



# Decision Memo

## Seventy-Six Ranch Project # 2

USDA Forest Service  
Tonto National Forest  
Tonto Basin Ranger District  
Gila, Arizona

The Seventy-Six Ranch Project #2 on Tonto Basin Ranger District is located at Seventy-Six Grazing Allotment, near the Forest Service Road #1387, approximately 6 air miles North from Punkin Center (See map at the end of this document).

### Project Background

The Seventy-Six livestock grazing allotment located on the Tonto Basin Ranger District is permitted for 305 adult cattle yearlong and 213 yearlings seasonally with an Allotment Management Plan signed in 1987. The original allotment management plan was to use a Holistic Resource Management Plan across the entire allotment in order to maintain or improve resource conditions on the Seventy-Six Allotment. This management plan acknowledged that additional problems and conflicts both known and unknown exists and therefor provided flexibility as well as a backup management method should the plan not succeed. Due to a lack of water and the understanding and higher importance placed on Tonto Creek, the allotment has been following the backup deferred rest management plan and running at lower livestock numbers for at least the past decade. One of the issues identified in the 1987 AMP and continues to be an issue is the lack of reliable water besides Tonto Creek. In 2001 a decision excluded livestock grazing from Tonto Creek through the construction of a barbed wire fence. With increased recreational conflicts near Tonto Creek, and a lack of dependable water available in the uplands next to Tonto Creek, livestock have recently been getting into the Tonto Creek enclosure.

### Project Purpose

The project was designed in conformance with the 2023 Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan (land management plan's) desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines.

Desired Conditions: (4) Livestock management and range improvements sustain or improve other resources.

Standards: (1) Livestock use in and around riparian areas will be evaluated on an allotment-specific basis. Design elements (e.g., deferment, herding, and fencing) will be implemented where needed.

Guidelines: (1) Range improvements should be maintained to provide their intended function and extend the useful life of the improvement. Range improvements should be removed or decommissioned when no longer needed.

The purpose of this project is to protect Tonto Creek by increasing water sources in the uplands above Tonto Creek so cattle are less likely to seek out the water in Tonto Creek which is currently excluded from livestock grazing. There is a need to provide additional livestock watering sites on the Seventy-Six grazing allotment to ensure an adequate rest rotation in compliance with current direction.

## Decision

I have decided to allow for the construction of a new water pipeline that connects to a new storage tank and two troughs. The pipeline will pump water out of Tonto Creek that is water wheeled from upstream where the livestock operator has their private property and will pump water from their private well into Tonto Creek in the same quantities that they remove. Access to the project and maintenance will be by foot or horseback only.

During development of the proposed action, information was collected about forest resources within the project area. My decision is designed to avoid and/or minimize impacts to these resources, and comply with other laws, regulation, policy, and the land management plan. This project would incorporate best management practices and includes the following for resource protection:

- Initiate a management method that meets animal husbandry requirements of livestock and provides proper stocking and vegetative management.
- Provide structural improvements for management of livestock and range resources.

## Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Proposed Actions

My assessment is that this proposal falls within the actions listed in *36 CFR 220.6 - Categorical exclusions* that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. This category is found in *36 CFR 220.6(e)(9)*. This category of action(s) is applicable because the project involves minor modifications and additions to management practices for range allotments.

I have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances associated with this project that would preclude the use of this category. This determination is based on the absence or the negligible level of adverse effects on the following resource conditions:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species** – Vehicles are not to be used within the floodplain of Tonto Creek. This is to avoid impacts to designated Critical Habitat for Northern Gartersnake, Narrow-headed Gartersnake, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and Spikedace as well as suitable habitat for Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Woundfin.

Two areas of concerns about the planned water use for this project for two reasons: 1) The proposed action does not monitor the amount of groundwater pumped up from the well on private land and discharged into Tonto Creek. This may mean less water is pumped into Tonto Creek than is extracted which may impact aquatic species of conservation concern in the project area. 2) Near-surface groundwater pumping from within the floodplain of Tonto Creek may negatively impact the amount of surface water present, especially during drier months and/or periods of drought. This may impact aquatic species of conservation concern in the project area.

- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** – In addition to mitigations outlined in the Soils section and monitoring water use with a meter to make sure exact amounts of water are equally pumped and withdrawn from Tonto Creek, the following BMPs are recommended: WatUses-3 during development and maintenance of tank/troughs and development/use of access road minimize disturbance to riparian area and streambanks and erosion and sedimentation to extent practicable; minimize streambank alteration and



excavation activity within the streambed for water drafting. Fac-2 Install and maintain suitable stormwater and erosion control measures on access roads.

- c. **Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** – The project is outside of wilderness, wilderness study areas, and National Recreation areas, and therefore no further discussion is warranted.
- d. **Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas** – This project is outside any inventoried roadless areas.
- e. **Research natural areas** – This project is outside of research natural areas, and there no discussion is warranted.
- f. **American Indian religious or cultural sites; and archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – Tonto Basin Ranger District staff plan to allow several improvements to the Seventy-Six Ranch parcel east of Tonto Creek. Because this is a priority project and the Tonto Basin archaeologist position has been vacant, part of the project – the storage tank placement via helicopter on a hand-leveled area and initial laying of ~ 0.10 miles of aboveground survey before the signing of this Inventory Standards and Accounting, with the authorization of the District Ranger. The pipeline will be connected to a pump that pumps water out of Tonto Creek, The amount of water removed from Tonto Creek at this location will be monitored so an equal amount of water can be pumped from the private landowner's well and placed into Tonto Creek upstream, for replenishment purposes. Ensure that sites 06-3274, 06-3275, and 06-3276 are avoided by all project activities, including overland driving. To avoid site 06-3274, the pipeline should be kept in its current position north of the pasture division fence in the Cottonwood pasture.

## Public Involvement

On October 12, 2023, the project was posted on PALS and then on October 27 it was posted on SOPA to complete Public Involvement.

## Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

*The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 104-33, as amended)* requires the U.S. Forest Service to provide for biological diversity on National Forest Service lands consistent with overall multiple-use objectives and to maintain viable wildlife populations in the planning area.

I have determined that this project complies with the 2023 Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan (land management plan). The project was designed in conformance with the land management plan's desired conditions, standards, and guidelines, and other federal and state law, policy, and direction applicable to the resources present in the Tonto National Forest. This determination is based on the absence or the negligible level of adverse effects on the following resource conditions:

- a) Forest Plan identified Species of Conservation Concern. No further discussion of this is necessary.
- b) Forest Plan identified Riparian Management Zones (RMZ).
- c) Forest Plan identified Recommended Wilderness Areas and Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers. No further discussion of this is necessary.



- d) Forest Plan identified recommended research natural areas and recommended botanical areas. No further discussion of this is necessary.

Implementation of this decision will not violate any Federal, State, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

**Implementation Date**

This project is not subject to administrative review and can be implemented immediately as detailed in this decision.

**Contact**

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Eric Hoskins, Rangeland Management Specialist, Tonto Basin Ranger District, 28097 Highway 188, Roosevelt, AZ, 85545, 480-435-5563.

	5/14/28	
Jeremy Plain	Date	District Ranger

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# Appendix A



