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DECISION NOTICE and FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Crooks Canyon/Maverick Ecosystem Management Project Livestock Grazing Management

T11-13N, R1-3W, Gila and Salt River Meridian

USDA Forest Service, Prescott National Forest
Bradshaw Ranger District
Yavapai County, Arizona

I. INTRODUCTION

The Crooks Canyon/Maverick Ecosystem Management Project includes the western-central part of the Bradshaw Mountains in central Arizona. The project is in the Bradshaw Ranger District of the Prescott National Forest. The area extends south from the upper Hassayampa River to Walnut Grove, and includes approximately 49,000 acres (Figure 1).

An EA (environmental assessment) which analyzes management alternatives for the Crooks Canyon/Maverick ecosystem management area was completed and released for comment on July 14, 1998. The EA addresses livestock grazing management in the Crooks Canyon and Maverick grazing allotments, and recreation, roads and trails management actions. The EA and supporting information are available for public review at the Bradshaw Ranger Station, 2230 E. Hwy. 69, Prescott, Arizona, 86301 (phone: (520) 445-7253).

This Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact document only my decision for livestock grazing management in this area and the rationale for the decision. I am postponing my decision on recreation, roads, and trails management actions until we have completed consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service about the effects of some of those actions on the Mexican spotted owl (a threatened species).

II. DECISION

I have decided to select the livestock grazing management strategy described in Alternative E of the Crooks Canyon/Maverick Ecosystem Management Project EA (see enclosed map). I will refer to this as the selected alternative. The selected alternative includes the following specific actions:

- allow a stocking rate of 830 head months. If improvements are made to "potential capacity" acres, the allowable stocking rate may increase up to 1,169 head months.
- discontinue grazing in the North Unit of the Maverick Allotment and the Palace Unit of the Crooks Canyon Allotment (roughly 21,700 acres; see Figure 2).
- manage the two allotments as one, and graze the South, Southwest, and Bodie Units using the rest-rotation method for 8 months from September through April (Figure 2). Remove livestock from the grazing allotments for the remainder of the year.

- increase water storage at Bodie Spring (T12N, R1W, Section 31).
- adjust sections of the east allotment boundary fence to eliminate fence crossing Yankee Doodle Trail #284.
- apply BMP's (Best Management Practices) to protect soil and water resources and beneficial uses (Forest Service Handbook 2509.22: 22.1, 22.11, 22.12, and 22.13) (EA p. 11 and Appendix 3).
- apply allowable use standards for key forage species, and monitor use in key areas (EA, pp. 11-12).

III. RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

My decision is based on the EA and its supporting record. The project purpose and need is to "improve conditions of certain streams, while providing recreation opportunities and livestock production consistent with resource considerations" (EA, p. 1). The EA describes the existing and desired conditions of these resources and uses (EA, pp. 1-2). Of the eight project objectives listed on pp. 2-3 of the EA, five are specifically related to livestock grazing management:

- **Objective #1** - Apply a livestock grazing strategy that allows vegetative structure, composition, and vigor to improve in all areas where there is the potential for improvement.
- **Objective #2** - Make effective use of full capacity rangeland.
- **Objective #3** - Riparian management favors the regeneration of woody species, increased vegetative ground cover, improved bank stability, and increased plant vigor in all areas with such potential.
- **Objective #7** - Provide for the maintenance and recovery of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and their habitats.
- **Objective #8** - Achieve project objectives in a cost-effective manner.

The selected alternative does the best job of meeting these objectives overall. By eliminating grazing from the two northern pastures (approximately 21,700 acres), grazing impacts on the highest concentrations of no capacity and low productivity rangeland will be eliminated. Also, the regeneration of woody species, increase in vegetative ground cover, improved bank stability, and increased plant vigor in six important riparian areas (Copper Creek, Groom Creek (lower), Hassayampa (upper and lower), Indian Creek, and Wolf Creek) will be maximized. These same effects would have been accomplished by selecting Alternative C (no grazing), however, Alternative C would have not accomplished Objective #2 to make effective use of full capacity rangeland.

Implementing the selected alternative will maintain Milk Creek in fair condition and will improve all other riparian area conditions because of reduced stocking rates, seasonal grazing, using the rest-rotation method, and monitoring key forage species utilization. Implementing BMP's listed in the EA (APPENDIX 3) will help ensure that water quality standards are met.

