

ALLOTMENT MANAGEMENT PLAN

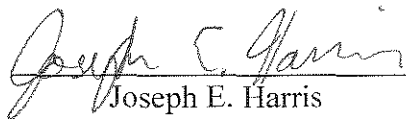
FOR

East Whitetail Allotment

Douglas Ranger District

CORONADO NATIONAL FOREST

Prepared By:

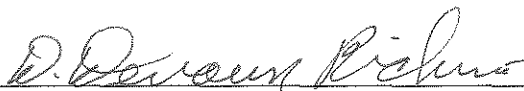


Joseph E. Harris
District Range Conservationist

Date:

12/08/08

Agreed To By:



Split Rock Ranch, Inc., Permittee

Date:

12-8-08

Approved By:



William A. Edwards
District Ranger

Date:

12/07/2008

INTRODUCTION

The East Whitetail Allotment is located in the northeast section of the Chiricahua Mountain Ecological Management Area (EMA) of the Douglas Ranger District, in Cochise County. The allotment is bounded on the north by the Cochise allotment and on the east by the Forest boundary. Total acreage is 12,830, of which 11,337 acres are considered capable. Current acreage estimates differ from those in the past due to the increased use of GIS technology, and slopes greater than 40% now being considered as non-capable range.

The allotment is permitted to Split Rock Ranch, Inc. for 100 cow/calf pairs (792 AUMs) from 11/01 – 04/30. The term grazing permit was issued in October of 1998. In 1999, with the concurrence of permittee, the permit was adjusted from 200 cattle to 100 cattle.

A trend study of the East Whitetail Allotment conducted in 1965 indicated approximately 100% of the allotment capable range was in fair condition with a static trend. In 2005, a re-reading of two of the five transects indicated the range condition trend had not changed. The majority of the allotment was classified as fair. Indicators on the ground show range trend conditions have improved as a result of increased ground cover. This is attributed to a reduction in permitted numbers and partial non-use of the allotment. A decline in range trend is caused by the over-all encroachment of woody vegetation.

Monitoring data collected in 2005 at two permanent monitoring transects indicated fair condition at one site and excellent condition at the second. Indicators of soil stability are stable or improving.

Production/Utilization studies conducted in the spring of 2006 suggested a stocking of 385 AUMs or 49 cows for same season-of-use. This lower number was caused by an abnormally dry year.

An environmental analysis was completed in June 2008.

Recent monitoring of permanent transects indicates allotment vegetation is in fair condition. Ground cover is increasing, but encroaching woody species tend to suppress conditions suitable for recovery. At this time, soils are 100% satisfactory. Vegetation cover is mostly comprised of desert grasslands, manzanita, Emory oak and alligator juniper woodlands, and coniferous trees in upper north facing slopes. There are 7.5 miles of riparian habitat within the East Whitetail Allotment with Whitetail and Jhus Canyon supporting some riparian obligate species.

There are no wilderness acres designated within the East Whitetail Allotment.

Over the past century, fire has been largely absent from the landscape in the area due to heavy grazing and active fire suppression. As a result, woody plants, especially manzanita and juniper, have become dominant on many sites within the oak woodland.

Recent Management

There is no current long-range management plan and livestock management that has been administered through the use of annual operating plans. Stocking is based on forage conditions and water availability, which fluctuates frequently.

The East Whitetail allotment has been permitted for 100 cattle during the winter dormant season (11/1-4/30). There are seven pastures: three pastures in Jhus Canyon and four pastures in Whitetail Canyon. Under the previous plan, cattle were pushed into higher elevation pastures at the beginning of the grazing season. As forage and water diminished, gates were opened and cattle were allowed to drift down through the allotment. In practice, the lack of dependable waters and fences has limited use in upper pastures; recent actual use has been light in most of the allotment due to an inability to keep cattle confined to pastures.

Primary management issues on this allotment are the lack of developed waters, leading to poor distribution and poor fence conditions making it difficult to keep cattle in the proper pastures. In addition, the presence of private inholdings in Whitetail Canyon makes it difficult to cross-fence pastures to control livestock.

