



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Partridge Creek Allotment Authorization Project

Final Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Williams Ranger District, Kaibab National Forest, Coconino County, Arizona

February 2021



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¹ The environmental analysis for this project is conducted according to the Council on Environmental Quality’s 1978 regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR §§1500-1508, as amended). The CEQ issued revised regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act, effective September 14, 2020. The revised regulations provide the responsible official the option of conducting an environmental analysis under the 1978 regulations if the process was initiated prior to September 14, 2020 (40 CFR §1506.13, 85 FR 137, p. 43373, July 16, 2020). This project was listed as “in progress” on the Schedule of Proposed Actions on 10/16/2019, and was therefore initiated before the effective date of the revised CEQ regulations. Any references to the regulations at 40 CFR 1500-1508 in this document refer to the 1978 regulations.

Background Information

Partridge Creek Allotment is located six miles north of the town of Ash Fork, on the Williams Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest (NF). The allotment is bordered by state and private lands to the north, west and south, and by the Double A Wild Burro Territory and the Double A Allotment to the east. Partridge Creek Allotment is approximately 24,985 acres in size with approximately 24,622 acres managed by the Kaibab NF and approximately 363 acres of private land managed by the landowners (table 1). This decision does not apply to management of private lands as the Forest Service does not have jurisdiction. The major vegetation types found on the allotment are pinyon/juniper woodland (approximately 22,255 acres) and Colorado Plateau/Great Basin grassland (approximately 2,367 acres).

Table 1: Pastures Within the Partridge Creek Allotment Boundary

Pastures	Acres*
Big Aso	4,214
Big Aso Trap	16
Big Bill Trap	95
Bull Trap	900
Heifer**	3
House Traps	258
Indian	4,121
Little Aso	6,770
Murray Trap	158
South	6,530
West Trap	1,557
Total	24,622

*Acreage reflects National Forest System acres only; all acres are approximate.

**Heifer Pasture totals 714 acres, 711 of which fall outside of the Kaibab NF boundary and are not applicable to this analysis.

Livestock grazing has occurred intermittently on Partridge Creek Allotment since the late 1800s and was historically grazed during the spring and summer months. A 1995 grazing analysis resulted in the season of use changing from spring/summer to winter/spring. Since 1995 the maximum permitted head of livestock has been 225 cow/calf, with 95 head deferred until monitoring indicates conditions have improved. The grazing season has been November 1 through April 30, for a total of 1,904 animal unit months (AUMs). The 1995 Allotment Management Plan (AMP) describes the current grazing strategy as allowing the annual authorized number of livestock to split into 3-5 herds and simultaneously graze the main pastures (Indian, Big Aso, Little Aso, and South Pastures) during the non-growth period (November 1 through March 15). Pasture(s) grazed during the growth period (March 15-April 30) were to be deferred from grazing for at least two, and if possible three years. This strategy was and still is impractical and difficult to implement due to the suggested number of years a pasture(s) would be removed from livestock use for part of the grazing season, limiting the flexibility for livestock management on the allotment.

Introduction

The Kaibab NF has completed a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review of a proposal to authorize livestock grazing on the Partridge Creek Allotment and to install new structures which includes a water pipeline, trick tanks, troughs, stock pond, and an expansion of the current holding facility. These structures would be installed throughout the allotment, which would increase flexibility of range land management through adoption of an adaptive management and a drought management strategy.

The purpose of this project is to determine whether to continue to authorize livestock grazing on Partridge Creek Allotment. Additionally, this project would assist in the determination of how to implement grazing while ensuring livestock management activities are consistent with other resource desired conditions on National Forest System (NFS) lands as stated in the Forest Plan (USDA 2014). There is a need to adjust the permitted season of

use and grazing strategy to allow for increased flexibility for livestock management on the allotment. There is also a need to construct additional water facilities to increase flexibility in addressing future drought concerns. This project would allow the Forest Service and the livestock producer to use adaptive management for changing resource conditions or management objectives while being in compliance with Forest Service Policy (Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 2209.13 Chapter 90).

All documents located in the project record, including the EA, are incorporated by reference and should be reviewed concurrently with this decision notice (DN) and finding of no significant impact (FONSI) (40 CFR 1502.21). This includes all specialist reports and other technical documentation used to support the analysis and conclusions for this project. The full project record is located at the Williams Ranger District in Williams, AZ and is available upon request.