The selected alternative will have no effect on threatened or endangered species or their habitat (Project Record Document #250).

In selecting Alternative E, I considered the relatively low cost for the increased water storage at Bodie Spring which is the only additional range improvement. I believe this investment is cost effective from the standpoint of the Forest Service. Bodie Spring is the only water source in the area. It is a reliable spring, but recharge is slow. Increasing the water storage capacity will aid in distributing livestock in the pasture putting less grazing pressure on the area immediately around the spring.

Based on the project effectiveness analysis (Project Record Document #224), all alternatives, including no grazing, rate as economically unfavorable overall. The permit holder will need to determine if continuing livestock grazing operations under the terms and conditions of this decision is a viable economic endeavor based on market, social, and other factors.

IV. SUMMARY OF ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

I considered five alternatives in detail in making my decision. Each alternative differs in its emphasis and approach to managing the resources and meeting the project purpose and need. The Interdisciplinary Team developed the range of alternatives to respond to the issues, other public comments, and undesirable existing conditions. Chapter 2 of the EA (pp. 10-18) contains the full descriptions of the alternatives which include additional projects and activities. Again, the scope of this decision is limited only to livestock grazing management. Each of the "action" alternatives incorporates measures to conserve soil and water and to protect threatened and endangered species (EA, p. 11).

- **Alternative A** would address the project purpose and need by applying rest, timing, and stocking rate adjustments to improve forage utilization patterns, protect riparian areas (creeks and drainages with unique vegetation), and better match grazing use with grazing capability. Range improvements targeted uneven livestock distribution and utilization patterns.
- **Alternative B**, the "no action" alternative, would continue the existing management situation which provides a baseline for comparing the other alternatives. Cattle would switch between two units on the Maverick Allotment, grazing each unit for about 6 months. On the Crooks Canyon Allotment, cattle would graze the Palace Unit (north) for roughly 2-3 months in the summer, move to the Bodie Unit in the fall, and graze the southwestern units in the winter. All livestock would be removed from the Crooks Canyon Allotment in April and May. No new range improvements would be constructed in this alternative.

- **Alternative C** would discontinue livestock grazing on both allotments. Range fence segments which would no longer be needed for livestock management or which interfere with recreation or wildlife movements would be removed.
- **Alternative D**, developed collaboratively with the rancher, would maintain livestock grazing in all areas of the two allotments. Groom Creek, Wolf Creek, and a portion of the upper Hassayampa River would be fenced to create a separate unit within which a management prescription to meet riparian objectives would be applied. Management of the remainder of the Maverick Allotment and for the Crooks Canyon Allotment would generally follow the description for Alternative B. Three water sources would be developed or improved to improve livestock distribution.
- **Alternative E**, the selected alternative, is described in Section II of this document. Alternative E would discontinue grazing in the North Unit of the Maverick Allotment and the Palace Unit of the Crooks Canyon Allotment (roughly 21,700 acres). It would manage the two allotments as one. Livestock would graze the South, Southwest, and Bodie Units using a rest-rotation method for 8 months from September through April. Livestock would be removed from the allotments for the remainder of the year. Water storage would be increased at Bodie Spring (T12N, R1W, Section 31).

The following table provides a brief comparison of the alternatives.

	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D	Alternative E
Livestock Management	rest-rotation*	switchback**	no livestock	deferred***	rest-rotation
Grazing Season	yearlong	yearlong	NA	yearlong	Sept - Apr
Miles of Fence Constructed	8	0	0	4	0
No. of Water Developments	4	0	0	3	1
Full Capacity Acres	15,572	18,167	NA	18,167	9,138** **
Potential Capacity Acres	13,382	15,331	NA	15,331	3,723** **
Headmonths	1415-2610****	5100****	0	1652-3045****	830-1169****
Stocking Rates - Maverick	NA	250	0	78-132****	NA
Stocking Rates - Crooks Canyon	NA	175	0	60-122****	NA
Stocking Rates - Combined	118-218****	NA	0	NA	104-146****

* Rest-Rotation - an intensive management system where grazing is deferred on various parts of the range during succeeding years, allowing the deferred part to completely rest for one year or more.

