

New
Dec.
18

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Management of the Baseline and Horsesprings Allotments

Clifton Ranger District
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests
USDA Forest Service
Greenlee County, Arizona

An environmental assessment that discusses the proposed Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for the Baseline and Horsesprings Allotment has been completed.

Decision and Rationale

It is my decision to approve development of an Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for livestock use on the Baseline/Horsesprings Allotment, Clifton Ranger District, Greenlee County, Arizona. Concurrently with AMP development, I will modify the Term Grazing permit for variable numbers and class of livestock as follows: Cow/calf 0 to 100 head, Yearlings 190 to 405 head, not to exceed 3019 Animal Unit Months in total. Season of use for 242 days (8 months) between the time period of September 1 and May 30 annually. The AMP will address both range improvements and the grazing program needed to achieve objectives and provide for livestock production. At full development, that grazing program will use a seven pasture, seasonal deferred rotation schedule designed to maximize rest for plant re-growth while optimizing grazing by livestock in most dormant growth seasons of forage plants.

Once this decision becomes final, the Term permit will be modified for the Baseline/Horsesprings Allotment, for the season of use and numbers as described in the above paragraph, implementing Alternative D, as described in the environmental assessment. The number of livestock will change as described above (not to exceed capacity as determined in the analysis), season of use, range facilities to be constructed, establish utilization standards and monitoring needs, and incorporate all Forest Plan standard and guidelines as part of the permit, including applicable changes from Amendment 6.

In concert with planned livestock grazing and rest, it is also my decision to use several other tools to address key resource issues and achieve various objectives for reaching goals established for this allotment. These tools include the use of small watershed stabilization structures such as Gabion baskets, straw bale check dams, slash and seeding as appropriate, in areas where active erosion is occurring that may need additional assistance to speed recovery faster than planned rest and livestock impacts may provide.

When compared to all other alternatives in the environmental assessment that evaluated future livestock management, the proposed action (Alternative D) provides the broadest and best approach to meet goals for Forest users, permittees, and residents of Greenlee County and other surrounding regions.

This alternative supports the best direction to achieve satisfactory riparian conditions associated with Eagle Creek, address land capacity to support livestock production, enhance or protect federally and sensitively managed wildlife and fish species, arrest and improve declining or static soil productivity, watersheds and water quality, and contribute to the stability of the social and economic well-being of Greenlee County as well as the livestock permittee. Analysis of ecological conditions indicates a variance in land productivity, with some areas of the Allotment static while other areas are declining under previous management strategies and stocking rates. Important resource issues are better addressed with management of the effects from livestock (grazing, animal impact) and rest from this disturbance. This is a key element in the rationale for my decision on season of use, class of livestock, and variable numbers of livestock to be authorized. Other tools, such as fire and fuelwood harvest, are better addressed at a later date for applicable and effective use. This proposal is consistent with all standards, guidelines, and mission direction found in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest Plan. Establishing both implementation and effectiveness monitoring will minimize both short and long-term environmental impacts from Alternative D, and comply with the Biological Opinion issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as amended January 15, 1998.

Public Involvement and Scoping

Public involvement on future livestock management of the Baseline/Horsesprings Allotment began as early as April, 1989 with development of a strategic planning team established to discuss goals and issues in managing livestock on the unit. Over the next several years, many meetings were held to establish temporary goals and resource objectives that would be consistent with Forest Plan direction and also address key resource, social and economic concerns. Meetings and correspondence intensified between 1994 to the present. Broad public scoping began in September, 1994, when a project feasibility report was sent to forest users that had expressed an interest in the planning for future management of the Allotment. The feasibility report outlined a tentative proposed action based on biological planning and intensive pasture management. Continued interdisciplinary and strategic team interaction, especially consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, continued over the next 30 months. Based on a change in the proposed action, official scoping was re-initiated in April, 1997 through a relatively broad mailout and request for input to 92 interested Forest users.

Issues and concerns raised during both scoping efforts for project planning corresponded closely with key issues members of the strategic planning and Interdisciplinary teams surfaced, including: capacity for livestock grazing; potential effects to federally listed and sensitive species; affects to soils and riparian zones; long-term soil and land productivity; local economic impacts; social and lifestyle impacts; impacts of livestock on heritage resources; and effective monitoring to detect changes in both land and economic conditions. Agencies, groups, and individuals involved in both strategic planning and interdisciplinary team analysis are included on pages 48-49 of the environmental assessment.

Letters of comment received during general project scoping were considered in conducting the analysis and developing this decision. Review of the project

biological assessment and formal biological opinion issued by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service played a key role in final development of alternatives analyzed in the environmental assessment.

