

# Decision Notice for the Ike's Backbone Allotment

USDA Forest Service  
Red Rock Ranger District  
Coconino National Forest  
Yavapai County, State

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## Introduction

The Ike's Grazing Allotment includes an area of approximately 3,057 acres, which has been grazed under Forest Service management since 1920. Approximately 2,370 acres, or about 78% of the allotment is located in designated wilderness. Although the allotment is over 3,000 acres in size, grazing areas are limited due to steep slopes and limited water. Prior to 2001, approximately 20 cattle grazed the allotment from April 1 to October 31. Since 2001 the allotment has been vacant. While there have been comments from the permittee or the permittee's representative that the allotment has been grazed since this time, there is no evidence that grazing on the allotment has occurred in either the Annual Operating Instructions or Bills for Collection associated with this allotment or the co-managed Skeleton Ridge Allotment files.

Between the years 1920-1964, the number of cattle grazing the allotment went from 21 to over 100 cattle grazing from November 1 to May 31. A 1964 allotment analysis determined that the allotment was in poor condition and the number of livestock grazing the allotment was reduced to 93 head (USDA Forest Service 1965). Management of the allotment included 93 head of cattle as late as 1986.

Between 1986 and 1995, the number of livestock on the allotment was decreased down to 30 head of cattle from October 21 to May 31 each season.

Beginning in 1989, the permit was transferred to another permittee who also operated the adjacent Skeleton Ridge Allotment on the Tonto National Forest. As a result, the administration of the permit was transferred to the Tonto National Forest, which issued a new term grazing permit including both the Skeleton Ridge and Ike's Backbone allotments. The Ike's Backbone Allotment was authorized for 20 head from April 1 to October 31.

Due to the difficult access on the allotment and the limited forage resulting from steep slopes and lack of water, records indicate that the allotment was not grazed during the years 2000 to the present.

In 2004, a Comprehensive River Management Plan for the Verde River was approved, which prohibited the access of livestock along the Verde River and resulted in the installation of fencing to affect this prohibition. In 2005, the nearby Childs-Irving Hydroelectric Facilities were decommissioned and the flumes that provided water to the hydroelectric dam and were used to fill two tanks on the allotment no longer carried water. The removal of water to fill tanks on the allotment for livestock watering effectively ended the potential for using the allotment during the summer months.

In 2008, the range permittee asked that the administration of the allotment be returned to the Coconino National Forest, and inquired about the possibility of using the allotment during the winter months or trading his permit for another nearby allotment. The Coconino National Forest identified that this would result in an increase in livestock grazing along Fossil Creek (which would be the only viable water source due to the removal of other previously existing water sources), and that reintroducing the livestock would likely require additional NEPA to address this issue.

In spring of 2009, Fossil Creek was designated as a Wild and Scenic River by Congress. This designation included approximately 16.8 miles from the confluence of Sand Rock and Calf Pen Canyons to the confluence with the Verde River. Approximately 783 acres of the designated Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River corridor overlaps with the boundaries of the Ike's Backbone Allotment. The designation itself does not include management requirements specific to livestock grazing. However, the designation does require the agency to manage for protection or enhancement of outstandingly remarkable values. Outstandingly remarkable values including fish and macroinvertebrates, soil stability and soil erosion, water quality and clarity, recreational satisfaction, upland and bosque vegetation, and wildlife populations could be degraded if grazing is reintroduced without adequate management.

The purpose and need for this project is to close an allotment that is not been feasible for grazing or Forest Service administration of livestock grazing. Due to topography and steep slopes, the amount of available forage is relatively low and would support approximately 20 cows for one month. For the allotment to be used, an extensive amount of fencing (over 8 miles) would be required to confine livestock to avoid and/or minimize impacts from grazing in sensitive streamside areas and designated wilderness. Fencing would be required to ensure cattle do not graze along the banks of Fossil Creek so as not to degrade outstandingly remarkable values and violate Forest Plan requirements for recovery of riparian vegetation. Boundary and enclosure fencing would need to be relocated out of flood plains and outside of designated wilderness and on the eastern boundary, fencing would need to be constructed to avoid livestock impacts to wilderness character and prevent livestock grazing along Fossil Creek. The need for the project is consistent with direction in the Coconino National Forest Plan which directs environmental analyses for allotment management plans to consider economic feasibility and practicality of implementation (USDA Forest Service 1987).

