

GRAZING PERMIT RENEWALS
FOR
CHILDS, COYOTE FLAT AND WHY GRAZING ALLOTMENTS
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

No. AZ-020-2003-0060

1.0 Introduction/Purpose for and Need for Action

1.1 Purpose of and Need for Action

On December 6, 2001, the Phoenix Field Office issued the Draft Ajo Block Rangeland Health Evaluation. Through the evaluation process, monitoring data was collected on a variety of vegetative and soil characteristics. These data were analyzed to determine if the current uses were consistent with the Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health. Based on the analysis of the monitoring data, recommendations were developed to ensure livestock use in the Ajo Block does not contribute to the non-attainment of the Standards for Rangeland Health. The purpose of the proposed action is to issue term permits for the Childs, Coyote Flat, and Why allotments, that are consistent with the Lower Gila South RMP/EIS and Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Administration.

1.2 Background

The current term permits for the three allotments are as follows:

<u>Allotment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Season of Use</u>	<u>%Public Land</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
Childs	320	cows	03/01 02/28	99	3802

<u>Allotment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Season of Use</u>	<u>%Public Land</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
Coyote Flat	40	cows	03/01 02/28	95	456

<u>Allotment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Season of Use</u>	<u>%Public Land</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
Why	38	cows	03/01 02/28	100	456

Livestock grazing may be authorized upon application to utilize an ephemeral forage crop pursuant to federal grazing regulations.

1.3 Location

The action area for this environmental assessment (EA) encompasses approximately 120,706 acres of public land in Pima County and is comprised of three allotments: Childs, Coyote Flat and Why. The northern boundary is the Barry Goldwater Air Force Range, approximately 8 miles north of Ajo. The southern boundary is the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (OPCNM) approximately 11 miles south of Ajo. The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (CPNWR) borders the Ajo block on the west, and the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation borders on the east.

1.4 Conformance with Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Land Use Plan (LUP):

Name of Plans:

- Lower Gila South Final Resource Management Plan (RMP)/ Environmental Impact Statement (EIS); dated August, 1985
- Lower South Range Program Summary, January, 5 1989
- Statewide Plan Amendment of Land Use Plans in Arizona for Implementation of Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Administration, December 1996

The Proposed Action is in compliance with the Lower Gila South RMP and the Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Administration.

The following decisions are from the Lower Gila South RMP/EIS:

Page 10. Perennial Ephemeral Allotments Categorization: Maintain Childs allotment, Custodial Coyote Flat and Why allotments.

Page 14. All livestock waters will provide safe, usable water for wildlife.

Page 14. Improvement and maintenance of the rangeland will be accomplished through the construction of new rangeland developments (see Table 1) and through livestock adjustments, if needed.

Page 48 under Impacts on Rangeland Management, paragraph 1 states in part: " The results of rangeland monitoring would help determine if grazing adjustments would be needed to met key species' physiological requirements or if downward trends have reversed on allotments showing downward trends in rangeland condition. All adjustments would be approved only when compatible with other resources."

2.0 Alternative Including the Proposed Action

2.1 Proposed Action

The Proposed Action would include issuing 10-year grazing permits for each allotment with the following terms and conditions:

<u>Allotment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Season of Use</u>	<u>%Public Land</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
Childs	317	cows	03/01 02/28	99	3802

Stocking rate may be adjusted when actual use increases, as indicated by monitoring data.

The coral at the Sikort Chuapo Wash will not be used during the breeding season for cactus ferruginous pygmy-owls (January 1 to June 30).

All construction or maintenance of range improvements within suitable pygmy-owl habitat will be preceded by 2 years of surveys, or will be conducted outside of the pygmy-owl breeding period (January 1 to June 30).

Construct a pronghorn friendly fence between the BMGR and Childs allotments west of SR 85.

Actual use information will be submitted within 15 days of the end of the grazing year (February 28) in accordance with 43 CFR 4130.3-2(d).

<u>Allotment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Season of Use</u>	<u>%Public Land</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
Coyote Flat	11	cows	03/01 02/28	95	132

Coyote Flat and Why allotments will be operated as one allotment. Summer grazing (05/01-9/15) will only be authorized in the Coyote Flat pasture on even years, and in the Why pasture on odd numbered years. These grazing management practices do not apply to ephemeral authorizations.

Actual use information will be submitted within 15 days of the end of the grazing year (February 28) in accordance with 43 CFR 4130.3-2(d).

