

DECISION NOTICE

and

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

for the

A BAR DRAW ALLOTMENT

Santa Cruz County, Arizona
Sierra Vista Ranger District
Coronado National Forest
USDA Forest Service

A. INTRODUCTION

An Environmental Assessment (EA) that discloses the effects of authorizing grazing on the A Bar Draw (A-Draw) Allotment is available for public review at the Sierra Vista Ranger District Office in Hereford, Arizona. The EA analyzes whether or not to authorize grazing on the allotment, and how to continue grazing while maintaining other resource values, uses and needs in the area.

The A-Draw Allotment lies in Management Area 4 as defined in the Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and is located within all or portions of T. 23 S., R. 18 E., Sections 7-10, 15-18, and 20-22, in Santa Cruz County, Arizona.

The requirement for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis of grazing on this allotment, and the concern for Forest resource condition, threatened, endangered and sensitive (TE&S) species, wildlife food and habitat needs, and watershed condition precipitated the development of the A-Draw Allotment Environmental Assessment.

B. DECISION AND RATIONAL

Based on the analysis and evaluation described in the assessment, it is my decision to implement **Alternative B**, identified as the Proposed Action Alternative in the EA, with the following changes: In the Apache Pasture a temporary electric fence, or other means deemed necessary by district range personnel, may be used to exclude cattle from the west 1/3 of the pasture for a period of time to allow it to recover from past heavy use and drought. Cattle will be allowed back into that area when soil covered by persistent litter has been restored to at least 17%. The Proposed Action will consist of issuing a new 10 year term grazing permit for 142 head with an existing Memorandum of Understanding to allow for partial non-use of the permit until appropriate stocking under the new management plan can be determined. Grazing management will consist of a deferred/rest-rotation system that incorporates the adjacent private land. The construction or extension of 3 pipelines, drilling of a well, and mechanical control of manzanita where it is encroaching into the plains grassland vegetation type are projects authorized under this decision.

When compared to the other alternatives, this alternative will best meet the multiple use objectives for the Management of Forest lands, which include improving rangeland resources on the A-Draw Allotment, consistent with Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, retaining the legitimate commercial use of livestock on Forest lands, providing for the protection of TE&S species, and other species and their habitat, and improving compliance with NEPA and related laws. The improved vegetative conditions will lead to an improvement in watershed condition and water quality.

All practicable means have been employed to avoid and/or minimize environmental harm while providing for sustainable livestock grazing. Specific monitoring activities will include annual range inspections with visits to key areas in pastures where past grazing practices have caused reason for concern. Areas that contain habitat for plants and animals that require special management for survival and reproduction will also be monitored. This will include establishment of photo points to monitor change over time, and performance of range trend and utilization monitoring.

C. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

Consultation and public involvement on the Environmental Assessment of Permit Issuance for the A-Draw Allotment was sought in 1998. A scoping letter was sent to interested individuals and organizations (public contact list in Chapter 4 of the EA) on March 6, 1998 to present the proposal by the Sierra Vista Ranger district to authorize grazing on the A-Draw Allotment with a new Allotment Management Plan (AMP). One field trip was conducted on April 29, 1998. The EA was made available for public review on August 4, 1998, and copies were sent to those individuals and organization who responded to the scoping document. Thirty letters were received in response to the scoping document and EA. Issues identified during the scoping process include brush encroachment, impaired soil conditions, cover for wildlife, water availability to wildlife, viability of ranching, long term management, and improvement construction interfering with other Forest uses. Other issues were brought up that are not within the scope of this decision. They are documented in Appendix B of the EA.

The involvement of individuals and organizations in this project is documented in Chapter 4 of the EA. Comments on the EA and scoping documents are documented in Appendix B and in the Summary of Comments, attached. All comments received throughout the analysis were considered in this decision. Some comments, though noteworthy, were outside the scope of this decision.

D. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The alternatives considered in detail were **Alternative A** (no grazing), **Alternative B** (proposed action), and **Alternative C**, current terms and conditions (no change). No alternatives were considered and eliminated.

Alternative A

This alternative would consist of removing all domestic livestock from the A-Draw Allotment. There would be no further construction of improvements. Those improvements contributing to resource improvement or enhancement, such as water developments used by wildlife would be maintained only if special funding is allocated to do so. Where necessary, maintenance of allotment boundary fences would be reassigned to adjacent neighboring permittees who still hold grazing permits, with the understanding that all livestock are to be kept off the closed allotment. Interior fences would need to be removed so they do not pose a hazard to horseback riders and hikers due to lack of maintenance. All roads that have been maintained in the past for use by the permittee would be closed. If funding allows, a monitoring program would be established to address the other uses within the allotment.