The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of the proposed action and no action alternatives to meet this need.

## **Decision and Reasons for the Decision**

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action which administratively closes the allotment to permitted livestock grazing and authorizes the removal of some existing improvements (such as any remaining non-functional water tanks, unnecessary pasture fencing and fence along the Verde Wild and Scenic River), when feasible.

When compared to the no action alternative, this alternative will reduce the potential for future livestock grazing and thus remove the potential for impacts to wildlife, fish, and rare plants and their habitat from livestock grazing over the long-term (>10 years). This alternative would also remove existing, unmaintained fencing, which would benefit wildlife and wildlife habitat by reducing the potential for fragmentation and entanglement hazard.

The Ike's Backbone Allotment has not been grazed for over 15 years, and none of the public comments received expressed an interest in reintroducing livestock grazing on the allotment. There has been no grazing on the allotment due to a number of changes including the decommissioning of Childs-Irving Hydroelectric Facilities, which removed a key potential drinking water source for livestock, and because of changes in law and policy including the designation of Fossil Creek as a Wild and Scenic River and the establishment of the Verde Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan. In addition to these changes, the water tanks and other facilities on the allotment, such as fences, have not been comprehensively maintained. All of these changes have substantially increased the likely costs of livestock grazing while also increasing the potential impacts of unmanaged livestock grazing to forest resources. The efforts and costs associated with re-establishing the range infrastructure to manage livestock grazing and the very limited amount of forage available makes it extremely unlikely that permitted livestock grazing will be viable on the allotment now or in the future. Administratively closing this allotment to livestock grazing under the chosen alternative reduces uncertainty and provides clear management direction into the future to limit conflict and improve progress toward Forest management goals.

This alternative meets requirements under applicable laws, regulations and policies including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Wilderness Act, the National Forest Management Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and relevant regulations and policy.

## **Other Alternatives Considered**

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered a No Action alternative, which would not remove existing grazing improvements and would allow consideration of any future grazing applications. This alternative was not chosen because it does not address the economic, environmental, or management issues associated with the allotment, which has resulted in a lack of livestock grazing for the last 15 years. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA on pages 13-44.

I also considered two other alternatives including a Modified Grazing alternative and a Current Management alternative. These alternatives were eliminated from detailed study because it was determined that the Modified Grazing alternative was not economically viable, and the Current Management alternative was the same as the No Action alternative. More information on these alternatives considered, but eliminated from detailed study can be found in the EA on pages 11-12.



## **Public Involvement and Scoping**

As described in the background, the need for this action arose in 2015. The Ike's Backbone Allotment project was posted in the Coconino National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in April of 2015.

A news release requesting comments on the proposed action was released on April 30, 2015. An email (GovDelivery bulletin) with the scoping proposal was sent to 206 interested parties.

On May 5, 2015, the proposed action was emailed to the former permittee's representative and the former permittee was contacted via telephone and advised that the scoping period was underway. The former permittee called back on May 14, 2015 and requested standing. The former permittee was contacted on May 19, 2015 and encouraged to send specific, written comments in alignment with the requirements of 36 CFR 218 (predecisional objection process). On May 19, 2015 the former permittee's representative was contacted by the Red Rock Ranger District's range program manager and advised of the scoping proposal and comment timeframe. No written response was submitted by the former permittee during the scoping process.

In response to scoping efforts, four written (e-mail) comments were received by May 14, 2015, including one comment from the Yavapai Apache Nation. All comments were in support of the proposed action, and issues were identified based on interdisciplinary team input.

