

**DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

Long Gulch Livestock Grazing

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

INTRODUCTION

The Long Gulch livestock grazing allotment is located on the Prescott National Forest in the Agua Fria Grasslands approximately 12 miles southeast of Cordes Junction, Arizona and involves about 12,200 acres of National Forest System lands. It includes an area north and west of Granite Peak and south and east of 22 Mesa in T.10 & 11 N, R.4 & 5 E, Gila and Salt River Meridian.

This document describes my decision and the reasons for it regarding the Long Gulch Livestock Grazing analysis on the Verde Ranger District of the Prescott National Forest. It also describes my finding regarding the need to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

My decision and finding is based on the Environmental Assessment (EA) of the proposed action and alternatives that follows standards established in the Prescott National Forest Plan, the goals of the Agua Fria Grasslands Coalition, and applies Best management Practices.

DECISION AND RATIONALE

It is my decision to implement **Alternative 2 – Proposed Action (Current Management)** that contains the following elements:

1. A new 10-year term permit will be issued authorizing grazing for an average of 200 cattle using a yearlong season under a four pasture deferred rotation system.
2. A variable numbers clause will be a part of the permit. This will allow for movement of cattle into and off the allotment as part of the permittee's larger cattle operation that includes the adjacent Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Box Bar grazing allotment.
3. Forage utilization guidelines on key species in key areas will be applied.
4. Salting and supplements will be used to improve livestock distribution and encourage greater use of side slopes.
5. Hand thinning of juniper trees in a critical antelope travel corridor will be conducted to improve sight distance for antelope.
6. Fences and water developments will be upgraded to current antelope and wildlife standards.
7. The Agua Fria Grasslands prescribed burning program will continue as will continued grazing coordination with the Bureau of Land Management.

I have chosen this alternative for the following reasons:

- ❑ The selected alternative will manage livestock grazing to complement and achieve resource objectives. It is consistent with Forest Plan management emphasis and resource conditions will be maintained or trend toward the desired condition for the Agua Fria Grassland Ecosystem.
- ❑ Cattle will be in only one unit at a time to ensure adequate recovery rest and proposed permitted numbers are sustainable on the allotment.
- ❑ Grass/forbs ground cover will continue to maintain the watershed in a satisfactory condition. Vegetative ground cover, plant density, and plant vigor are at or near potential and will continue to improve or be maintained.
- ❑ Wildlife habitat and species diversity will be maintained or enhanced. Non-uniform utilization and full cover in rested pastures will add to the structural diversity of the grasslands. Impacts to riparian habitat will be lessened through implementation of established utilization standards. Chaparral and woodland habitat impacts will be minimal due to light utilization in those areas. Juniper thinning along a known antelope travel corridor will improve sight distance reducing the potential for predation and encouraging the continued use of the travel way. Maintenance of range improvements to wildlife standards will improve wildlife access and habitat quality.
- ❑ Cumulative effects of actions on the allotment are generally considered to be beneficial.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Five alternatives were developed by the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) based on the ability of the alternative to meet Forest Plan standards, the goals of the Agua Fria Grasslands Coalition, and Best Management Practices as well as addressing public concerns. Four alternatives created to specifically address public concerns were not considered in detail as the IDT felt those concerns were captured in the Proposed Action.

The following alternatives were considered in detail:

Alternative 1 - No Action (No Grazing)

This alternative addresses no grazing. The Long Gulch grazing term permit would be allowed to expire in 2001 and livestock would be removed from the allotment. Removal would take up to five years with a minimum of 20% reduction in the 200 permitted livestock per year. The Forest Service would assume responsibility for the interior facilities (fences, developed water, pipelines, etc.) that may be retained or removed. The adjacent grazing allotment permit holders would assume allotment boundary fence maintenance. Private land boundary fences would remain intact. Management activities for other resources such as facilities maintenance, wildlife, fire management, and recreation would continue as funding is secured.

Alternative 2 – Proposed Action (Current Management)

This alternative provides for the issuance of a new 10-year term permit authorizing continued grazing. The authorization would be for an average of 200 cattle for a yearlong season (a

variable numbers clause would be included) under a deferred rotation system moving through four pastures, one at a time. Salt and supplements would be used to encourage better use of the side slopes. Utilization standards of 40% on grama and tobosa grasses during the growing season, 50% on those species during the dormant season, 30% utilization on browse species, and 20% utilization on riparian vegetation would be used to regulate movement between pastures.