Decision and Rationale

I have reviewed the Partridge Creek Allotment Authorization Project’s final environmental assessment (EA) and considered the environmental effects and public comments disclosed within the EA. Based on my review, my decision is to select the proposed action to best meet the purpose of and need for this project as outlined in the final EA as well as in this DN. The chosen alternative provides for livestock management activities on the Williams Ranger District of the Kaibab NF that are consistent with the Forest Plan desired conditions for livestock management and the Forest Service’s multiple use land management mandate.

By managing for resistant and resilient ecosystems, promoting landscape connectivity, and implementing concepts of adaptive management, land and resource management plans can provide the framework for responding to new information and changing conditions related to climate change that have the potential to increase impacts to ecosystem risks. The Kaibab NF is using adaptive management to help minimize adverse effects of ecological and socioeconomic impacts of climate change regarding livestock grazing. This is consistent with the Forest Plan desired conditions for livestock grazing for opportunities to engage in ranching activities and graze livestock on National Forest System lands. These activities contribute to the stability and social, economic, and cultural aspects of rural communities.

The final EA, DN and FONSI refer to mitigation measures relating to botany and noxious weeds, soils and watersheds, and cultural resources. These mitigation measures are an integral and required component of this decision and are intended to avoid or lessen the potential effects associated with the activities. All project mitigation measures that apply to this decision and associated analysis can be found within the final EA and are listed below.

Proposed Action

The Williams Ranger District of the Kaibab NF proposes to continue to authorize livestock grazing on the Partridge Creek Allotment under updated parameters identified in table 2 as well as construction of improvements throughout the allotment.

The permit holder would assume financial responsibility for construction and maintenance of proposed improvements.

Table 2: Proposed Specifications for Livestock Authorization on Partridge Creek Allotment in Relation to Current Management

Proposed Action	Details	Change from Current Management	Number of Acres Impacted by Construction of New Structural Improvements
Permitted Animal Unit Months (AUMs)	Up to 1,904	None	N/A
Season of Use	October 15-May 31	Extension of 48 days	N/A
Permitted Number of Head*	252 cattle for full season of use	Reduction of 68 cattle**	N/A

Proposed Action	Details	Change from Current Management	Number of Acres Impacted by Construction of New Structural Improvements
Grazing System	Continuous, deferred rotation, rest rotation or a combination of any of these	More options for grazing systems	N/A
Forage Utilization Guideline	Conservative level of utilization (30-40%)	None	N/A
Seasonal Utilization Guideline	Conservative level of seasonal utilization (30-40%)	None	N/A
Expansion of Holding Facility	Approximately 1 mile of new fence construction expanding the existing holding facility by approximately 100 acres	New construction	Approximately 2 Acres
New Pipeline Construction	Approximately 2 miles of buried OR surface pipeline	New construction	Approximately 8 Acres
New Troughs	3 new troughs located in South Pasture	New construction	Approximately 1.5 Acres
New Earthen Stock Ponds	1 in Little Aso Pasture; 1 in Big Aso Pasture	New construction	Approximately 6 Acres
New Trick Tank	1 new trick tank in South Pasture	New construction	Approximately 3 Acres

**This number can be adjusted based on actual season of use and current conditions but would not exceed permitted AUMs.
 **Compared to total of 320 currently permitted. Inaccuracy in the description in preliminary EA has been corrected.*

Range Improvements

Existing Structural Improvements

Maintenance of existing range improvements on the Partridge Creek Allotment would be assigned to the grazing permit holder. These improvements would be kept to current Forest Service guidelines for range improvements. Existing improvements would not need to be modified until reconstruction is warranted. If reconstruction is needed, the permittee would contact the Kaibab NF Range Management Staff.

Proposed Structural Improvements

Structural range improvements would be constructed in order to facilitate grazing animal distribution throughout the allotment. These improvements would allow the grazing permittee increased management flexibility during times of drought. These structural range improvements would assist in achieving desired conditions and management objectives set forth in this analysis.

Specifications on the proposed structural improvements would be determined prior to the construction of the improvements. All improvements would be constructed to current Forest Service guidelines for range improvements. The proposed improvements would not exceed the area of disturbance identified in table 2 of the proposed action.