<u>Allotment</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Kind</u>	<u>Season of Use</u>	<u>%Public Land</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
Why	11	cows	03/01 02/28	100	132

Coyote Flat and Why allotments will be operated as one allotment. Summer grazing (05/01-9/15) will only be authorized in the Coyote Flat pasture on even years, and in the Why pasture on odd numbered years. These grazing management practices do not apply to ephemeral authorizations.

Actual use information will be submitted within 15 days of the end of the grazing year (February 28) in accordance with 43 CFR 4130.3-2(d).

The proposed action also includes the following conservation measures identified during the section 7 consultation with the USFWS. The conservation measures apply as appropriate to the portions of the Coyote Flats, Childs, and Why allotments west of State Route 85. The conservation measures are included as terms and conditions of each grazing permit:

Ensure all range improvements are functional/operational and meet BLM standards. Projects that cannot become operational through normal maintenance will be abandoned. Ensure water is available for wildlife at all water developments, and escape ramps are installed on all water troughs.

BLM will only authorize ephemeral grazing on the Coyote Flats, Why, and Childs allotments in accordance with ephemeral use criteria in the Arizona Rangelands Standards and Guidelines and if both of the following conditions are met:

1. In years where ephemeral plant production is geographically limited, ephemeral forage on the Ajo allotments is not an important part of ephemeral forage available to pronghorn, either in terms of forage quality and acreage of green up.
2. The U.S. population must be above 100 and increasing.

Prior to authorizing ephemeral use, the BLM will work with the USFWS and Arizona Game and Fish Department in evaluating ephemeral conditions throughout the range of the pronghorn.

2.2 No Action Alternative

The No Action Alternative would be to issue the 10-year term permits on the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments with the current terms and conditions.

2.3 No Grazing Alternative

The no grazing alternative would remove all livestock grazing from the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments.

3.0 Affected Environment

3.1 Background

The action area for this EA encompasses approximately 120,706 acres of public land in Pima County and is comprised of three allotments Coyote Flat, Why, and Childs. The Coyote Flat and Why allotments are located within the 40-2 MLRA, Middle Sonoran Desert Scrub. The Saucedo Mountains in the Childs allotment are within the 40-1 MLRA, Upper Sonoran Desert Scrub. A detailed description of the affected environment is presented in the Ajo Block Rangeland Health Evaluation.

3.2 Affected Elements

Critical elements that do not occur on the Coyote Flat, Why, and Childs allotments are Floodplains, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wetlands/Riparian Zones, and Wilderness. Critical elements that are not affected by the proposed action are Air Quality, Environmental Justice, Hazardous/Solid Waste and Water Quality.

Critical Elements:

a. Cultural and Paleontological Resources

A total of 12 archeological surveys have been completed in the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments. Nine sites have been recorded on the Childs allotment. Only one of the nine sites is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The one site is the historic Tucson, and Gila Bend Railroad. The other eight sites are prehistoric. Six of the eight sites are eligible for the NRHP: a village site, two campsites, one food processing site, one sherd scatter, and one rock-shelter site. Two chipped stone scatters have been recorded and are not eligible.

Two sites on the Coyote Flat and Why allotments have been recorded. One of the two sites is eligible for the NRHP. The sites can be characterized as follows:

The eligible site is a prehistoric/protohistoric site with roasting pits and rock features associated with food processing activities. The site has 25 features with associated artifacts, and is in good condition.

The other site is the in-use alignment of State Route 85 and its associated feature, Gunsight Wash Bridge. The highway has been modified extensively since its construction in 1939 to 1945, and is not considered eligible. The bridge was constructed in 1943 and was formally determined ineligible in the Arizona Bridge Inventory.

On the Coyote Flat and Why allotments, surveys performed on the tanks resulted in the discovery of a small prehistoric site. This site is located near one of the tanks and is exhibiting damage from erosion

b. Native American Concerns

There are no known sites that have been identified as properties of traditional importance by Native American Tribes or other groups

c. Threatened and Endangered Species

There are four Federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species in the action area. The endangered Sonoran pronghorn (*Antilocarpa americana sonoriensis*) current range occurs west of State Route 85. The current range for the Sonoran pronghorn includes the Why allotment, and a portion of Coyote Flat and Childs allotments. To date no Sonoran pronghorn observations have been document on the Coyote Flat, Why or Childs allotments.