The Indian Creek Pasture in the upper reaches of Whitetail Canyon has not been grazed these last few years because the drift fence was removed by a private landowner. Presently, there are no means to keep cattle in this pasture.

The East Whitetail allotment is watered by five developed springs and a couple private wells that feed the lower pastures. It is difficult to maintain good distribution of cattle throughout the allotment due to limited developed water, topography, and dense vegetation in the form of brush and tree canopy. During wet winters, natural water holes are available yet terrain and vegetation still hinder cattle movement.

Management Areas identified under the Coronado Forest Plan are: MA1 for visual and dispersed recreation resource; MA4 for livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, and fuelwood resource; and MA7, which designates Whitetail and Jhus Canyons as riparian areas.

Issues, Concerns, & Conflicts

The following issues were identified during the EA through field visits to the allotment, discussions with the permittee, consultation with Forest resource specialists, and by soliciting comments from interested publics.

Wildlife, soil and watershed condition, upland vegetation and heritage resources: Continued grazing in the project area could result in effects, either positive or negative, to these items, depending on the timing, intensity, frequency and duration of grazing and other management activities.

Goals and Objectives

The Coronado National Forest Plan has identified goals for the range, wildlife, soil, water and lands, wilderness and recreation programs on the Forest (Forest Plan pp. 9-11). These goals can be found on page 5 of the Environmental Assessment for the East Whitetail allotment published in June 2008.

Based on Forest Plan goals and site-specific knowledge of the East Whitetail allotment, the following objectives constitute the desired condition for the analysis area.

- Livestock stocking is consistent with annual forage production and use is monitored annually. Management controls livestock use and distribution so that sufficient herbaceous vegetation is retained to protect soils and provide herbaceous wildlife cover; zones of heavy use are minimized.
- Management plans provide sufficient flexibility to allow management to adapt to changing resource conditions.
- Ecological sites have stable soils, functional hydrology and support functional biotic communities. All sites are at or moving toward high similarity with their potential natural community.
- Lower elevation sites are dominated by warm season native perennial grasses and are increasing in diversity of grasses, forbs and shrubs. Encroachment of Lehmann lovegrass and woody shrubs is controlled through management.
- Native vegetation in riparian bottoms is a diverse mix of perennial grasses, forbs, shrubs and trees. Trees and shrubs show no evidence of high-lining or hedging and a range of age classes is present.
- Areas with impaired soil condition have increasing ground cover and litter and little erosion.
- Occupied habitats for threatened, endangered, sensitive and management indicator species are maintained or improved and recovery objectives are being met.
- All grazing improvements necessary for management on all allotments are in proper working order and are contributing toward improved livestock distribution and pasture reliability.

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Grazing Strategy

Permitted use would remain at 100 cow/calf pairs or equivalent (up to 792 AUMs). The season of use on the East Whitetail allotment would also remain winter seasonal (11/1-4/30) to allow for annual summer growing season rest. The sequence and timing of pasture moves and the timing of entry and exit from the allotment will be based on monitoring of range readiness, ecological condition, water availability, and utilization.

The rotation will be similar to previous management, with the cattle being pushed into the higher pastures and allowed to drift downward as the season progresses. With the

intermittent private land scattered in the Indian Creek pasture, use of that pasture has been difficult, but by installing the drift fence the pasture should once again be included in the rotation. The East Whitetail pasture, which includes McKey Canyon, should also be used as much as possible, while trying to keep the cattle from congregating near the flat, lower portions of the pasture.

Forage utilization will be managed at a level corresponding to light to moderate intensity to provide for grazed plant recovery, increased plant vigor, and retention of herbaceous litter that will protect soils and provide forage and herbaceous cover for wildlife. Consistent patterns of annual utilization in excess of 45% of key species in key areas would be used as a basis for modifying management practices and for taking administrative actions necessary to reduce utilization in subsequent grazing seasons.