The proposed structural improvements are as follows:

- Expansion of Big Bill Trap holding facility
 - Approximately one mile of new fence construction expanding the existing holding facility by approximately 100 acres.
- New pipeline
 - Approximately 2 miles of buried or surface pipeline
 - New pipeline would be in the South pasture
- Three new troughs
 - New troughs would be in South pasture
- Two new earthen stocktanks
 - One in Little Aso pasture
 - One in Big Aso pasture
- One new trick tank
 - New trick tank would be in the South pasture

Figure 1 shows the approximate locations of these structures. All structure locations would be validated in the field and finalized prior to construction, the placement may vary slightly based on field conditions, however, they would be in the vicinity of the locations shown in the proposed locations. All required surveys (i.e. heritage, rare plants and weeds) would be completed prior to construction. The permittee would contact the Kaibab NF Range Management Specialist prior to construction to ensure surveys are completed.

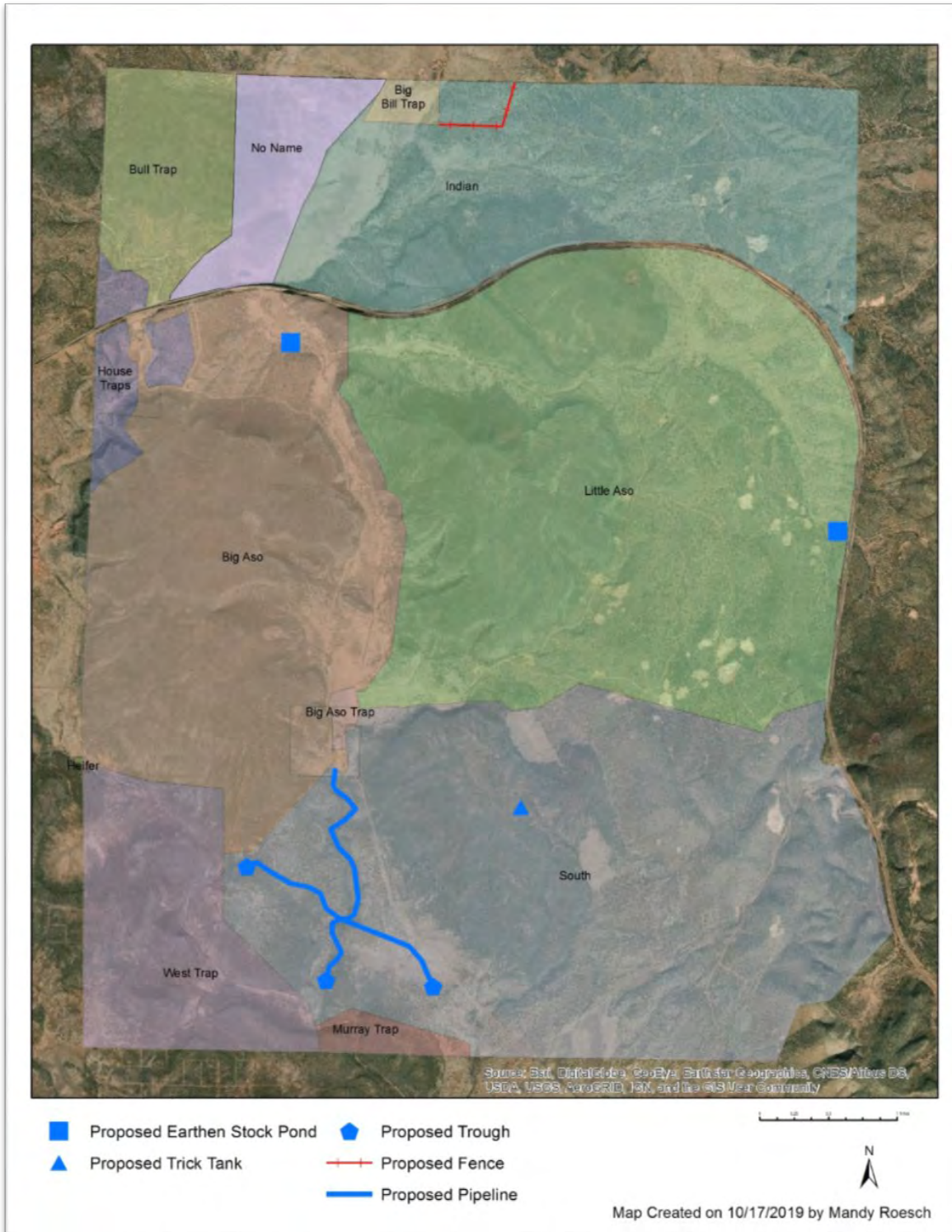


Figure 1: Map Illustrating Approximate Locations of Proposed Structural Improvements on the Partridge Creek Allotment