The variable numbers clause would allow for movement of cattle into and off the allotment as part of the permit holder's larger cattle operation that includes the adjacent Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Box Bar allotment. The main cattle herd grazes an average of about ½ of the year on the Long Gulch and the other ½ year on the Box Bar allotment. Stocking has varied from a high of 425 to a low of 280 cattle, averaging about 380, since this rotation began in 1992.

In association with this grazing strategy, there would be hand thinning of juniper trees in the east pronghorn antelope travel corridor and a planned upgrade of existing fences and water developments to wildlife and antelope standards. The Agua Fria Grasslands prescribed burning program will continue as will continued grazing coordination with the BLM. Although no new range facilities have been identified, limited improvement of existing waters such as additional storage, pipelines and troughs may be needed.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

Public participation was encouraged throughout the planning process. The public was notified of the proposal through the Prescott Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning in 1997 and continuing through to the present. In June 1997 a copy of the proposed action was distributed to 60 individuals, groups, and agencies. These individuals and organizations included grazing permittees, interested individuals, State and Federal resource management agencies, and other special interest organizations. As a result of this scoping process Jeff Williams, Tempe AZ; Jeff Burgess, Tempe AZ; Jack Bohning, Society of Range Management, Prescott AZ; Jerry Mundell, Camp Verde AZ; and David Brown, Antelope Foundation, Phoenix AZ provided scoping information.

The current holder of the term grazing permit for the Long gulch allotment was consulted and participated in the development of the action alternative.

Natalie Robb and Kyle Cooper of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, participated in the survey of Indian Creek on the BLM administered Box Bar allotment.

A legal notice posted in the *Daily Courier* (Prescott Arizona) on January 24, 2001 invited the public to comment on the environmental assessment. At the same time copies of the assessment were sent to those who had supplied scoping information or otherwise participated in the development of the assessment. One additional copy was sent in response to a request generated from the legal notice. Two individuals reviewed the project record. Seven people/organizations responded with comments. Those comments and agency responses are a part of the project record.

FINDINGS

This decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. I have summarized some below:

Federal Land Policy and Management Act - The regulations at 36 CFR 251 guide the issuance of permits, leases, and easements under this Act. Permits, leases, and easements are granted for occupancy, use, or crossing of National Forest System lands when the need for such is consistent with planned uses and Forest Service policy and regulations. This decision is consistent with this Act.

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act) - This Act requires the development of long-range land and resource management plans (Forest Plans). The Prescott Forest Plan was approved on August 4, 1987, as required by this Act. The plan provides for guidance for all natural resource management activities on the Forest. The Act requires all projects and activities to be consistent with the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan has been reviewed in consideration of this project. This decision is responsive to guiding direction contained in the Plan.

Endangered Species Act - The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered, or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical habitat. In accordance with Section 7 (c) of this Act, potential effects of this decision on listed species have been analyzed and documented. It was determined that this decision will have 'no effect' on listed species or their critical habitats.

Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670) - This Manual direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species, those species for which population viability is a concern. Potential effects of this decision on sensitive species have been analyzed and documented. This decision will have no adverse impact on sensitive species.

Clean Water Act - This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices. This decision incorporates Best Management Practices to ensure protection of soil and water resources, in compliance with this Act.

Floodplains - Executive Order 11988 is to avoid adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Floodplains are defined by this order as, "... the lowland and relatively flat areas adjoining inland and coastal waters ... including at a minimum, that area subject to a one percent or greater chance of flooding in any one year." The only identified floodplains on the Forest are in the Verde River Valley (FP FEIS, p. 102). Smaller floodplains associated with drainages in the project area are present, however, this decision will not adversely affect any of them.

Wetlands - Executive Order 11990 is to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands. Wetlands are defined by this order as, "... areas inundated by surface or ground water with a frequency sufficient to support and under normal circumstances does or

would support a prevalence of vegetative or aquatic life that requires saturated or seasonally saturated soil conditions for growth and reproduction.” This decision will not adversely affect wetlands as these areas only occur as small spots associated with springs or bedrock pools in some of the drainages.

Municipal Watersheds - This decision will not affect municipal watersheds. There are no identified municipal watersheds within the project area.