Alternative B (Proposed Action)

This alternative would authorize grazing on the A-Draw Allotment for another 10 years and implement an allotment management plan (AMP). A permit for 142 head of cattle year long would be issued. A deferred rest rotation grazing schedule would be implemented. The livestock would be run in a combination cow-calf and yearling operation. Utilization would be limited to a level that would sustain range and watershed health and provide for wildlife habitat. Three pipelines would be constructed or extended to improve water availability and livestock distribution. Range improvements would include drilling a well in the Apache Pasture, reconstruction of the existing corrals at the corner of the Gertrudis, Lower Forest, and Upper Forest pastures, reconstruction of the Middle corrals, location and development of a mountain spring; and mechanical control of manzanita, as funding permits. Monitoring techniques will be described in the monitoring plan and will measure such things as utilization, condition and trend of vegetation, and soil condition. Permitted numbers would not change for now because little data exists on which to base a change in numbers. An existing non-use agreement would allow flexibility in stocking while the plan is implemented. Before this agreement expires a capacity analysis will be done based on the new management plan and the permit adjusted accordingly.

Alternative C

This alternative would implement a management plan that would continue the present management on the allotment without the construction of new improvements. The livestock rotation would be similar to that described in **Alternative B**, but livestock distribution would not be as effective without additional water developments. Permitted numbers would remain at 142 cattle year long for a ten year term starting in 1997, with a Memorandum of Understanding for partial non-use for the first 5 years. The capacity would be evaluated prior to the expiration of that agreement.

E. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

The Proposed Action is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's long term goals and objectives that relate to grazing in Management Area 4. This direction can be found pages 10, 35-40, 61-66, 72-73, and 116 of the Forest Plan. The A-Draw grazing permit and Annual Operating Plan will be designed to conform with Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, and incorporate appropriate guidelines for management of TE&S species, and other species, as directed by the District Biologist, Forest Biologist, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and will incorporate recommendations by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, where appropriate. The Forest Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) provisions will be included in part three of the grazing permit and discussed with the permittee at the annual meetings.

The Biological Assessment and Evaluation (BA&E), completed by the District Wildlife Biologist, and other plant and wildlife specialists, is included in the project record for this analysis. It determined the proposed action may affect, would be likely adversely affect the Sonora tiger salamander. The finding for the lesser longnosed bat, and the Gila topminnow was "may affect, not likely to adversely affect". The BA&E also determined that the proposed action will not affect 14 other endangered species that may be found in the area. The USFWS has concurred with the findings of "no effect" and "not likely to adversely affect", and has determined that this action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Sonora tiger salamander (Cons. # 2-22-99-F-016). The terms and conditions from the Biological Opinion on the Sonora tiger salamander will be incorporated into the Allotment Management Plan (AMP). A cultural resource clearance has been completed with concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Officer.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

A. Summary of Environmental Assessment:

The following discussion summarizes key portions of the EA which is available upon request from the District Ranger, USDA Forest Service, Sierra Vista Ranger District, 5990 S. Hwy. 92, Hereford, Arizona 85615 (520-378-0311)

Key Issues: Seven issues were identified from the scoping comments that needed further analysis before a decision could be made. These issues define the scope of environmental concerns that were addressed in the EA, Chapter 1, pages 1-4.

1. **Brush encroachment and fire:** Manzanita is encroaching into some of the grasslands on the allotment. Resource experts agree that fire is an important, but missing, component in this ecosystem and needs to be restored. The brush encroachment situation can be largely attributed to interruption of the fire regime. Fine fuels must be available to support prescribed or natural fires.
2. **Impaired soil conditions:** Portions of the grassland dominated mesas have been determined to be in impaired soil condition due to lack of vegetative cover and litter accumulation, particularly in the west side of the Apache Pasture (Lefevre, 1998).
3. **Cover for wildlife:** The allotment is inhabited by some species, such as pronghorn and Mearns' quail, that require grass cover for fawning and/or hiding cover.
4. **Water availability to wildlife:** Some drinkers are not accessible to small animals. Water should be provided to wildlife along the planned pipelines.
5. **Viability of ranching:** Ranching has been identified as a crucial force in maintaining the open grasslands in the private portions of the San Rafael Valley. Many livestock operations in the area must be able to maintain a Forest grazing permit to remain economically viable.
6. **Long term management:** The proposed action needs to provide for long term grazing management.
7. **Construction of range improvements:** Surface installed pipelines may interfere with multiple use and may increase utilization in areas already heavily grazed.

Alternatives considered and impacts: the alternatives include a "no change" alternative and two action alternatives that respond to the need for action on issues. Chapter 2 (pages 5-7) of the EA contains a complete discussion of alternatives.

Alternative A (no grazing)

- Maximum fine fuel loads to carry fire.
- Most rapid transition from impaired to satisfactory soil conditions.
- Water improvements not maintained and/or removed.

- Ranching operation entirely dependent on private land.
- Forest plan direction for recreation and uses other than grazing will guide management
- No new improvements.