Adaptive Management

Adaptive management uses documented results of management actions (monitoring) to continually modify management in order to achieve specific objectives including, but not limited to, maintaining or moving towards desired conditions as stated in the Forest Plan (USDA 2014). Adaptive management would be tied strongly to the Drought Management Strategy, which is described in the following section. Management results would be assessed with site-specific, short-term inspections, and could be evaluated with long-term monitoring identified in the Forest Plan. The short-term inspections would focus on annual evaluation of rangeland vegetation, such as forage production or utilization, adequate function of allotment improvements, such as water developments and fencing, and annual assessment of weather-related variables that would inform drought conditions, like the Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI). The long-term monitoring would be tied to the Forest Plan measurements of the relative composition and cover of grasslands (USDA 2014, p. 136). Forest Plan monitoring would be conducted across a larger landscape with random site selection, which may only assess a subset of allotments and may or may not include the Partridge Creek Allotment.

Adaptive management provides the flexibility to adjust livestock numbers and timing of grazing so that use is consistent with current productivity and is meeting management objectives. Under the adaptive management strategy, the specific number of livestock authorized, specific dates for grazing, class of animal and modifications in allotment use may be administratively modified as determined to be necessary and appropriate based on programmatic monitoring. Administrative changes would be documented and implemented in the Annual Operating Instructions (AOIs), which are made part of the term grazing permit. Adaptive management also includes monitoring and analysis to determine whether identified structural improvements are necessary or need to be modified.

In the case that changing circumstances require structural improvements or management actions not disclosed or analyzed herein, further interdisciplinary review would occur. The review would consider the changed circumstances and site-specific environmental effects of the improvements in the context of the overall project. Based on the results of the interdisciplinary review, the Responsible Official would determine whether correction, supplementation or revision of the EA is necessary in accordance with FSH direction at FSH 1909.15(18) and FSH 2209.13(96.1), or whether further analysis under NEPA is required.

Drought Management Strategy

Drought is an inevitable occurrence in the southwestern United States. Land managers and grazing permittees must plan for drought as a normal part of management and business. The SPI is a unit of measure that compares recent precipitation values for a period of interest with long-term historical values to assess moisture conditions in a given area. In the Southwestern Region, any time the SPI reaches a value of minus 1.00 or less for the preceding 12-month period, grazing allotments should be evaluated for existing drought conditions.

The Forest considers a diversity of factors when devising management actions on the National Forests in the Southwestern Region in response to drought. Such factors include species diversity, past grazing use, timing of grazing, intensity of management, and conditions of improvements to support grazing activities. These factors along with precipitation data provide flexibility to the line officer to make decisions based on recommendations from district specialists. Rangeland management specialists use direction provided in the Region 3 Supplement to FSH 2209.13, the Grazing Permit Administration Handbook, and 12-Month SPI to assess soil and vegetation conditions. Using the SPI as a baseline and combining it with site-specific information from allotment inspections and monitoring data, range specialists can make a determination for necessary management actions and review adaptive management alternatives to determine the best course of action.

Region 3 and Kaibab NF drought management policies identify numerous adaptive management actions for mitigating grazing effects during drought. The Williams Ranger District would conduct annual monitoring of the allotment to collect forage production and forage utilization data. Annual monitoring would help inform the management actions that could be used on the Partridge Creek Allotment during periods of drought. The following are examples of management actions that could be used with appropriate monitoring:

1. Reduce authorized AUMs (livestock numbers). Reductions may be necessary prior to the permitted season of use and/or during the permitted season of use.
2. Shorten season of use. Depending on the severity of the drought and authorized AUMs, a reduced grazing season may be necessary.
3. Shorten pasture use periods.
4. Lack of livestock water, or poor distribution of livestock water, may result in reduced pasture/allotment use periods.
5. Pastures would only be grazed once during the same grazing season and this may ultimately result in an early exit from the Partridge Creek Allotment.
6. Pastures may need complete rest from livestock use. Pasture resting periods would depend on the severity of the drought. Livestock use of planned rested pastures due to drought would not be authorized.
7. Reduce forage utilization and/or seasonal utilization levels. Depending on the severity of the drought and the authorized AUMs, reduced forage utilization and/or seasonal utilization levels would likely result in shortened pasture use periods and may ultimately result in an early exit from the Partridge Creek Allotment.

Mitigation Measures

The following mitigation measures/best management practices (BMPs) are required.