** Switchback - a two-pasture grazing system where livestock graze one unit while the other unit is rested.

*** Deferred - a grazing system that allows each part of the range to rest successively during the growing season to permit seed production, establishment of seedlings, or restoration of plant vigor.

**** The first number is the grazing capacity which was calculated using only full capacity acres; the second number is the grazing capacity calculated with both full and potential capacity acres.

***** Present permitted headmonths.

** ** Full capacity acres = 13,706 - 4,568 acre adjustment for rest-rotation system = 9,138 acres.
Potential capacity acres = 5,584 - 1,861 acre adjustment for rest-rotation system = 3,723 acres.

A coordinated ranch plan, which would incorporate various state, federal, and private lands, was dropped from consideration due to a lack of interest on the part of the grazing permittee and the other agencies.

V. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

In December 1990, a scoping report describing the project was mailed to interested and potentially affected groups and individuals. Comments received were mostly about riparian protection and suitability of the area for livestock.

Planning efforts were postponed until January, 1993. In June, 1993, an Open House was held to display the existing conditions of the area and seek input about desired conditions and additional concerns. Using both internal and external comments, the Interdisciplinary Team developed a proposed action. The proposed action was shared with members of the public through a revised scoping report which was mailed in April, 1994. Alternatives were developed with public input on issues resulting from the proposal. In November 1994, the alternatives were displayed for the public at an Open House, and comments were taken. Comments were generally supportive, and the public offered some site-specific ideas. The proposed action (Alternative A) was slightly adjusted based on public input.

The status of the project was continually listed in the Forest's Granite Tablet and/or Schedule of Proposed Actions (Fall/Winter 92, Spring 93, Fall 93, Winter/Spring 94, Summer/Fall 94, Fall/Winter 94, 6/95, 9/95, 1/96, 6/96, 8/96, 11/96, 2/97, 6/97, 9/97, 12/97, 3/98, 6/98). These schedules were mailed to several hundred people.

Following analysis and completion of an EA, Forest Supervisor Mike King prepared a letter selecting Alternative E as the proposed action for livestock grazing management. The letter was sent to interested parties for comment. A legal notice was also published in the Prescott *Daily Courier* newspaper on February 26, 1996. Approximately 50 comment letters and phone calls were received in response to the proposed action. The Interdisciplinary Team prepared a detailed response to comments (Project Record Document #230).

In 1996, two national environmental organizations filed a lawsuit over certain aspects of the Prescott National Forest Land Management Plan. The Crooks Canyon and Maverick allotments were specifically identified in the lawsuit. The project was "put on hold" while the case was litigated. In 1998, the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona ruled in favor of the Forest Service.

After the court ruling, the EA was rewritten. The scope of the proposal was narrowed to include only livestock grazing, road and trail management, and recreation developments. On July 14, 1998, District Ranger Ernest Del Rio prepared a letter again announcing Alternative E as the proposed action for livestock grazing management. The letter was sent to interested parties for comment. A legal notice was published in the Prescott *Daily Courier* newspaper on July 17, 1998. Eleven comment letters and phone calls were received during comment period. The Interdisciplinary Team prepared responses to comments which is APPENDIX 13 to the new EA (Project Record Document #268).

VI. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on my review of the EA and supporting record, I have determined that Alternative E for range management, which I have selected, will not have significant effects on the human environment. For this reason, no environmental impact statement will be prepared. I have summarized my reasons for this determination below:

