey protocol, prescribed fire treatments would occur during the non-breeding season (September 1 – February 28).
- Livestock grazing and management in the action area would maintain adequate levels of residual plant cover to maintain fruits, seeds, and allow plant regeneration.
- The proposed action will manage the Sunflower Allotment under a rest-rotation grazing strategy that provides annual seasonal rest. This strategy allows for plant growth and reproduction in many areas of the allotment each year. In addition to non-grazing rest built into the proposed action, conservative use standards set for the allotment will also provide for residual vegetation.

Determination of Effects

We concur with your determination that the proposed action may affect, but will not likely adversely affect, the MSO or its critical habitat. We base our concurrence on the following:

1. No human disturbance or other activities associated with livestock grazing or prescribed burning will occur during the breeding season (March 1 through August 30), unless non-breeding is inferred or confirmed that year per the accepted survey protocol.
2. The key habitat components of MSO protected and restricted habitat, and the primary constituent elements of MSO critical habitat will be protected. Livestock grazing and management activities will provide for levels that provide the woody and herbaceous vegetation necessary for prey species habitat, the residual biomass that will support prescribed natural and ignited fires, and the regeneration of riparian trees.
3. In owl habitat, forage utilization will be maintained at conservative levels (30-50%) and livestock grazing will occur through a rotational management system which will allow for plant growth and recovery.

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Sonoran Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*)

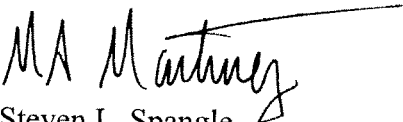
The Sonoran desert tortoise was added to the list of candidate species in December 2010. The species occurs primarily in the southern portions of the allotment, specifically the Picadilla, Otero, and Adams pastures of the Dos S Unit, and the western portion of the Cline Unit. The Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) had been collecting data on the Sugarloaf study site since 1991. This area combined with the Four Peaks study site, immediately east of (SR87) is approximately 2,150 acres. This area incorporates the mark-recapture survey area, and the home ranges of 13 juvenile desert tortoises that are currently tracked using radio-telemetry.

Sonoran Desert Tortoise Conservation Measures

- Complete a pre-construction survey and monitor as needed to ensure that individual tortoises are not present within the action area.
- Avoid disturbing key habitat features to retain Sonoran desert tortoise cover and reduce human disturbance to tortoises that may be present.
- Use existing travel routes, trails or channel crossings for all vehicle travel. Creating new routes will cause soil and vegetation disturbance as well as increase human disturbance to Sonoran Desert Tortoise.
- Reduce soil and vegetation disturbance when conducting ranch activities.
- Ensure the area cleared for maintenance will not exceed 25 feet in width, the average equipment width to minimize vegetation and soil disturbance.
- When practicable, livestock will be moved using established trails, roads, travel routes, and channel crossings.

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, these determinations may need to be reconsidered. We encourage you to continue coordinating with our office as monitoring data become available. We also encourage you to coordinate the review of this project with the AGFD. In all future correspondence on this project, please refer to the consultation number (02-21-05-I-0450-R001). Should you require further assistance or if you have any questions, please contact Reggie Perkins (ext. 208) or Debra Bills (ext. 239).

Sincerely,


for Steven L. Spangle
Field Supervisor

Mr. Gary Hanna, District Ranger

cc (electronic copy):

Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, AZ

Shaula Hedwall, Wildlife Biologist, Fish and Wildlife Service, Flagstaff, AZ

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From: Kessler, Kelly M -FS
Sent: Tuesday, September 10, 2013 1:05 PM
To: Cathy Gordon (cathy_gordon@fws.gov)
Cc: Reggie Perkins (reggie_perkins@fws.gov); Martinez, Mike (mike_martinez@fws.gov); Hanna, Gary -FS; Cress, Debbie C -FS; Nelson, Kathy -FS
Subject: FW: Sunflower Grazing Allotment Management Plan-see attached

Thank you very much!

Kelly M. Kessler
Range/Wildlife Staff
Mesa Ranger District
5140 E. Ingram St.
Mesa, AZ 85205
480.610.3305

“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other”.
Mother Teresa

From: Gordon, Cathy [mailto:cathy_gordon@fws.gov]
Sent: Tuesday, September 10, 2013 12:01 PM
To: Kessler, Kelly M -FS; pep@azgfd.gov; shaula_hedwall@fws.gov; Reggie Perkins; Mike Martinez; Steve Spangle
Subject: Sunflower Grazing Allotment Management Plan-see attached

this is your electronic copy of the letter that was signed and mailed today to Mr. Gary Hanna, District Ranger, Mesa Ranger District. If you have any questions, please contact Reggie Perkins at 602-242-0210 x208.

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Cathy Gordon, Office Assistant
Fish and Wildlife Service/Phoenix, AZ
602-242-0210
work hours 8:30-6:00 pm