Botany and Noxious Weeds

- Rare plants and noxious weeds will be surveyed for prior to proposed improvements being installed.

Table 3: Noxious Weeds BMPs

BMP	Actions
RM-1. Consider weed prevention and control practices in the management of grazing allotments.	1.1 – Include weed prevention practices, inspection and reporting direction, and provisions for inspection of livestock concentration areas in allotment management plans and annual operating instructions for active grazing allotments. 1.2 – For each grazing allotment containing existing weed infestations, include prevention practices focused on preventing weed spread and cooperative management of weeds in the annual operating instructions. Prevention practices may include, but are not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining healthy vegetation • Preventing weed seed transportation • Minimize potential ground disturbance - altering season of use or exclusion • Weed control methods • Revegetation • Inspection and Monitoring • Reporting • Education
RM-2. Minimize transport of weed seed into and within allotments.	2.1 – If livestock are potentially a contributing factor to seed spread, schedule units with existing weed infestations to be treated prior to seed set before allowing livestock on those units. Schedule these infested units to be the last in the rotation. 2.2 – If livestock were transported from a weed-infested area, corral livestock with weed-free feed, and annually inspect and treat allotment entry units for new weed infestations. 2.3 – Designate pastures as unsuitable range to livestock grazing when infested to the degree that livestock grazing would continue to either exacerbate the condition on site or contribute to weed seed spread.
RM-3. Maintain healthy, desirable vegetation that is resistant to weed establishment.	3.1 – Through the allotment management plan or annual operating instructions, manage the timing, intensity (utilization), duration, and frequency of livestock activities associated with harvest of forage and browse resources to maintain the vigor of desirable plant species and retain live plant cover and litter. 3.2 – Manage livestock grazing on restoration areas to ensure that vegetation is well established. This may involve exclusion for a period of time consistent with site objectives and conditions. Consider practices to minimize wildlife grazing on the areas if needed. *

RM-4. Minimize ground disturbances.	4.1 – Include weed prevention practices that reduce ground disturbance in allotment management plans and annual operating instructions. Consider for example: changes in the timing, intensity, duration, or frequency of livestock use; location and changes in salt grounds; restoration or protection of watering sites; and restoration of yarding/loafing areas, corrals, and other areas of concentrated livestock use. 4.2 – Inspect known areas of concentrated livestock use for weed invasion. Inventory and manage new infestations.
RM-5. Promote weed awareness and prevention efforts among range permittees.	5.1 – Use education programs or annual operating instructions to increase weed awareness and prevent weed spread associated with permittees' livestock management practices. 5.2 – To aid in their participation in allotment weed control programs, encourage permittees to become certified pesticide use applicators.

**Any effort to minimize wildlife grazing on the allotment would be in coordination with the Arizona Game and Fish Department.*

Cultural Resources

- If any adverse effects to sites are observed, Kaibab NF archeologists would work with range staff to develop and implement sufficient mitigation measures pursuant to Appendix H of the Standard Consultation Protocol for Rangeland Management to mitigate any adverse effects to sites.
- Once exact locations of the proposed improvements are identified, archaeological surveys would be conducted.

Soils and Watershed

- The following BMPs would be followed.

Table 4: Soils and Watershed BMPs

BMP #	Mitigation	Purpose
BMP 1	Manage forage utilization by livestock to maintain healthy ecosystems for all resource objectives.	Safeguard water and soil resources under sustained forage production.
BMP 2	Several techniques are used to achieve proper distribution or lessen the impact on areas which are sensitive, or which would naturally be overused. These techniques include: a. Construction of fences, and implementation of seasonal or pasture systems of management. b. Water development in areas that receive little use and closing off water developments when proper use has been achieved. c. Riding and herding to shift livestock locations. d. Using salt or supplement feed as tools to gain proper distribution of livestock. e. Range improvements f. Prevention of intensive livestock grazing, or concentrated livestock use on soils that have low bearing strength and are wet. Developing sufficient watering places is one way to limit the amount of trailing. Livestock distribution needs are determined through evaluations of range conditions and trends, including utilization studies.	To manage sustained forage production and forage utilization by livestock while protecting soil and water resources. Maintaining healthy ecosystems for wildlife and other resources.
BMP 3	Soil condition class is determined by qualified soil scientists using Terrestrial Ecosystem Survey. A range conservationist would use the soil condition class in determining the grazing capacity.	This practice is an administrative and preventative control. Soil condition classes is used to determine grazing capability. Only land with soils in satisfactory condition are considered as "full capability" range. Grazing capability ratings are then used in conjunction with other grazing considerations to determine the actual grazing capacity of an area.
BMP 4	Where soil has been severely disturbed by past overgrazing and the establishment of vegetation is needed to minimize erosion, the appropriate measures shall be taken to establish an adequate cover of grass or other vegetation acceptable to the Forest Service	To establish a vegetative cover on disturbed sites to prevent accelerated erosion and sedimentation.