The draft environmental assessment, completed in August, 1997, was sent to scoping respondents, strategic team, and interdisciplinary team members. Several extensive comments were received, and predominately requested clarification of portions of the assessment narrative and specialist reports. Comments from two respondents resulted in minor changes in the draft environmental assessment, including changes in the monitoring strategy to include a section on economics and inclusion of the list of document preparers inadvertently left out of the draft. Responses to all public comments is found in Appendix E of the final environmental assessment.

Alternatives Considered

Five alternatives were considered and analyzed in detail in the environmental assessment.

Alternative A: Rest from livestock disturbance would be the only management tool applied on the Allotment to address key resource issues. No livestock grazing or other watershed rehabilitation work would be permitted or conducted.

Alternative B: Continue with current livestock management with no action to change grazing strategy, change permitted numbers or season of use, or to expand the existing watering system to aid in livestock and wildlife distribution.

Alternative C: Expand the existing livestock management program to delineate and manage for 32 pasture units using a biological controlled planning chart to identify areas on the allotment where rest and grazing will be managed on a yearlong basis to achieve improved land conditions. Expansion of the water distribution system, and additional fencing would be needed to fully implement this program. An increase of yearling cattle (up to 112 head) would be permitted yearlong, along with existing permitted cow/calf numbers of 188 head yearlong.

Alternative C-1: Implementation of a biological controlled grazing management program requires, by Forest Service manual direction, a back-up grazing strategy, represented by this alternative. Implementation of this alternative is a conventional 7 pasture deferred rotation grazing program, with no change in permitted numbers of livestock (188 cow/calf yearlong). The Term Grazing Permit would be modified to incorporate appropriate Forest Plan direction. Ranger improvement construction would be similar to that described for Alternative C, at a level necessary to obtain effective animal distribution.

Alternative D: The Proposed Action, includes:

1. Modification of the Term Grazing Permit including both the Baseline and Horsesprings allotments under one permit. The permit will incorporate new Forest Plan direction for enhancing federally protected and sensitive species habitats, and direction from the AMP as part of the permit.

2. Implementation of the AMP for forage utilization of the forage resource by domestic livestock, emphasizing dormant growth season grazing and active growth season rest. Permitted livestock will be variable between cow/calf and yearlings to adjust to market and climatic conditions, with total days not to exceed 242 within an 8 month period between 9/1 and 5/30 annually, and/or 3,019 animal unit months of authorized livestock grazing.
3. Implementation of a seven pasture deferred rotation grazing program as described in detail in the assessment, combined with construction of water lot fences around earthen tanks to aid in distribution and habitat enhancement.
4. Construction of an expanded water distribution pipeline system that will service both the Double Circles and Baseline/Horsesprings allotments, as described in detail in the assessment.
5. Where accelerated erosion from historical land uses at isolated sites on the allotment cannot be effectively arrested with the grazing and rest strategy, additional watershed rehabilitation measures (hand built check dams, mulching, seeding) will be used to increase the rate and success of recovery.
6. Implementation monitoring of the grazing program (forage utilization, pasture use and numbers of livestock) and range improvement construction will be accomplished through the Annual Operation Plan. Effects monitoring of livestock use on the allotment will be outlined in the AMP, and include water resource analysis (diversity, productivity, stability) of Eagle Creek as directed in Terms and Conditions within the the Biological Opinion. Social and economic monitoring will be accomplished and reported by the Permittee in the context of meeting objectives and goals as appropriate to each issue.

For alternatives B, C, C-1, and D, appropriate Forest Plan standards and guidelines will be included in the Term Permit, Part 3, for livestock grazing, an example of which is included in the process record.

Decision Implementation


Where there are no appeals, modification of the Term Grazing permit and subsequent implementation of the AMP will not occur sooner than five business days following the close of the appeal filing period established in the Notice of Decision in the Copper Era newspaper. Where an appeal has been filed, implementation of this decision will occur no sooner than fifteen (15) calendar days after appeal disposition.

Appeal Rights

36 C.F.R. 215 - This decision is subject to appeal by those who meet the criteria as specified in 36 Code of Federal Regulations 215.11. 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. Appeals must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, "Content of an Appeal", and must be filed with John R. Kirpatrick, Acting Regional Forester, Southwestern Region, 517 Gold Avenue, SW, Albuquerque, NM 87102, with a copy simultaneously sent to John C. Bedell, Forest Supervisor, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, P.O. Box 640, Springerville, AZ 85938, within 45 days from the date of publication of the Legal Notice of Decision in the Copper Era.

Information Contact 4

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Nancy Walls or Frank Hayes, Clifton Ranger District, HC1, Box 733, Duncan, AZ 85534, (520) 687-1301.



FRANK A. HAYES
District Ranger

JANUARY 20, 1998

Date