No roost sites for the endangered lesser long-nosed bats (*Leptonycteris curasoae yerbabuena*) have been documented on public lands in the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments. However suitable foraging habitat in the form of medium to high-density

saguaro stands only occur on the Childs allotment. No suitable foraging habitat has been identified on the Coyote Flat and Why allotments.

Endangered cactus ferruginous pygmy owls (*Glaucidium brasilianum cactorum*) have been documented on the Childs allotment. The Coyote Flat and Why allotments are within the historic distribution of cactus ferruginous pygmy owls, but no suitable habitat has been identified on these allotments.

Acuna valley pineapple cactus (*Echinomastus erectocentrus* var. *acunensis*), a candidate species, occurs in the eastern portions of the Childs allotment.

The Phoenix Field Office completed a biological evaluation of the proposal to issue new 10 year grazing permits for the four grazing allotments in the Ajo block. The biological evaluation was submitted to the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service in April 2002, to comply with Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act, 1973 as amended. The BLM received a biological opinion (BO) (2-21-94-F-192R2) from the USFWS on September 30, 2002.

d. Noxious Weeds

Red brome and Mediterranean grass have become naturalized over most of Arizona. Salt cedar, African (Sahara) mustard, buffleggrass, garden rocket and fountain grass are scattered throughout the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments. Spiny cocklebur and malta star thistle are scattered throughout Maricopa and Pima counties and may be present in the area.

Non-Critical Elements

a. Vegetation

Shrubs dominate the vegetation in this area. Grass species that occur in the valley bottoms include big galleta, three-awns, fluffgrass and bush muhly. Slim tridens, sand dropseed and plains bistleggrass can occur in conjunction with areas that receive slightly higher rainfall. Dominate shrubs in the area include creosote bush, mesquite, triangle leaf and white bursage, false mesquite, range and white ratany, ironwood, blue and foothills palo verde, wolfberry, brittlebush and acacia. Saguaro, organ pipe cactus, jumping (chainfruit) cholla, teddy bear cholla and other succulent/cactus species are present where habitat conditions are appropriate.

b. Soils

Based on the Soil Survey of Gila Bend-Ajo Area, Arizona there are four general soils in the action area: Mohall-Dateland; Gunsight-Rillito-Denure, Cherioni-Hyder-Cipriano; and Quilotosa-Rock Outcrop-Momoli.

c. Wildlife

The three allotments are located in portions of Arizona Game and Fish Departments hunt unit's 40A and 40B. Big game species in this area include desert bighorn sheep, desert mule deer, javelina and mountain lions. Approximately 67,400 acres of desert bighorn sheep habitat occurs on the Childs allotment. Gambel's quail and dove are the primary bird species hunted in this area. Small game and fur-bearing species present in the area include ringtail cats, skunks, bobcats, foxes and coyotes.

Portions of all three allotments contain BLM categorized desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) habitat. There are approximately 23,065 acres of category I, and 46,310 acres of category II on the Childs allotment. Category II tortoise habitat occurs on the Coyote Flat and Why allotments, approximately 2,953 and 1,080 acres respectfully.

4.0 Environmental Consequences

4.1 Proposed Action

Critical Elements:

a. Cultural and Paleontological Resources

Surveys were completed on the Coyote Flat and Why allotments around the livestock water tanks. The survey resulted in the discovery of a small prehistoric site. This site is located near one of the tanks and is exhibiting damage from erosion. It is not clear if livestock is having an impact to the site, but PFO's range staff will work with the cultural resources staff to evaluate and determine the appropriate action to take.

For the remainder of these allotments, the environmental setting and information from previous surveys indicate that archeological sites are expected to exist in the area, but not in high density. There are no known historic properties, or areas likely to contain historic properties that coincide with areas of concentrated, ground-disturbing impacts from livestock grazing.

On the Childs allotment, areas in which livestock habitually congregate are on two large privately owned parcels. The livestock do not congregate where archeological sites are known to occur. The environmental setting, and information for surrounding areas indicate that archeological sites are expected to exist in the area, but not in high density.

There are no known historic properties or area likely to contain historic properties that coincide with areas of concentrated, ground-disturbing impacts from livestock grazing.