BMP #	Mitigation	Purpose
	and outlined in the allotment management plan. This measure is applied where it is expected that disturbed soils in parts of the area would require vegetative cover for stabilization and the problems would not be mitigated by other management plan provisions.	
BMP 5	Rangeland improvements are intended to enhance forage quality, quantity, and/or availability, and to provide protection to the other resources. Building fences to control the movement of livestock, improve watershed condition, and develop watering sites are just a few of the types of rangeland improvements implemented by the permittee or Forest Service as identified in the allotment plan. If a structure is causing soil erosion or water quality degradation, the allotment plan would identify it and state corrective measures.	To improve, maintain or restore range resources, including soil and water through the use of rangeland improvements.
BMP 6	During allotment improvement work (earthen stock ponds, pipelines, fences, etc.) do not operate equipment when ground conditions are such that soil rutting, compaction or puddling can occur.	Mitigate adverse impacts to soil (compaction, puddling, disturbance).

Reasons for Not Selecting the No Action (No Grazing) Alternative

I did not select the no action (no grazing) alternative because it does not meet the purpose of and need for this project to allow for a more flexible management approach, it would not meet the Forest Service’s multiple use mandate, including provision of goods and services for the American public such as beef production, and would cause a hardship to the permittee. This alternative would not meet the Forest Plan desired conditions to provide opportunities to engage in ranching activities and graze livestock on NFS lands. Providing this opportunity contributes to the stability and social, economic, and cultural aspects of rural communities.

Under the no action alternative, grazing operations would not be authorized and use of the allotments by domestic livestock would be discontinued. Permittees would be given one year from the date of the decision to remove livestock from the allotments. Existing structural improvements would remain in place but would not be maintained. Improvements contributing to resource protection or enhancement, such as water developments important for wildlife, would be maintained, where feasible, using other program funds. When feasible, periodic inspection of structural improvements would be used to determine whether maintenance or removal is needed. Where necessary, maintenance of allotment boundary fences would be reassigned to adjacent permittees.

Finding of No Significant Impacts

After consideration of the environmental effects described in the EA and supporting documentation, I have determined that the selected actions would not individually or cumulatively have significant effect on the quality of the human environment. I based this determination on the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.13). Thus, an environmental impact statement (EIS) will not be prepared. I based my findings on the following:

The Context of the Actions

Context means that the significance of an action may be analyzed in several contexts (i.e. local, regional, worldwide) and over short and long-time frames. For this project, the context of the environmental effects is based on the analysis within the project area as found in the final EA. Livestock grazing has been occurring in the project area since the late 1800s. The effects of this site-specific proposed action are limited to the local level. This project is limited in scope and duration. The project was designed to minimize environmental effects through adaptive management, mitigations, and a drought management strategy.

The Intensity of the Actions

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis of the final EA and the references in the project record. 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. This FONSI is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the ten elements identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

1. *Beneficial and adverse impacts:*

Mitigation measure requirements are designed to reduce the potential for adverse impacts and are incorporated into the selected alternative. These mitigation measure requirements would minimize or eliminate potential adverse impacts caused by ground disturbing activities. All analyses prepared in support of this document considered both beneficial and adverse effects, but all determinations were made based on only adverse effects. None of the potential adverse effects of the proposed action would be significant.

Impacts to the wildlife resource can be found in the Environmental Effects to Wildlife section of the EA. With the design criteria in place, it is the specialist's determination that the Partridge Creek Allotment Livestock Authorization Project would not adversely affect the species mentioned in the final EA and the project actions are unlikely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability for any Forest Service Sensitive, rare, or narrow endemic wildlife species. Nor would implementation of the proposed action result in any measurable negative effects to migratory bird populations.

Impacts to range management can be found in the Environmental Effects to Range section of the EA. Impacts from the proposed action would be both beneficial and adverse. The addition of water sources would improve livestock and wildlife distribution and offer more water for wildlife. Adverse impacts from livestock grazing and trampling, construction of new improvements and maintenance of existing improvements are expected to be temporary with vegetation recovering based on precipitation amounts.

