DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
Reavis and Tortilla Study Area
Grazing Strategy and Associated Developments

Tonto National Forest
Mesa Ranger District
Maricopa County, Arizona

The following discussion summarizes key portions of the Environmental Assessment. The Environmental Assessment is available on request from the District Ranger, USDA Forest Service, Mesa Ranger District, P.O. Box 5800, Mesa, Arizona 85211-5800 (602-379-6446).

Key Issues. Five issues were identified from the scoping comments that needed further analysis before deciding what action to take. These issues define the scope of the environmental concerns that were addressed in the Environmental Assessment, Chapter 1, Page 2.

1. Protection of unique ecosystems (riparian and Ponderosa Pine).

2. Protection of water quality.

3. Protection of wildlife habitat.

4. Avoiding additional conflicts in heavy use recreation areas.

5. Capability of the area to support livestock grazing.

Alternatives Considered. The alternatives included a "no action" alternative and six action alternatives that respond to the need for action and issues. Chapter 2 (Pages 3 - 12) of the Environmental Assessment contains a complete discussion of alternatives.

Alternative 1, No Action - A term grazing permit would not be issued for livestock grazing on the Reavis and Tortilla Study Area. No range developments would be constructed, reconstructed, maintained or removed. The Reavis and Tortilla Study Area would remain in management level B in the Tonto Forest Plan.

Alternative 2, No Grazing - The Reavis and Tortilla Study Area would be moved to management level A during the Tonto Forest Plan revision. No grazing permit would be issued for the area.

Alternative 3 - Issue a term grazing permit for the same stocking rate, class of livestock and allotment area as the December 1990 term grazing permit. A term permit would be issued for 1800 yearlings from November 15th to June 15th

within the current Reavis and Tortilla Allotment boundaries. Class of livestock would be limited to yearlings with actual numbers depending on the entry weight of the animals.

Alternative 4 - Issue a yearlong term grazing permit for the stocking level and area determined by the 1995 allotment analysis. A term grazing permit would be issued for 250 cattle for the areas classified as full capacity range. Areas listed as no capacity would be removed from allotment boundaries and placed in management level A during the Tonto Forest Plan revision.

Alternative 5 - Issue a yearlong term grazing permit for 550 cattle utilizing the same area as permitted in the December 1990 term grazing permit. This alternative would be a conversion of the 1800 head, seven month permit to a yearlong cow-calf operation.

Alternative 6 - Issue a seasonal term grazing permit for 500 cattle on the units identified as full capacity range in the 1995 analysis. Cattle would be permitted to graze from November 1st until April 31st each year.

This is the selected alternative.

Alternative 7 - A new term grazing permit would not be issued. The areas identified as full capacity range in the 1995 analysis would be available for incorporation into adjoining allotments. Grazing strategies on adjoining allotments would be modified prior to the areas being added. The modified grazing strategies would be subject to NEPA review. Originally the preferred alternative

Impact Summary. The following summary of environmental impacts was developed from information found in the Environmental Assessment on pages 13 - 24. The summary discussion focuses on the key elements of the environment identified in the scoping process. A discussion is provided for each alternative.

A. Alternative 1 (No Action)
* Unique ecosystems would not be affected.
* Water quality would not be affected.
* Wildlife Habitat would not be affected.
* There would be no additional conflicts in heavy use recreation areas.
* Areas capable of supporting livestock grazing would not have livestock grazing permitted.

This alternative was not selected because it is not consistent with the Tonto Forest Plan direction which allows livestock grazing on areas capable of supporting this use.

B. Alternative 2 (No Grazing)
* Unique ecosystems would not be affected.
* Water quality would not be affected.
* Wildlife Habitat would not be affected.
* There would be no additional conflicts in heavy use recreation areas.
* Areas capable of supporting livestock grazing would not have livestock grazing permitted.

This alternative was not selected because it is not consistent with the Tonto Forest Plan direction which allows livestock grazing on areas capable of supporting this use.

C. Alternative 3
* 1337 acres of unique ecosystems would be adversely affected.
* 28,689 acres of watershed could be adversely affected resulting in degraded watershed conditions and water quality.
* 28,689 acres of wildlife habitat could be adversely affected.
* Additional conflicts would result on 472 acres of heavy use recreation areas.
* 19,818 acres of rangeland that is not capable of supporting livestock grazing could be utilized by livestock

This alternative was not selected because of the adverse impacts that would result in all areas of resource concern.

D. Alternative 4
* 175 acres of unique ecosystems would be adversely affected.
* 175 acres of watershed would be adversely affected.
* 175 acres of wildlife habitat would be adversely affected.
* No additional conflicts in heavy use recreation areas would occur.
* livestock grazing would be confined to areas capable of supporting this use with the exception of 175 acres of unique ecosystems which would be adversely affected.

This alternative was not selected because of the concentration of livestock that would occur during the summer use period. These livestock would concentrate in the 175 acres of riparian area. Exclusion from these areas would not resolve the problem because the riparian areas would provide the only available water during the summer period.

E. Alternative 5
* 1337 acres of unique ecosystems would be adversely affected.
* 28,689 acres of watershed could be adversely affected resulting in degraded watershed conditions and water quality.
* 28,689 acres of wildlife habitat could be adversely affected.
* Additional conflicts would result on 472 acres of heavy use recreation areas.
* 19,818 acres of rangeland that is not capable of supporting livestock grazing could be utilized by livestock

This alternative was not selected because of the adverse impacts that would result in all areas of resource concern.