An inventory for cultural and paleontological resources will be conducted prior to construction of any new range improvement project or major modification to any existing project. If any cultural or paleontological sites are identified the project would be modified or abandoned. There would be no impacts due to construction or modification of any range improvement project. Adjusting the season-of-use, implementing the livestock management practices and construction of the range improvement projects would modify livestock use patterns from previous years. With the change in livestock use patterns, there is some potential to disturb cultural or paleontological resources previously undisturbed by livestock. However, there would be no effort to concentrate livestock in these areas, therefore, any impacts would be minimal.

b. Native American Concerns

There are no known sites that have been identified as properties of traditional importance by Native American Tribes or other groups.

c. Threatened and Endangered Species

The BO address potential impacts to Sonoran pronghorn, lesser long-nose bat, and Cactus ferruginous pygmy owls. The finding for Sonoran pronghorn was that the effects of the proposed action and ongoing BLM actions, and the cumulative effects are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Sonoran pronghorn. No critical habitat has been designated therefore none will be affected.

The USFWS concurred with BLM finding that the proposed action may affect, but will not likely adversely affect, the endangered lesser long-nose bat.

The USFWS concluded in the BO that the proposed action and ongoing BLM action, and the cumulative effects are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Cactus ferruginous pygmy owl. This finding was based on the following:

1. BLM had committed to limit utilization rates to 30 percent. If the target utilization rate is exceeded livestock numbers will be reduced.
2. Although the Sikort Chuapo Wash corral exists within 0.25 mile of a previously occupied pygmy-owl site, the BLM has committed to not using the corral during the breeding season for the owl. BLM does not anticipate renewed use of these facilities in the immediate future, the BLM will conduct two years of pygmy-owl surveys prior to any future activities, and may reinstate consultation depending on the results of the surveys.
3. All construction or maintenance of range improvements within suitable pygmy-owl habitat will be preceded by 2 years of surveys, or will be conducted outside of the pygmy-owl breeding period.

The implementation of the conservation measure in the BO, the USFWS did not anticipate any "Incidental Take" of Sonoran pronghorn or Cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl.

d. Noxious Weeds

No known noxious weeds have been identified on any of the three allotments. Other invasive, non-native species are present in the area. These invasive, non-native species would continue to spread by wind dispersion of seeds and human activities such as off-road vehicles and undocumented immigrant use. The proposed action would not significantly increase the spread of these species; therefore the impact to noxious weeds would be minimal.

Non-Critical Elements

a. Vegetation

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined overall vegetative composition on the Childs's Coyote Flat and Why allotments are similar to comparable sites that have not been grazed during the past 15-20 years. In a few cases the plants species considered desirable by livestock may occur in lower frequency than on un-grazed areas. The proposed action would allow for growing season rest to help improve range condition on the Coyote Flat and Why allotments, which is consistent with the objectives of the Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management, and the Lower Gila South RMP. The proposed action would impact vegetation; however, the impacts will be within the allowable uses described in the evaluation. No significant impacts are anticipated for the proposed action.

b. Soils

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined soil surface density is slightly higher in some areas that receive considerable livestock use than in areas that have not been grazed during the past 15-20 years. The proposed action would help reduce the number of livestock concentration areas through increased management and help improve the overall health of the ecosystem, which is consistent with the Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management. There is some potential that the proposed action would impact soils in the area. However, the proposed action would implement changes in the grazing system that would be beneficial and would result in minimal effects to soils.

c. Wildlife

Through the evaluation process, not significant species-specific issues were identified on

the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments. On the Childs allotments overall objective were being met. Due to the low stocking rate utilization data were not collected.

Implementing the proposed action should result in benefits to wildlife species. Reducing the number of livestock and setting utilization levels on key forage will reduce potential conflicts between livestock and wildlife. No significant impacts are anticipated from implemented the proposed action on desert tortoise, mule deer, javelina and bighorn sheep habitats.

4.2 No Action

Critical Elements:

a. Cultural and Paleontological Resources

Under the current grazing practices, impacts to sites would be minimal.

b. Native American Concerns

There are no known sites that have been identified as properties of traditional importance by Native American Tribes or other groups. No impacts are anticipated from the No Action alternative.

c. Threatened and Endangered Species

Under this alternative, the BLM would not be in compliance with Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act, 1973, as amended. The BLM would have to reinitiate Section 7 consultation on the affects of livestock grazing on threatened or endangered species.

d. Noxious Weeds

No known noxious weeds have been identified on the three allotments. Other invasive non-native species are present in the area. These invasive, non-native species would continue to spread by wind dispersion of seeds and human activities such as off-road vehicles and undocumented immigrant use. The proposed action would not significantly increase to the spread of these species; therefore the impact to noxious weeds would be minimal.