Once issues were identified and alternatives developed from scoping responses, a preliminary Environmental Assessment and 30-day comment period was published in the Red Rock News on October 7, 2016. Notification of the availability of the Environmental Assessment and the 30-day comment period was e-mailed and postal mailed to 195 individuals and organizations. Seven responses were received, 5 of which were received during the 30-day comment period. No new key issues were identified from comments that were not already addressed through the proposed action or in the environmental analysis. A response to comments document is available in the project record and on the project webpage; <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=46354>.

On March 31, 2017, a legal notice was published in the Sedona Red Rock News to announce the establishment of an objection filing period and the availability of the final Environmental Assessment and draft Decision Notice. No objections or other communications were received on this draft decision during the 45-day objection filing period.

## **Finding of No Significant Impact**

A summary of the project analysis to determine significance, is included in the EA on pages 44 – 47. The effects of this project have been appropriately and thoroughly considered with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. The agency has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

## **Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations**

### *National Forest Management Act (NFMA)*

This decision to administratively close the Ike's Backbone Allotment is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for range resource planning (Coconino National Forest Plan, pages 66-1 - 69-1), for



the Verde Wild and Scenic River (Coconino National Forest Plan, pages 113 – 115-5), and the Verde Valley Management Area (Coconino National Forest Plan, pages 166 - 170).

On April 9, 2012 the Department of Agriculture issued a final planning rule for National Forest System land management planning (2012 Rule) [77 FR 68 \[21162-21276\]](#). None of the requirements of the 2012 Rule apply to projects and activities on the Coconino National Forest, as the Coconino Forest Plan was developed under a prior planning rule (36 CFR §219.17(c)).

### *Endangered Species Act*

A Biological Assessment for the project was written to analyze effects to 11 Endangered, Threatened or Candidate species. A concurrence from the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) was received on March 31, 2017, which concurred that the proposed action "may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect" the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), the threatened yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) and its proposed critical habitat, the threatened narrow-headed gartersnake (*Thamnophis rufipunctatus*) and its proposed critical habitat, the threatened northern Mexican gartersnake (*Thamnophis eques mega/ops*) and its proposed critical habitat, the endangered razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen lexanus*) and its critical habitat, the endangered loach minnow (*Tiaroga cobitis*) and its critical habitat, the endangered spikedace (*Medafulgida*) and its critical habitat, and the endangered Gila topminnow (*Poeci/iopsis occidenta/is occidenta/is*). The Forest Service also determined, and the FWS concurred, that the proposed action would not jeopardize the continued existence of the experimental, non-essential 10 (j) population of Colorado pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus lucius*), the proposed threatened roundtail chub (*Gila robusta*), and the proposed threatened headwater chub (*Gila nigra*). The biological assessment of closing the Ike's Backbone allotment found that the effects would be wholly beneficial as all potential direct and indirect effects to the aforementioned species and their potential habitat from livestock grazing would be eliminated.

### **Implementation**

No objections were filed on the published draft decision for the closure of the Ike's Backbone Allotment to livestock grazing within the 45-day objection period that occurred from April 1 through May 30, 2017. Implementation may begin immediately.

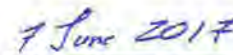
Minor changes may be needed during implementation to better meet onsite resource management and protection objectives. If these changes may require further review through the NEPA process, I will consider the criteria to supplement an existing environmental impact statement in 40 CFR 1502.9(c) and FSH 1909.15, sec. 18, and in particular, determine whether the proposed change is a substantial change to the intent of the selected alternative as planned and already approved, and whether the change is relevant to environmental concerns.

For further information concerning the Ike's Backbone Allotment Project, contact Mike Dechter, 928-527-3416, [mdechter@fs.fed.us](mailto:mdechter@fs.fed.us).

Approved by:



NICOLE BRANTON  
Red Rock District Ranger



Date

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