F. Alternative 6
* Unique ecosystems would not be adversely affected.
* Water quality would not be adversely affected.
* Wildlife Habitat would not be adversely affected.
* There would be no additional conflicts in heavy use recreation areas.
* Areas capable of supporting livestock grazing would have livestock

grazing permitted.

This is the selected alternative

G. Alternative 7
* Unique ecosystems would not be adversely affected.
* Water quality would not be adversely affected.
* Wildlife Habitat would not be adversely affected.
* There would be no additional conflicts in heavy use recreation areas.
* Areas capable of supporting livestock grazing would have livestock grazing permitted.

This alternative was not selected because of several unknown factors involved with incorporating the areas into adjacent allotments, including cost and reluctance of adjoining permittees.

Significance Findings.

Context - This project is a site specific action that by itself does not have international, national, regionwide or statewide importance. The discussion of the significance criteria that follows applies to the intended action and is within the context of local importance in the area associated with the Mesa Ranger District.

Intensity - The following discussion is organized around the ten significance criteria described in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations (40 CFR 1508.27).

1. The impacts from this site specific project are considered to be beneficial especially for unique habitats, wildlife habitat and livestock grazing.

2. The project will not affect public health or safety.

3. The project calls for the protection of unique habitat and important recreation areas. No other unique characteristics of this area were identified.

4. Some reviewers of the project have disagreed with aspects of the proposed action and although some controversy is involved with this project it is not considered to be highly controversial.

5. This project is similar to other grazing strategies in similar biotic communities. Although some risk is involved there are no unique or unknown risks.

6. A decision to implement this grazing strategy does not establish any future precedent for other actions that may have a significant effect. Future actions will be evaluated through the NEPA process and will stand on their own as to environmental effects and project feasibility.

7. Cumulative effects are discussed in the Environmental Analysis. Some related actions are discussed but the cumulative effect of these other projects and the Reavis and Tortilla Study Area Grazing Strategy is not reasonably expected to have a significant impact on the environment.

8. The grazing strategy will not affect any district, site, highway, structure or object listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.

9. A Biological Evaluation was completed for the Reavis and Tortilla Study Area and consultation completed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

10. This proposed action is in compliance with all federal, state and local law requirements.

Summary. The analysis and other evidence compiled for this site specific project proposal have not revealed any potential for significant environmental effects; therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not necessary. The project administrator will be responsible for monitoring implementation and conformance to project design to keep environmental effects below significance thresholds.

Decision.

It is my decision to implement Alternative 6 for the grazing strategy and associated range developments for the Reavis and Tortilla Study Area. This alternative will protect unique ecosystems, wildlife habitat, watersheds and important recreation areas while providing for permitted livestock use on areas capable of supporting livestock grazing.

All practical means have been employed to avoid and/or minimize environmental harm. Detailed descriptions of required mitigation can be found in Chapter 2 of the Environmental Assessment. The project administrator will be responsible for seeing the project is implemented on the ground as designed. Specific monitoring activities will include annual range inspections, reading of existing permanent trend transects and establishment of six additional cover-frequency transects.

Public involvement and scoping

The following steps were utilized to involve the public in the development of a livestock grazing strategy for the Reavis and Tortilla Study Area.

a. A scoping letter was sent to determine interest in the proposed action.

b. A list of interested publics was developed.

c. A draft list of issues was sent to participants for review and comment.

d. A draft list of possible alternatives for management was developed and sent to participants based on the issues developed earlier. This list was mailed for review and comment. Additional alternatives were also requested.

e. Additional comments were requested during a 30 day comment period when the Environmental Assessment was made available to all interested people. A summary of these comments and responses is included in Appendix F of the Environmental Assessment.

All comments received throughout the analysis were considered in this decision.

Findings required by other laws

The Reavis and Tortilla Study Area includes part or all of management units 3B, 3C, and 3I of the Tonto National Forest. The project is consistent with the Tonto National Forest Plan standards and guidelines for these management units.

A Biological Evaluation was completed for the study area.

Mitigation requirements for the selected alternative state:

1. A resource specialist will visit the staked and flagged location of all potential ground disturbing development projects to survey for cultural resources and clearance will be obtained prior to construction.

2. A resource specialist will visit the staked and flagged location of all potential ground disturbing development projects to certify the findings in the Biological Evaluation prior to construction.

Implementation date

This project will not be implemented sooner than 50 calendar days following publication of the legal notice of decision in the Mesa Tribune.

Appeal rights

This decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 215. Any appeal must be consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, Content of Notice of Appeal, including the reasons for the appeal. The appeal must be in writing and postmarked or received by THE APPEAL DECIDING OFFICER, Deputy Regional Forester for Resources, Southwestern Region, 517 Gold SW, Albuquerque, NM 87102-0084 within 45 days of the date of legal notice of this decision in the Mesa Tribune. It is anticipated that the legal notice will appear in the Mesa Tribune on August 2, 1996.

Information contact person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Russell Orr, Mesa Ranger District, P.O. Box 5800, Mesa, Arizona 85211-5800, (602) 379-6446.

Arthur L. Wirtz

ARTHUR L. WIRTZ, District Ranger

7/30/96

Date