- **Issue #1: Grazing may reduce the riparian vegetation, vegetative ground cover, and the stability of riparian areas.** Rotational grazing and no grazing in portions of the project area will contribute to meeting riparian objectives: increasing density of riparian vegetation and vegetative ground cover; improving infiltration capacity of the soils on the floodplains and terraces; improving soil moisture; and increasing potential for stability. The selected alternative's removal of livestock grazing from the north 44% of the project area for the term of the permit will eliminate negative impacts to riparian vegetation and streambanks on six of nine key riparian areas: Copper Creek, Groom Creek (lower), Hassayampa (upper and lower), Indian Creek, and Wolf Creek. The condition and trend of the other three key riparian areas (Ash Creek, Crooks Canyon, Milk Creek) will remain in or improve to fair or better condition (EA, pp. 19-20). Past livestock grazing has contributed to reduced vegetative ground cover. Overall, however, watershed condition is currently satisfactory, and the selected alternative will improve watershed and riparian conditions for an overall positive effect (EA, pp. 24-25).
- **Issue #2: Grazing may occur in areas that are not capable of sustained forage production.** The selected alternative will remove grazing from approximately 21,700 acres for the term of the permit. The no grazing area contains considerable acres with no capacity or potential capacity (PR 158). The no grazing area also contains areas of mostly low productivity potential (PR 158). The selected alternative will focus livestock grazing in areas of full capacity range. Better management of grassy areas will result. By applying no grazing, seasonal use, rest-rotation grazing, and allowable forage utilization standards, livestock use will better match environmental, social, and economic factors (EA, pp. 20-22).
- **Issue #4: Road, trail, and other recreation uses may impact livestock operations.** Since the area with the highest potential for recreation conflicts will be excluded from grazing (the northern 44% of the project area), problems with gates being left open and fences being cut will be reduced by the selected alternative (EA, p. 38-39). The selected alternative also eliminates numerous fence/trail intersections along the Yankee Doodle trail 284. I have concluded that the effects of road, trail, and recreation uses on livestock operations will not be significant.
- **Issue #5: Changes in current grazing management may adversely impact the economic and managerial feasibility of grazing cattle on the allotments.** The project effectiveness analysis (Project Record Document #224) concluded that all alternatives rate as unfavorable for livestock operations. No alternative has a benefit/cost ratio higher than 0.31 considering both permittee and Forest Service planning and administration costs. The selected alternative has a benefit/cost ratio of 0.17 compared with 0.26 for the current operation and 0.31 for Alternative D (the latter alternative was developed collaboratively by the permittee and the Forest Service). Considering the low, unfavorable values among these alternatives, I do not consider the change to be significant.

Comparing PNV (present net value) between the alternatives, the selected alternative has the least negative value. The selected alternative has a PNV of -\$361,270 compared with -\$491,007 for continuing the current operation (Alternative B) and -\$369,845 for Alternative D. Again, considering the low, unfavorable values among the alternatives, I do not consider the change to be significant.

With improved management included in the selected alternative, production (weight gain, number of calves) may increase slightly by having the cattle concentrated in a smaller area where the bulls can better service the cows, and employees can keep closer tabs on the livestock by working a smaller area of the ranch at any one time. Livestock performance (i.e. weight gain and reproduction) often drops off for a period after making changes in routines. The number of pasture moves also increases costs to the rancher. Cattle will move up to four times each year, including on and off the Forest.

However, the selected alternative will bring about a major change in the livestock operation by allowing livestock grazing on the Forest only part of the year as opposed to yearlong. The two allotments will be managed with one livestock herd. To balance the stocking rate with the carrying capacity, downward adjustments in livestock numbers will be necessary.

- Of the 10 points under section 40 CFR 1508.27(b), the following ones will not be discussed further for these reasons: no effects on public health or safety; no unique geographic features (except for wetlands, as discussed above); no highly uncertain or unknown risks; no precedents for future actions; no significant cumulative effects (EA, pp. 22, 24-28, 32-34, 40-41); no significant effects to historic or cultural sites (Project Record Document #270); no significant effects to threatened or endangered species (Project Record Document #250); and no violations of Federal, State, or local laws.
- Several environmental groups have been very concerned about how grazing in these allotments would affect various components of the ecosystem (e.g. riparian areas, cryptogamic crusts, water quality). Some individuals have attended our public meetings, and have met personally with us. We have addressed their concerns by applying no grazing to approximately 21,700 acres, seasonal use on the remainder of the acres, rest-rotation grazing, and allowable forage utilization standards. We will monitor utilization of key forage species in key areas. We will apply and monitor BMP's to protect soil and water.

The range permittee is concerned about the selected alternative because it eliminates grazing on 21,700 acres, reduces the carrying capacity, and the length of use. We have partly addressed the economic aspect of his concern by selecting an alternative that has minimal improvement costs (\$2,000). As stated previously, all alternatives are economically unfavorable for the permittee.