Mitigation

To mitigate resource impacts, the following measures will be implemented. These practices have been demonstrated to be successful when used on similar projects and are considered effective at reducing environmental impacts. They are consistent with applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines, Best Management Practices and the terms and conditions and conservation measures of applicable U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biological Opinions. Implementation of the mitigation measures and design criteria is intended to preclude the occurrence of potentially significant environmental impacts.

Soil, Water and Vegetation: The objective is to mitigate effects of livestock grazing and facility construction through the use of Best Management Practices (FSH 2509.22) and adaptive management. Practices include, but are not limited to the following.

- Utilization of key upland herbaceous forage species in key areas will be managed to achieve the goal of light to moderate grazing as a pasture average. The objective is to protect plant vigor, increase herbaceous residue needed for soil protection and to increase herbage producing ability of forage plants. A utilization guideline of 30-45 percent use of key species in key areas will be used to achieve this objective.
- Management practices will be used to achieve proper distribution or lessen the impact on sensitive areas. Practices include herding, salting and controlling access to waters. Salt will be placed on good feed, one quarter to one half mile from waters and salting locations will be moved annually. Placement of liquid or bulk supplements will require prior approval of the District Ranger.
- No hay will be placed on Forest lands in order to minimize the introduction of weeds.

Wildlife: The objective is to mitigate impacts to wildlife from livestock grazing and from disturbance associated with maintenance and construction of range facilities. These measures include features developed through the interdisciplinary NEPA process to mitigate effects to wildlife in general, and species specific conservation measures for listed species.

- All water developments will include wildlife access and escape ramps. Waters will be kept available to wildlife year round.
- All new and reconstructed fencing will be built to Forest Plan standards (Forest Plan, p. 35) to provide for wildlife passage through the fence. At a minimum, this will be a 4-strand fence with smooth bottom wire 16 inches off of the ground and a total height of 42 inches or less.
- Within areas meeting the definition of high quality Montezuma (Mearns') quail habitat, herbaceous vegetation will be managed to maintain a minimum of 6 inches of herbaceous stubble height, which is generally interpreted as less than 45 percent utilization of key perennial grass species. The objective is to provide herbaceous vegetation as cover for quail and other wildlife.

Conservation Measures:

- Range construction projects will be designed to avoid the destruction of agaves. If impacts to agaves are unavoidable, the Forest will insure that no more than 1 percent of agaves within 800 meters of a project are impacted. The objective is to avoid impacts to lesser long-nosed bat food resources.
- All proposed waters and fences will be evaluated by a qualified wildlife biologist for effects to threatened, endangered or sensitive species prior to any ground-disturbing activities. Facilities will be designed and constructed to have no adverse effect on listed species.
- Range improvement projects within Mexican Spotted Owl protected activity centers (PACs) or Goshawk post-fledging family areas (PFAs) will be constructed outside of the breeding season for these species (March 1-September 30), or after a Forest wildlife biologist has determined that nest sites or territories are not occupied.
- The Forest will implement the Forest's Stockpond and Aquatic Habitat Management and Maintenance Guidelines for the Chiricahua leopard frog (*Rana chiricahuensis*). The objectives are 1) to minimize short-term impacts to frogs while allowing maintenance activities that maintain occupied habitats, and 2) to protect shoreline and emergent vegetation and to improve water quality.

Heritage Resources: The objective is to protect heritage resources (historic and prehistoric sites) from direct or indirect impacts caused by ground-disturbing activities associated with the construction of range facilities and to monitor the effects of cattle grazing on sites to ensure that adverse effects are not occurring. In general, these measures include the following:

- All proposed range facilities will be surveyed by qualified personnel for heritage resources prior to any ground-disturbing activities. Facilities will be built or modified to avoid impacts to sites. If unrecorded sites are discovered during the course of project implementation, activities will cease and the Forest or District Archeologist will be notified.
- Range facilities, if needed, will be located so as to avoid concentrations of livestock on identified heritage resource sites.
- No salting will occur within or adjacent to identified heritage sites.

- If impacts from grazing (e.g. excessive trampling, cattle rubbing against and knocking down standing features) are occurring to heritage sites, measures will be taken (e.g. fencing) to protect them.

