



Decision Memo

Ortega Pasture Fence Project

USDA Forest Service
Tonto National Forest
Globe Ranger District
Gila County, Arizona

Background

The project is located north of Globe, Arizona, adjacent to the Salt River Canyon and near the end of Forest Service Road 219 (Horseshoe Bend Road). Topographical features of the project area are variable and include near level land and steep rock escarpments. The specific location for the fence improvements referenced can be found in the Project Geodatabase in the project record at the Tonto National Supervisor's Office.

Purpose and Need

The Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI) is a widely used drought index that calculates precipitation anomalies at different timescales and interprets SPI units (standard deviations) in probabilistic (likelihood) terms. This index is the initial measure used in Southwestern Region Drought Policy for rangeland management, which states that any time the index "...falls to a negative one (-1) or less for the preceding 12-month period, grazing allotments should be evaluated for existing drought conditions" (Region 3 Manual Supplement to Forest Service Handbook 2209.13.19.1). In addition, the Tonto National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) directs grazing management when rangeland is in less than satisfactory condition. This can be achieved with the installation of structural and non-structural improvements to better distribute cattle, protect wildlife habitat, and in some instances providing wildlife with additional reliable water sources.

Currently, across the Tonto National Forest, the SPI is negative two (-2), and in some places even lower, according to research conducted by the University of Arizona¹. Because of these conditions, Forest Service regulations, and Forest Plan direction, allotment improvements are being authorized across the forest.

¹ <https://uaclimateextension.shinyapps.io/SPItool/>

Decision

I have decided to authorize the following range improvements on the Hicks Pikes Peak Allotment. These improvements will consist of the installation of two fences, which will allow continued access to private property, administrative and other authorized use of Forest Service Road 219, and limit motor vehicle use.

Access to the fence line will be on existing routes: Forest Service Roads 2506—currently closed to public access—and 219. Motorized equipment will be used to access the fence line. The fence will be constructed of piperail, using welding and posthole drilling tools. The portion of the fence in the Salt River Canyon Wilderness—less than 10 percent of the total fencing necessary—will be installed using non-motorized/mechanized tools and the fence will be constructed using t-posts and four strand wire. Access points for fence installation were identified and the fence placement was designed to avoid surveyed cultural resources, and Salt River viewshed in the project area.

Specifically, fence and gate construction will meet the following:

- All wire will be spliced and repaired and re-stretched to keep tension. Wire splices will be made with 12 gauge size tie wire or type of wire used in initial construction.
- Top wire on all range fences should be kept at 42 inches in height, and bottom wire should be smooth and 18 inches above ground.
- Wire gate tension should be sufficient to prevent gate from sagging and still be easily opened and closed. Gate loops are made of smooth wire, not barbed wire.
- Piperail should be buried deep enough and the hole filled with concrete to prevent vandalism and damage in a flood event.
- A walkthrough fence gap should be constructed in the pipe rail segment in the wash that allows for people to walk through the fence but would prevent any motorized access or livestock to pass through.

This decision includes the following design features for resource protection:

- The fence portion within the Salt River Canyon Wilderness will be constructed beyond the view shed—where it cannot readily be seen by river-going users.
- The fence portion in the Salt River Canyon Wilderness will be constructed with non-reflective materials and without prohibited tools.
- Motor vehicle use access to the fences will be on existing roads, where practicable. Existing routes or the shortest, most direct route to the install and maintain the fence must be used and new route construction (i.e. blading a path or using the same route repetitively over a short period of time) is not allowed without additional environmental analysis and authorization. Cross-country motorized travel is not allowed when conditions will cause unacceptable natural and/or heritage resource damage.
- Disturbance to obligate riparian vegetation should be minimized including but not limited to willows, cottonwoods, and sycamores.
- New fence will be minimally brushed with chainsaws, no heavy equipment.
- District Ranger will authorize construction of the fences through a permit modification.

Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Proposed Actions

My assessment is that this proposal falls within the categories of actions listed in the Forest Service *National Environmental Policy Act* Regulations that are excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. This category is 36 CFR 220.6(e)(9) “Implementation or modification of minor management practices to improve allotment condition....”

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:

- a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species** – According to the Tonto National Forest Botanist, the range improvements are not proposed within known TES species habitat.

According to the District Wildlife Biologist, southwest willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) and narrow-headed gartersnake (*Thamnophis rufipunctatus*) are present within the project area. The project may have negative effects on individual sensitive species but would not trend the population toward federal listing. Nearly all of the fencing is more than a quarter mile from river floodplain, which minimizes impacts to these species. Additionally, the installation and maintenance of the fence will meet Forest Plan and agency manual standards for wildlife.

- b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** – According to the Tonto National Forest Hydrologist, this project will not affect perennial streams, springs, mapped floodplains, or mapped riparian areas. The riparian vegetation in and along the wash is primarily mesquite and xeric riparian shrubs. This vegetation should not be impacted by the project. Water resource related permits are not needed.

- c. Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** – According to the District Recreation Staff, the portion of this project is within the designated Salt River Canyon Wilderness. If this project is implemented as described above, impacts to wilderness values will be minimal. In addition, a small portion of the fence will be installed within the river corridor of the river segment that is eligible under the Wild and Scenic River Act. This project will very minimally affect the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for scenery and recreation because most of it will be obscured by existing vegetation and will likely go unperceived by the vast majority of river users.

- d. Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas** – According to the District Recreation Staff, this project is not within any of these areas, thus there are no effects.

- e. Research natural areas** – According to the District Recreation Staff, this project is not within any of these areas, thus there are no effects.

- f. American Indian religious or cultural sites; and archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – According to the Tonto National Forest Archaeologist, the project area



has been surveyed and all cultural resources have been flagged and will be required to be avoided during implementation. This will result in no impacts to cultural resources.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision is consistent with the Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan. The project was designed in conformance with the Forest Plan and other federal and state law, policy, and direction applicable to the resources present in the Tonto National Forest. *The National Forest Management Act of 1976* (Public Law 104-33, as amended) requires the 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. The Forest Plan discloses forestwide standards and guidelines and management area direction.

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 appeal. I anticipate implementing this project immediately or as soon as feasible.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Mike Eytchison, Rangeland Management Specialist, Globe and Mesa Ranger Districts, 7680 S Six-shooter Canyon Rd. Globe AZ, 85501 or email at meytchison@fs.fed.us.

Andrea Jamie Wages
Acting Globe District Ranger

7/19/2018

Date

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