Alternative B (preferred alternative)

- Flexibility to allow fuel build up for future prescribed burns.
Possible mechanical manzanita control.
 - Transition from impaired to satisfactory soil conditions within five years.
 - All drinkers made accessible to wildlife with optional installation of separate wildlife drinkers.
 - Private land and forest allotment managed together to provide maximum flexibility.
 - Long term goals and objectives with management plan that is reviewed annually and adjusted based on monitoring.
 - UV and damage resistant high density polyethylene pipe installation based on sound engineering principles, buried in roads or other areas where necessary.
Storage tanks screened from view as much as possible.
Improvements mainly financed by permittee.
- Alternative C (no change)
 - Flexibility to allow fuel build up for future prescribed burns but no mechanical control of manzanita.
 - Transition from impaired to satisfactory soil conditions within five years.
 - Existing drinkers made accessible to wildlife.
 - Higher grazing pressure on private land than Alternative B due to water limitations on forest.
 - Management plan based on current management.
 - No new improvements.

G. INTENDED ACTION

In this Environmental Assessment the agency's intended action is **Alternative B**, with the addition of temporary fencing in Apache pasture and the soil cover requirements described in Part B. This alternative provides for needed grazing management, wildlife habitat and restoration of soils to satisfactory condition. Alternative B will help maintain ranching as a viable use of federal land in the area of the San Rafael Valley, in conjunction with other uses.

H. SIGNIFICANCE FINDINGS

Context: This project is a site specific action that, by itself, does not have international, national, region wide or statewide importance. The discussion of the significance criteria that follow applies to the intended action and is within the context of local importance in the area associated with the Sierra Vista Ranger District.

Intensity: The following discussion is organized around the 10 Significance Criteria described in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations (40 CFR 1508.27).

Many effects, both beneficial and adverse, and their significance, have been discussed for the alternatives considered in detail. Short and long term impacts were lessened or eliminated through alternative design and mitigation measures. None of the adverse effects were determined to be significant, singularly or in combination. The Environmental Assessment contains a complete discussion of the effects.

1. Public safety will be minimally affected by the proposal. Public health will be positively affected with the proposal meeting established water quality standards.
2. This project will not affect unique characteristics of the geographical area. There are no historic sites, parklands, wetlands, floodplains, prime farmlands, or wild and scenic rivers identified within the project area.
3. The activities associated with this proposal will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The effects of the proposed activities have been revealed, discussed with the public and the alternatives have been designed and mitigated to address the various issues raised. While livestock grazing on federal land is currently a volatile issue, this proposal is not highly controversial within the context of the National Environmental Policy Act.
4. This proposal does not include highly uncertain or unknown risks.
5. A decision to issue the grazing permit does not establish any future precedent for other actions that may have a significant effect. The grazing permit will be evaluated through the NEPA process every 10 years to ensure that the level of impact is not exceeding the level of significance.
6. Cumulative effects for both wildlife and watershed issues were considered in the Environmental Assessment. The effects of all activities were considered under all resource areas. There are no significant cumulative effects, singularly or in combination, associated with this proposal.
7. This proposal will not have any adverse effect on any inventoried and/or potentially eligible National Historic Site or on any scientific cultural resources. Cultural resource surveys will be made prior to ground disturbing activities and concurrence obtained from the State Historic Preservation Officer.
8. The BA&E lists 57 TE&S species that do or could occur on this allotment. The USFWS concurs with the findings in the BA&E, and has determined the proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Sonora tiger salamander. The terms and conditions of the June 30, 1999, Biological Opinion for the Sonora tiger salamander will be incorporated into the Allotment Management Plan.
9. This proposal is in compliance with all federal, state and local law requirements.

I. IMPLEMENTATION

This decision will not be implemented sooner than five business days following the close of the appeal filing period established in the Notice of Decision published in the **Sierra Vista Herald**. If an appeal is filed, implementation will not begin sooner than 15 calendar days following a final decision on the appeal.

H. APPEAL RIGHTS

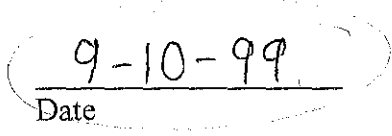
This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.7. A notice of appeal must be in writing and clearly state that it is a notice of appeal being filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7. Appeals must be filed with the Regional Forester, Southwestern Region, 517 Gold SW, Albuquerque, NM 87102-0084 within 45 days of the date of the legal notice of this decision in the Sierra Vista Herald.

The livestock grazing permittee for the A Bar Draw allotment may elect to appeal this decision under 36 CFR 251.82. The permittee must elect which regulation to use; the decision cannot be appealed twice. If the permittee decides to appeal the decision under 36 CFR 251.82, the Notice of appeal must be in writing and clearly state that it is a Notice of Appeal being filed pursuant to 36 CFR 251.82. The Appeal must be postmarked or received (in the case of hand delivery) by the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of the date of this decision. The Appeal Deciding Officer is Forest Supervisor John McGee, Coronado National Forest, 300 W. Congress Ave, Tucson, AZ 84701. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 251.90.

J. INFORMATION CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Laura Dupee, Range & Watershed Staff, Sierra Vista Ranger District, 5990 S. Hwy. 92, Hereford, Arizona 85615 (520-378-0311).


RANDALL A. SMITH
Acting District Ranger


Date