Clean Air Act – Under this Act areas for Prevention of Significant Deterioration were designated as Class I, II, or III air sheds. Class I areas generally include national parks and wilderness areas. Class I provides the most protection to lands by severely limiting the amount of additional human-caused air pollution that can be added to these areas. The Pine Mountain Wilderness (a part of the project) is a Class I air shed. The remainder of the project is classified as a Class II air shed. Arizona Department of Environmental Quality regulates prescribed burning in the state in accordance with the State Implementation Plan (SIP). Prescribed burning in this decision will coordinate with the State and follow the SIP.

National Historic Preservation Act, Archaeological Resources Protection Act, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act - Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to take into account the effect of a project on any district, site, building, structure, or object that is included in, or eligible for inclusion in the National Register. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act also requires federal agencies to afford the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation a reasonable opportunity to comment.

The Archaeological Resources Protection Act covers the discovery and protection of historic properties (prehistoric and historic) that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It affords lawful protection of archaeological resources and sites that are on public and Indian lands.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act covers the discovery and protection of Native American human remains and objects that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It encourages avoidance of archaeological sites that contain burials or portions of sites that contain graves through “in situ” preservation, but may encompass other actions to preserve these remains and items. This decision complies with the cited Acts. Surveys have been conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties on areas that may be affected by this project. A ‘no effect’ determination was made. Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office is not required for this project because the project is covered under a Programmatic Agreement regarding cultural property protection and responsibilities between the Arizona State Historic Preservation Office and the Forest Service.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) - This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision-making. Public involvement did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income populations. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

National Environmental Policy Act - This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The entirety of documentation for this decision supports compliance with this Act.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined that this is not a major federal action and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required. This determination is based on the following factors, substantiated in the environmental assessment and project record.

1. Beneficial and adverse impacts were considered and there will be very few localized, short-term adverse effects. The overall long-term effects will be beneficial.
2. Public health and safety will not be adversely affected.
3. There are no unique characteristics about this geographic area not found elsewhere on the District or National Forest. There are no significant historic resources that would be impacted. There are no prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas that would be affected. There will be no significant adverse impacts to minority groups, civil rights, women, consumers or environmental justice.
4. This is not a major action within the context of the forest Plan or the historic level of management activity for the area.
5. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. The public was involved during the analysis and reviewed the environmental assessment. While some people have disagreed with portions of the project, no one has provided evidence that the effects of the project have been wrongly predicted.
6. Effects are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.
7. The grazing activities to be implemented will not establish a precedent for future actions or represent a decision in principle, because they are not a major departure from types of activities now common to the Prescott National Forest. Additionally, this decision does not commit me to actions on lands outside the project area. Finally, the grazing activities are within guidelines established by the Forest Plan.
8. Cumulative effects of past, present, and foreseeable future projects have been considered and evaluated and do not substantially add to the effects described for the selected alternative. With the exception of routine maintenance activities, all known connected actions associated with the selected activities likely to occur in the future have been identified in the assessment and the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects disclosed. They do not create any cumulatively significant impacts.
9. The action will not adversely affect districts, sites, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National register of Historic Places. Cultural resources will be adequately protected by mitigation measures and other requirements.
10. All known or possible endangered or threatened species were considered. The selected alternative will have no effect on endangered or threatened species or their habitats.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal by the public in accordance with 36 CFR 215.7 or by permit holders in accordance with either 36 CFR 251 subpart C or 36 CFR 215 but not under both rules.

To appeal this decision under 36 CFR 215, a person must submit a Notice of Appeal, in writing, fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14 with the Appeal Deciding Officer, Southwestern Regional Forester, 517 Gold Ave SW, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102 within 45 days from the date of publication of the legal notice of the decision in the Prescott Arizona *Daily Courier*.

To appeal this decision under 36 CFR 251 subpart C, a person must submit a written Notice of Appeal to Michael R. King, Forest Supervisor, 344 S. Cortez Street, Prescott, Arizona 86303 and simultaneously send a copy of the Notice to Appeal to Thomas D. Bonomo, Verde District Ranger, P.O. Box 670, Camp Verde, Arizona 86322 within 45 days from the date of publication of the legal notice of the decision in the Prescott Arizona *Daily Courier*.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation may begin 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period established in the notice of decision legal ad posted in the Prescott Arizona *Daily Courier*. If an appeal is filed, the project can be implemented beginning 15 business days following disposition of all appeals.

For further information contact, Doug MacPhee or Craig Steedman, Verde Ranger District, P.O. Box 670, Camp Verde, Arizona, 86322; telephone (520) 567-4121.

SIGNATURE

THOMAS D. BONOMO
District Ranger
Verde Ranger District
Prescott National Forest

DATE 5/15/01

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