Non-Critical Elements

a. Vegetation

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined that overall vegetative composition on the three allotments is similar to comparable sites that have not been

grazed during the past 15-20 years. In a few cases on the allotments plants species considered desirable by livestock may occur in lower amounts than on un-grazed areas. This alternative would not allow for growing season rest to help improve range condition on the Coyote Flat and Why allotments, and conditions would remain unchanged.

b. Soils

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined that soil surface density is slightly higher in some areas that receive considerable livestock use than areas that have not been grazed during the past 15-20 years. The no action alternative would not help reduce the number of livestock concentration areas though increased management and help improve the overall health of the ecosystem and conditions would remain unchanged.

c. Wildlife

BLM would not be in conformance rangeland health standards. Objectives for the Coyote Flat and Why allotments that were identified as not being met are important to maintaining healthy ecological condition. Maintaining and improving resource condition is important to maintaining habitat for a range of wildlife species. This alternative would not result in increasing perennial grasses, or maintenance canopy cover, shrub composition and improving herbaceous component that are important to wildlife species. Therefore, objectives set in the rangeland health evaluation will not be met.

4.3 No Grazing

Critical Elements:

a. Cultural and Paleontological Resources

No impacts to cultural resources are anticipated under this alternative. .

b. Native American Concerns

No impacts are anticipated under this alternative

c. Threatened and Endangered Species

No impacts to threatened or endangered species would occur under this alternative. The BLM would not be required to implement the conservation measures included in the BO.

d. Noxious Weeds

No known noxious weeds have been identified on the three allotments. Other invasive non-native species are present on the three allotments. In the absence of livestock grazing these invasive, non-native species would continue to spread by wind dispersion of seeds and human activities such as off-road vehicles and undocumented immigrant use. The impact to noxious weeds will be minimal.

Non-Critical Elements

a. Vegetation

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined overall vegetative composition on the three allotments is similar to comparable sites that have not been grazed during the past 15-20 years. In a few cases plants species considered desirable by livestock may occur in lower amounts than on un-grazed areas. The no grazing alternative would allow for complete vegetative rest from cattle grazing, which would result in similar vegetative conditions to other un-grazed areas. There is some potential for the no grazing alternative to impact vegetation in the area, but this impact would be beneficial. However, this alternative is not consistent with the Lower Gila South RMP.

b. Soils

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined soil surface density is slightly higher in some areas of the allotments that receive considerable livestock use than areas that have not been grazed during the past 15-20 years. The no grazing alternative would remove all livestock concentration areas, however recreation and undocumented immigrant use would still contribute to soil surface compaction. There is some potential for the no grazing alternative to impact soils in the area, but this impact would be beneficial. However, this alternative is not consistent with the Lower Gila South RMP.

c. Wildlife

The no grazing alternative should result in beneficial impacts to wildlife species. No competition for forage would result between livestock and wildlife. This alternative should result in increasing perennial grasses, and maintenance canopy cover, shrub composition and improving herbaceous component that is important to wildlife species. Therefore, objectives set in the rangeland health evaluation should be met.

4.4 Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions

Recreation and undocumented immigrant use will continue to occur on the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments. The BLM does not have any proposed actions planned on the three grazing allotments.

4.5 Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impact analysis is to evaluate impacts on the environment that result from the incremental impact of an action when added to other past, present and future actions. Other actions in around the Childs, Coyote Flat and Why allotments include: Military activity on Yuma Proving Grounds and Barry M. Goldwater Range; recreation use; livestock grazing; undocumented immigrant use; U.S. Borer Patrol activities; mining; residential development; agricultural development and transportation/utility corridors.

Through the allotment evaluation process it was determined that livestock grazing, as currently authorized, is having some negative impacts overall to the natural environment. The proposed action would help reduce these negative impacts. Based on this analysis, the impacts from the proposed action and the incremental impacts from the other past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions would not have a significant impact on the natural environment.

5.0 Consultation

Philip Cooley- Natural Resource Specialist (Range, Noxious Weeds, Soils)

Elroy Masters- Wildlife Biologist (Wildlife, T&E species)

Cheryl Blanchard- Archaeologist (Native American Concerns, Cultural and Paleontological Resources)