The impacts to the soils and watersheds resource can be found in the Environmental Effects to Soils and Watersheds section of the EA. The proposed action would affect soil condition through soil disturbance, soil erosion, soil compaction and a reduction in nutrient cycling processes within portions of the project area where livestock concentrations occur. These effects would be minor across the majority of the allotment area from livestock grazing. There would be short term minor effects to soil condition from the construction of the proposed water improvements and fence line. There would be long term localized effects as described above around proposed and existing stock tanks, troughs and trick tanks.

Managed livestock grazing would increase sediment delivery to streamcourses and water bodies and increase nutrient concentrations in surface waters (stock tanks). These effects would be minor regarding water quality due the ephemeral nature of drainages, low gradient, and lack of perennial water. Proposed range improvements would not alter the physical, chemical or biological components of water quality. The construction of stock tanks in drainages would directly affect natural flow regimes by retaining water and sediment at those locations. The amount of water that would be retained is negligible at the subwatershed scale. Other proposed range improvements would not change natural flow regimes.

Impacts to botany and noxious weeds can be found in the Environmental Effects to Botany and Noxious Weeds section of the EA. Eleven rare plant species (Forest Service-Sensitive and/or restricted and narrow endemic species) have the potential to be impacted by the proposed action; of these, three (Arizona phlox, Mat penstemon, and Mt. Dellenbaugh sandwort) are known to occur in the project area. Grazing and ground disturbance are likely to affect individual rare plant populations and their habitats. This effect would be negligible.

Noxious weed species of concern that may occur in the project area include scotch thistle and knapweeds; cheatgrass has been documented in the allotment. Grazing and ground disturbance could encourage the spread of weeds in the project area. However, weed surveys, treatment, and adaptive management would occur as needed. This effect would be negligible.

Impacts to Heritage resources can be found in the Environmental Effects to Heritage Resources section of the EA. Kaibab NF archeologists determined that there would be no measurable direct or indirect effects on any heritage resources as a result of the proposed action activities.

2. *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety:*

The proposed action is not expected to affect public health and safety. Management activities are expected to be conducted in a safe manner thus no impacts are expected.

3. *Unique characteristics of the geographic area:*

The proposed action would not cause effects to the unique characteristics of the area. There are no parklands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas within the project area. The project area is located completely outside designated wilderness, as well as Inventoried Roadless Areas. There are no documented riparian areas in the project area, therefore there would not be an impact to these areas.

4. *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial:*

The effects of implementing the proposed action on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. Effects of livestock grazing are well documented in the literature and numerous NEPA analyses. Throughout the analysis process, public concerns were considered from both a scientific and technical standard. Expected environmental effects were analyzed and disclosed in the *Environmental Effects* section of the EA.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks:*

The effects of the proposed actions on the human environment are not highly uncertain, nor do they involve unique or unknown risks. The Forest Service has considerable experience in implementing the activities proposed in this action. The environmental effects are not uncertain for livestock management on Forest lands and no unique or unknown risks can be reasonably identified.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:*

The intended actions do not set a precedent for other projects that may have significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The Forest Service has considerable experience in managing the resources affected by this decision. Nothing about this decision is unprecedented. Future actions would be evaluated through the NEPA process and would stand on their own as to environmental effects and project feasibility. As a result, I conclude that no precedent would be set for future actions with significant effects.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts:*

A cumulative effect is the consequence on the environment that results from the incremental effect of the action when added to the effects of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. A cumulative effects analysis was completed for each resource area. No analysis identified potential for significant cumulative effects. The cumulative effects for the different resource areas are discussed and disclosed in the Environmental Effects section of the EA. This decision would allow for a more effective, efficient, and beneficial management of the allotment. The proposed action related to other actions would not be cumulatively significant for any of the analyzed resources.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Place or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources:*

The impacts to cultural resources, which encompass sites, objects, etc. listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, can be found in the EA in the Environmental Effects to Heritage Resources section. The direct and indirect effects to cultural resources would be mitigated through

mitigation measures and range management practices. These effects would be reduced through site monitoring. The project would not cause loss of destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources. There would be no adverse effects to cultural or historical resources.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973:*

The experimental population of California condors is located within the project area. For the purposes of consultation requirements, nonessential experimental populations receive the same treatment as species proposed for listing. Consequently, the Forest Service must “confer” with USFWS in accordance with requirements for proposed species (FSM 2671.45b). Informal or formal consultation with the USFWS was not required for this project because the effects determination for the California condor is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the species.

