



Decision Memo

Holder Well and Corral Project

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

The Holder Well and Corral project on Tonto Basin Ranger District is located on Hardt Creek Grazing Allotment, near Forest Service Road 184, approximately 2 air miles South of the Town of Rye. (See map at the end of this document).

Project Background

The Hardt Creek Allotment on the Tonto Basin Ranger District is permitted for 200 Cows and 200 yearlings however the permittee has run conservative numbers below this number over the years in order to make sure all the structural improvements and water was in place to support this permitted number. In recent years the permittee has started to increase the herd size closer to this permitted number but has run into two issues; The Holder well that provides water to the South Ridge Pasture has gone dry and there isn't a large enough corral facility along Forest Road 84 to accommodate proper livestock husbandry needs. The permittee has proposed drilling a new well approximately 100 yards away from the current dry well and expand the Holder Corral to accommodate the needs of a larger herd size.

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: (1) Sustainable livestock grazing contributes to the long-term socioeconomic diversity and stability of local communities. (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: (3) Drought preparedness should be emphasized in allotment management plans and may include flexible stocking rates/livestock classes, flexible rotation schedules, and other strategies for dealing with climate variability.

The purpose of this project is to provide adequate water to accommodate the needs of a larger herd size on the Hardt Creek Grazing Allotment.

Decision

I have decided to authorize the expansion of the existing corral but not the change in location of the existing well.

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** –The hydrology report notes that operation of the proposed well within the floodplain and the alluvium may have adverse effects to the water table during drier months. Hydrology recommended pumping operations occur outside the months of May to September. If this conservation measure can be implemented, than the project will not affect species of conservation concern in Rye Creek. If this conservation measures cannot be implemented, consultation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for effects to federally listed species will be required. Information from the permittee indicated that well would be needed from May to September since this is the driest time of the year.
- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** - Installing the well within the floodplain and the alluvium may have adverse effects to the water table during drier months. In order to mitigate the risk of lowering the groundwater table and affecting downstream resources, pumping operations was recommended to occur only outside the months of May to September to protect potential effects to riparian vegetation as well as Threatened and Endangered species that are more vulnerable during those dry months. After project implementation of the well it was recommended that there would be a need to monitor for evidence of decreases in the water table and adverse effects to downstream resources identified in the biologic evaluation as well as riparian vegetation health. It should also be noted that the drilling of the new well may have an adverse impact to another private well slightly downstream of the proposed location. In regards to the construction of the new well, the following BMPs are recommended: Range 3 – Rangeland Improvements, Veg 2 – Erosion Prevention and Control, WatUses – 2 Water Wells for Production and Monitoring, and Road 9 - Parking and Staging Areas. More specifically, those BMPs include practices such as: the top of the well should be at an elevation above flooding depths to ensure that no sediment or material enters the well, during construction heavy machinery should be stage outside of the ordinary high water mark, a spill kit should be on site during the length of implementation, and any contamination should be immediately cleaned and removed outside of the floodplain. Additionally, the abandoned well should be effectively decommissioned per state standards, and a notification to the state of abandonment should be provided. In regards to the construction of the new corral and access routes the following BMP

practices are recommended in order to minimize surface runoff and erosion: avoid construction after rain or snow events to minimize soil compaction and surface runoff, apply appropriate drainage features for new/improved transportation segments including the new turn around area.

- 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 road areas or potential wilderness areas.
- e. **Research natural areas.** The project is outside of research natural areas, and therefore no discussion is warranted.
- f. **American Indian religious or cultural sites; and archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** –. The Tonto Basin Ranger District Range staff is proposing to allow an existing permittee to make multiple improvements to an existing corral and the associated infrastructure to better manage the loading and movement of livestock. This includes expanding the existing corral to include holding pens, improving access routes to the corral, and creating a turnaround area (map 1). Footings for the expanded corral would be dug every 6'-8' with an auger and then cemented in place. Vegetation in an area measuring approx. 55m north-south by 35m east-west would then be cleared of vegetation to allow for a full-sized trailer to pull in and backup to east side of the new corral.

Public Involvement

On (date), the project was posted on PALS and then on (date) 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). No further discussion of this is necessary.
- 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, Range Supervisor, Tonto Basin Ranger District, 28097 Highway 188, Roosevelt, AZ, 85545, 480-435-5563.

5/14/24

Jeremy Plain
District Ranger

Date

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Appendix A