Livestock Distribution Aids

- Use of salt, protein, and other nutritional supplements are encouraged for livestock health and to improve livestock distribution. All supplements will be placed on forage, no less than ¼ mile from water, and away from natural concentration areas such as drainage bottoms, saddles, roads and trails. Supplement locations will be rotated periodically. No hay or bulk feed may be fed on Forest Lands.
- Supplements will be packed into remote country, and not simply dumped out of a truck where it is convenient, as this does not promote improved livestock distribution.
- Water may be turned off to discourage livestock use in a portion of a pasture, but must be made available again once livestock leave the pasture.
- New water developments will be constructed in uplands to encourage livestock use out of the bottoms.
- Existing water lots around dirt tanks will be maintained in satisfactory condition to control livestock access to water.
- Regular herding of livestock will be used to improved livestock distribution.

Range Improvement Construction Priority

The following prioritized improvements will be completed to implement the grazing strategy:

1. Construct 0.5 mile of drift fence in upper East Whitetail Canyon to keep cattle in Indian Creek pasture. The Forest Service will supply the materials, while the permittee is expected to provide the labor to construct it. This should be completed by the 2010 grazing season.
2. Re-establish a pipeline from Jhus Spring by constructing a new spring box, re-fitting storage and adding a new trough. This project will be initiated as soon as the water rights of the spring are secured.

Range Improvement Maintenance

Maintenance of all structural improvements listed on pages 7-11 of the term grazing permit is the responsibility of the permittee. Likewise, the maintenance of any new improvements as a result of this plan will be the responsibility of the permittee. All improvements must be kept in a serviceable condition. The Forest service will assist in supplying materials if budgets allow.

Fires

District wide, there is an effort to re-establish the role of fire on the landscape. Naturally ignited wildfires will only be aggressively fought when they endanger life or property. Fires on other portions of the allotment will be fought with a containment strategy, being allowed to burn to the nearest roads or natural barriers. When planning prescribed fires,

the permittee will be consulted, so that he will have time to make adequate preparations for his livestock operation, and so the rotation can be altered to allow fine fuels to accumulate. Burned areas will be allowed to rest for 1-2 growing seasons to ensure adequate recovery before livestock will be allowed access.

Monitoring

The objective of monitoring is to determine whether management is being properly implemented and whether the actions are effective at achieving or moving toward desired conditions.

Effectiveness monitoring includes measurements to track condition and trend of upland and riparian vegetation, soil, and watersheds. Monitoring will be done following procedures described in the Interagency Technical Reference and the Region 3 Rangeland Analysis and Training Guide. These data will be interpreted to determine whether management is achieving desired resource conditions, whether changes in resource condition are related to management, and to determine whether modifications in management are necessary. Effectiveness monitoring will occur at a minimum of five-year intervals, or more frequently if considered necessary.

Implementation monitoring will occur yearly and will include such things as inspection reports, forage utilization measurements in key areas, livestock counts and facilities inspections. Utilization measurements are made following procedures found in the Interagency Technical Reference and with consideration of the Principles of Obtaining and Interpreting Utilization Data on Southwest Rangelands.

Utilization will be monitored on key forage species, which are native perennial grasses that are palatable to livestock. At a minimum, monitoring will include use in key areas, but may include monitoring outside of key areas. The Douglas District Range Staff Officer and the permittees will be responsible for monitoring livestock grazing utilization. Over time, changes in resource conditions or management may result in changes in livestock use patterns. As livestock use patterns change, new key areas may be established and existing key areas may be modified or abandoned in cooperation with the permittee(s).

Permittees are strongly encouraged to participate in monitoring activities. Records of livestock numbers, movement dates and shipping records will be kept by the permittee and will be provided to the District Range Staff annually.

Additionally, species-specific monitoring requirements are in place for Mearns' quail, Goshawk, Chiricahua leopard frog, and Mexican spotted owl, as described in the Grazing Strategy portion of the Environmental Assessment.