Fickeisen plains cactus is the only federally listed plant species known to occur near the Williams Ranger District. USFWS range maps for the species indicate potential occupied habitat approximately seven miles north of the project area. No designated critical habitat for the species is located in or near the project area. Based on the criteria and related habitat analysis, the proposed action would occur outside of the range of Fickeisen plains cactus and would have no effect on the species or habitat.

10. *Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment:*

The proposed action would not threaten a violation of Federal, state, or local laws, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed action fully complies with all standards, guidelines, and desired conditions in the Forest Plan. More information on relevant laws and regulations are discussed in the *Findings Required by Other Law, Regulation, and Policy* section of this DN.

Conclusion

As the responsible official, I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). After considering the environmental effects described in the EA and specialist reports, I have determined that the proposed action would not have significant effects on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Public Involvement

Planning for the Partridge Creek Allotment Authorization Project began in October 2019. The project first published on the Forest Service Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) on October 1, 2019. In October 2019, a District interdisciplinary team met to develop the proposed action and identify preliminary issues, concerns and measures to carry forward into the analysis. The proposed action was released for a 14-day public scoping period with a letter dated November 1, 2019. A legal notice published in the *Arizona Daily Sun* on January 10, 2020 which initiated the 30-day legal comment period for the draft EA.

The Kaibab NF received three comment letters during the scoping period. Public comments were received about the proposed allotment use compared with actual past use, drought associated with climate change, pasture rest and financial responsibility for proposed allotment improvements, which are addressed in the *Proposed Action* section of the final EA. Public comments were received regarding watershed-scale cumulative effects, cumulative impacts of unauthorized grazing use, impacts of the proposed action on riparian areas and federally-listed threatened or endangered species, which are evaluated in the *Environmental Effects* section of the final EA, as well as the individual resource specialist reports. Additional information regarding public comments and agency responses to those comments can be found in the document *Response to Comments*, which is available on the project website (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56955>).

During the legal comment period, the Kaibab NF received one comment. The comment received did not prompt significant change to the EA, however, the comment highlighted need for clarification in various areas of the EA.

All clarifications were minor in nature and were added in response to comments received. Additional information regarding public comments and agency responses to those comments can be found in EA *Appendix B: Response to Comments-Comment Period*.

The Tribal Relations Liaison for the Kaibab NF stated in an email dated December 4, 2019, the project listing on the SOPA was the primary method used to initiate tribal consultation. No further need for tribal consultation on this project has been identified.

Arizona Game and Fish Department was contacted on October 6, 2019 to determine an estimated number of elk present in Game Unit 10.

Findings Required by Other Law, Regulation, and Policy

The planning and decision-making process for the Partridge Creek Allotment Authorization project was conducted in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, policies, and plans. The project was designed in accordance with the Forest Plan standards, guidelines, desired conditions, and objectives. The decision is consistent with other applicable laws, regulations, and policy including, but not limited to, the National Forest Management Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

Administrative Review Opportunities

The Partridge Creek Allotment Authorization Project is an activity implementing a land management plan and not authorized under the Health Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) and is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. Legal notice of opportunity to object published in the *Arizona Daily Sun* on December 25, 2020, beginning a 45-day objection period. No objections were received in response to this legal notice.

This decision is appealable by the permittee under the post-decisional administrative review process for occupancy or use of National Forest System lands [36 CFR 214.4(a)], because it falls into one of the categories listed as decisions that are appealable [36 CFR 214.4].

Project Implementation

As per 36 CFR 218.12, because no objections were received within the legal objection period, this decision may be implemented on, but not before, the fifth business day following the close of the objection-filing period. Implementation is anticipated to begin in 2021.

Contact for Further Information

For additional information on this project, contact Shai Schendel, District Range and Botany Staff, at shai.schendel@usda.gov. Electronic copies of project documents are available online at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56955>.

References

USDA Forest Service. 2014. Land and Resource Management Plan for the Kaibab National Forest. Southwestern Region.

Responsible Official Signature

As the Responsible Official, my signature below certifies that I am the Agency employee who has the authority to make and implement the decision specified in this DN.

Debra Mollet

2/14/2021

DEBRA MOLLET
District Ranger, Williams and Tusayan Ranger Districts

Date