My judgement is that the concerns of the environmental groups and the permittee do not reflect a situation that is "highly controversial" as listed in section 1508.27(b)(4) of the CEQ Regulations. I recognize that these groups are not 100 percent satisfied, but one critic of the project offered that, ". . . this decision and the accompanying analysis represent a VERY big improvement over the typical decision of this type. . . It is well past time, therefore, that the Forest Service began to make decisions that will put the land first. . . I

believe the Forest Service is taking a very important step in this direction - THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!!!!" (Project Record Document #255)

VII. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

To the best of my knowledge, the selected alternative complies with pertinent laws and regulations. Regarding the National Forest Management Act and its implementing regulations, the selected alternative is consistent with the Prescott National Forest Land Management Plan (Project Record Document Nos. 4, 11, 20, 21, 33, 38, 39a, 47). All undertakings included in the decision have been surveyed and evaluated for heritage resources, and consultation has been completed with the State Historic Preservation Officer in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (Project Record Document Nos. 42, 47, 48, 157, 161, 173, 270). In compliance with the Endangered Species Act, I have informally consulted with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Project Record Document Nos. 20, 47, 66, 104, 156, 161, 168, 220, 226, 233, 243). All known or possible endangered or threatened species (bald eagle, American peregrine falcon, and Mexican spotted owl) were considered. The selective alternative will have no affect on the endangered and threatened species or their habitats (Project Record Document 250). Regarding compliance with the Clean Water Act, the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality has been involved in the planning process, applicable BMP's have been identified for use, and no special permits are required of the Forest Service (Project Record Document Nos. 4, 20, 47, 68, 104, 156, 165, 242 (APPENDIX 3), 243). The entirety of documentation for this project supports that the project complies with the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Rescissions Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-19, Section 504 (a)), requires each Forest to identify and schedule allotments for NEPA analysis, and adhere to the established schedule. The Crooks Canyon and Maverick Allotments are scheduled for completion of NEPA analysis during 1996-1998. This decision is consistent with the established schedule and the Act.

VIII. APPEAL PROVISIONS

This decision is subject to appeal by the public in accordance with 36 CFR 215 or by the permittee or holders of like permits in accordance with 36 CFR 251 Subpart C. Those eligible to appeal under 36 CFR 251 subpart C may appeal under either 36 CFR 215 or 36 CFR 251 Subpart C, but not under both rules.

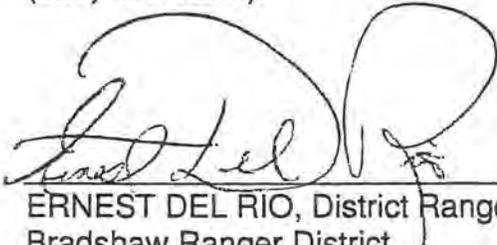
To appeal this decision under 36 CFR 215, a person must submit a written appeal to the Appeal Deciding Officer: Eleanor Towns, Southwestern Regional Forester, 517 Gold Avenue SW, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87102 within 45 days of the date of the publication of this decision in the *Daily Courier* newspaper of Prescott, Arizona. Those filing under 36 CFR 251 Subpart C must submit a written appeal to the Appeal Deciding Officer: Michael R. King, Forest Supervisor, 344 S. Cortez St., Prescott, Arizona, 86303 also within 45 days of the date of the publication of this decision in the Prescott *Daily Courier*. Evidence of timely filing will be determined by the U.S. Postal Service postmark or date of receipt (which ever is earliest).

IX. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision will not be implemented sooner than five days from the close of the appeal filing period (45 calendar days after publication of this decision in the Prescott *Daily Courier* newspaper). If an appeal is filed, this decision will not be implemented for 15 days following disposition of all appeals.

X. CONTACT PERSON

For additional information about this decision or the appeal process, contact Malcolm Hamilton at the Bradshaw Ranger Station, 2230 East Highway 69, Prescott, Arizona, 86301 (phone: (520) 445-7253).



ERNEST DEL RIO, District Ranger (Responsible Official)
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Prescott, AZ 86301
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September 30, 1993
Date

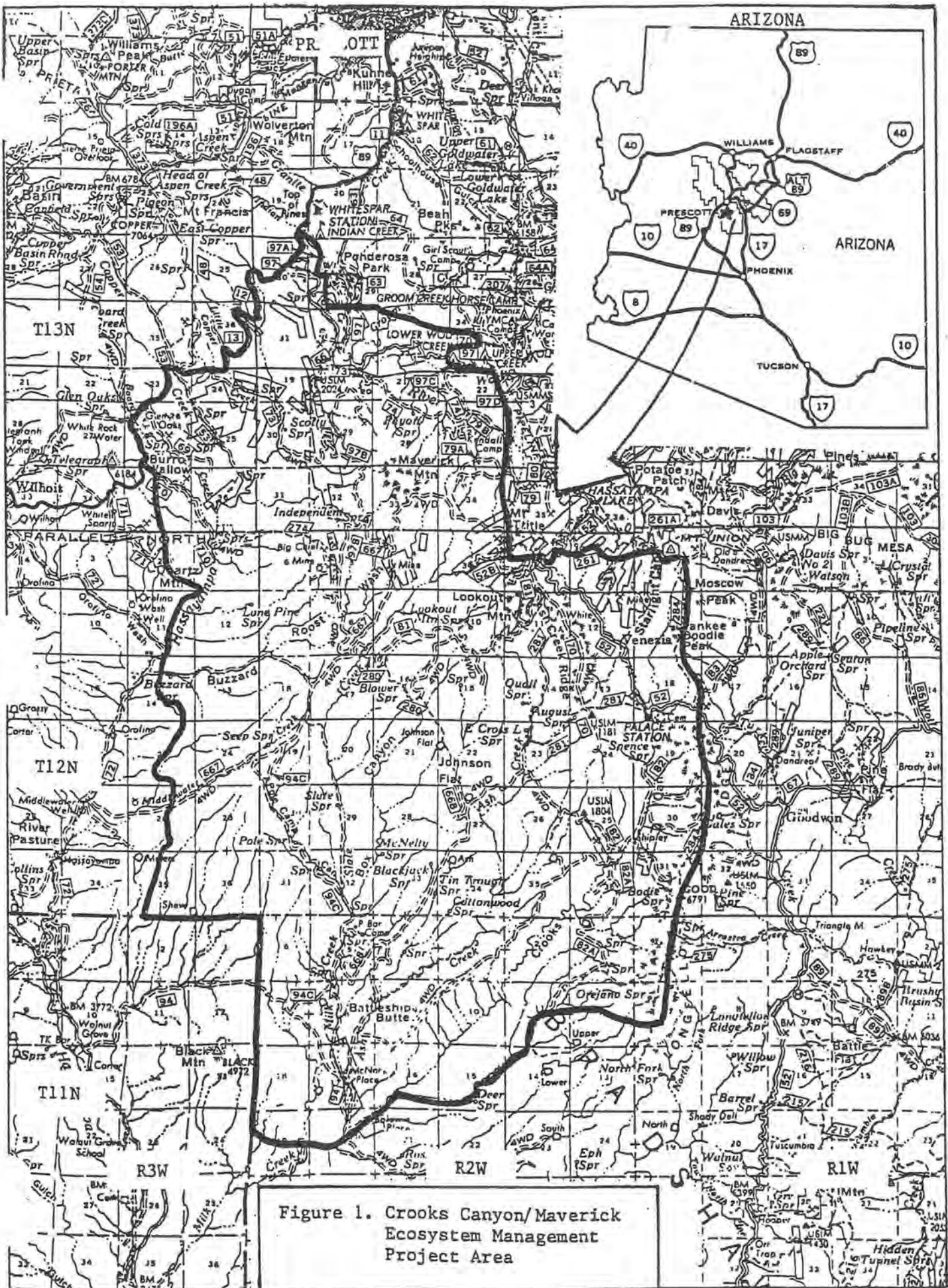
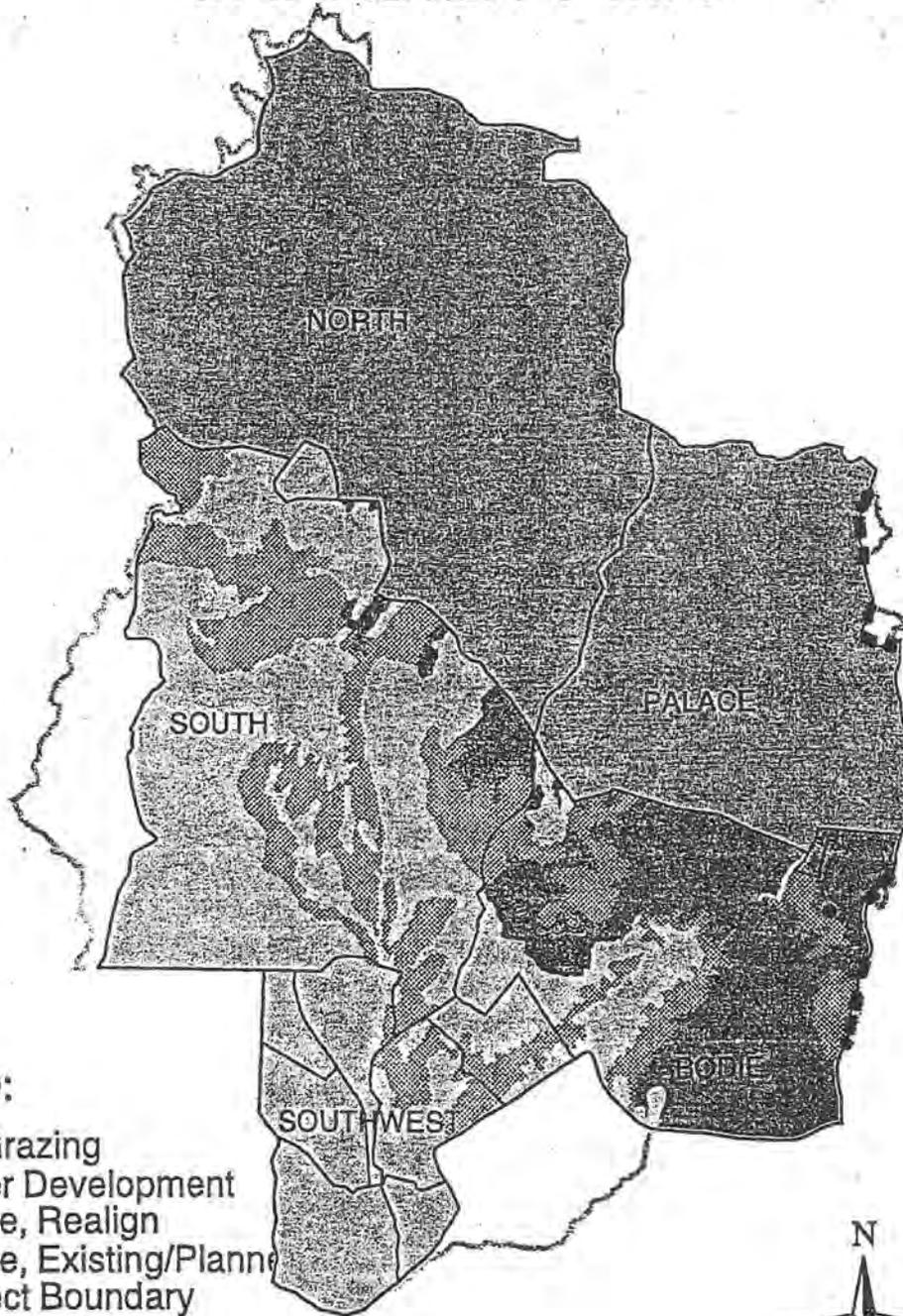


Figure 1. Crooks Canyon/Maverick Ecosystem Management Project Area

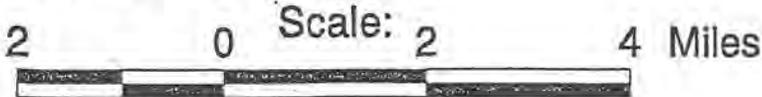
Figure 2. SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT - ALT E CAPABILITY MAP



LEGEND:

- No Grazing
 - Water Development
 - Fence, Realign
 - Fence, Existing/Planned
 - Project Boundary
 - Bodie = Grazing Unit
 - Full Capacity (13,706 acres)
 - No Capacity (5,440 acres)
 - Potential Capacity (5,584 acres)
- Total Acres = 24,730



Map Disclaimer: The USDA Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created may yield inaccurate or misleading results. This information was released on June 4, 1998. The USDA Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace GIS products without notification. For more information contact: Malcolm Hamilton, Bradshaw Ranger District.

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