

Decision Notice
& Finding of No Significant Impact

Houserock, Suicide, and Ryan Allotment Management Plans Revision

**USDA Forest Service
North Kaibab Ranger District, Kaibab National Forest
Coconino County, Arizona**

BACKGROUND

An analysis team completed an assessment of the existing range, wildlife, and watershed resource conditions for the Forest Service's (FS) and Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Houserock (FS and BLM), Suicide (BLM), and Ryan (FS) allotments prior to the development of the proposed action. The desired conditions were developed from a review of the goals and objectives for both the Arizona Strip Resource Management Plan and the Kaibab Forest Plan (see plan to project analysis in the PR). These allotments are located on the Kaibab National Forest, North Kaibab Ranger District in Ecosystem Management Areas 12, 13 and 16 and on the Arizona Strip in Houserock Valley. Standards and guidelines from the Forest Plan were incorporated into the development of the proposed action. Existing and desired resource conditions have been identified for 10 range and/or ecological sites.

Data indicates that in the pinyon pine/juniper and sagebrush ecosystems existing range conditions have, at best, been maintained. It is speculated that a combination of factors such as drought, poor rotation strategy, long grazing periods, and a high allowable use (FS Ryan Winter and Houserock) have all contributed to the winter rangelands not improving over the last analysis period. In contrast, range conditions in the ponderosa pine type have improved. This trend line is based on the higher densities of cool-season grass species and the fair or higher range conditions that were found. Our assessment indicates a need for change with the winter rangeland that was found to have low levels of cool-season forage plants and browse.

The purpose of this project is to 1) improve cool season grass and browse density in the winter rangelands, 2) raise the overall capacity of the allotments, 3) contribute to the economic diversity and social well being of people by providing opportunities for economic diversity and by promoting stability for communities that depend on range resources for their livelihood (FSM 2202.1), 4) meet the goals and objectives of the Kaibab National Forest Plan, as amended, and the associated Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision, as well as the Arizona Strip Resource Management Plan, and lastly 5) meet the 1995 Rescissions Act and undertake full public disclosure of the environmental impacts of livestock activities. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Kaibab Forest and Arizona Strip Resource Management Plans, and helps move the project area towards preferred conditions as described in those plans. These purposes will result in revision of the Allotment Management Plans.

The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of four alternatives, including No-Action, to meet this need for Houserock, Suicide, and Ryan Allotments.

DECISION

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 1 for the Forest Service's Ryan and Houserock allotments. This decision only authorizes activities on National Forest System lands administered by the North Kaibab Ranger District.

I will initiate a Coordinated Resource Management Plan following a separate decision, issued by the Bureau of Land Management for Suicide and BLM-Houserock allotments administered by the Arizona Strip District.

Houserock Allotment:

Alternative 1 will combine FS and BLM Houserock allotments into a single grazing unit (when decided by the BLM). A FS term grazing permit would be issued that allows from 1,620 to 3,000 animal unit months annually (135 head to 250 head of livestock) for a yearlong season of use. The level of stocking within that range of livestock numbers in any given year would be depend on annual forage production in the full capacity rangelands, resulting utilization levels, and achievement of desired resource conditions. Specific actions for the Houserock allotments include the following:

1. Construct a 50,000 gallon trick-tank west of the FS Houserock Allotment.
2. Adjust the season of use on the FS Houserock from 12/01 to 03/31 (winter) to late summer early fall (07/15 to 10/31). The BLM portions (when decided by the BLM) would be totally de-stocked during this same time period and if utilization levels are below the allowable, and extend season of use on the FS side to allow as much deferment as possible in the winter rangelands.
3. Reconstruct three miles of the FS allotment's western boundary fence.
4. To promote native forage plants, improve watershed conditions and provide improved habitat for wildlife, utilization standards would be reduced to 40 percent in the key areas (grassland or shrub/grasslands at least ¼ miles from dependable water sources) from the current 60 percent (FS only).

Ryan and Suicide Allotments:

Alternative 1 will combine the BLM Suicide Allotment into the two pasture system currently found within the FS Ryan Allotment (when decided by the BLM). A fourth pasture would be developed within the northwest portion of Wildhorse pasture (on FS) enabling the implementation of a 4-pasture rest-rotation strategy. Within the winter rangeland, authorized numbers would range from 85 adult livestock to 130 adult livestock. Initial stocking would be 105 adult livestock. The summer country would be authorized 186 adult livestock. Adjustments in livestock season of use, utilization levels, and rotation strategy would be based on monitoring of utilization and changes in range conditions. Specific actions for the allotments include the following:

1. Reduce the livestock allowable use standard to 40 percent in key areas from the current 60 percent (FS only).

2. Construct approximately two miles of allotment interior fence from North Burn pasture west across LeFevre Canyon to prevent livestock from moving to summer country too early and impacting wild turkey habitat (FS only).
3. Construct a reliable water source in LeFevre Canyon (FS only).
4. Construct a trick-tank in Ryan Winter South pasture to improve livestock distribution patterns (FS only).
5. Clean and treat with bentonite clay 10 dirt stock tanks (FS only). This would improve distribution patterns and increase the amount of available water storage.
6. The pasture grazed during the spring growth period (03/15 and after) will be deferred for two consecutive years to promote recovery of cool-season plants (FS only).

Adaptive Management

My decision includes adaptive management for both Ryan/Suicide and Houserock Allotments and could include the following adjustments if monitoring indicates desired conditions are not being met:

1. Authorized livestock numbers would be adjusted annually, if needed, to meet existing capacities of the allotments. This variation would normally be between the previously identified minimum and maximum numbers. Under extreme drought conditions, authorized livestock numbers may drop below the minimum.
2. The on and off dates may be modified within the allotments. Later livestock entry dates and earlier livestock removal dates on the allotments would occur in order to promote the growth and reproduction of desired herbaceous plants. Changes in on/off dates would be required if utilization levels on primary forage grasses exceed allowable levels, if the frequency of these plants drops, or if suitable progress toward desired vegetation conditions does not occur.

Rationale for Decision

I have chosen Alternative 1 because it best meets the purpose and need of the project. Alternative 1 also provides improvements that go beyond the purpose and need. These include reduced soil erosion, reduced cow/deer winter forage competition on the Houserock allotments, and increased stability for communities that depend on range resources for their livelihood (FSM 2202.1). Alternative 1 will reduce soil erosion by 0.2 tons per acre per year to up to 1.1 tons per acre per year within those TES units with the potential for improved ground cover conditions.

The reduction of grazing time within individual pastures, the lowering of the allowable use standard on the FS allotments, construction of additional water sources, and higher deferment success within the FS Houserock Allotment for cool-season growing plants, will also encourage improvements in the density of plants, diversity, and result in higher effective ground covers and lower soil erosion on all three allotments.

The inclusion of adaptive management will allow the Agency to range livestock numbers and season of use to assure actual utilization remains at or below the defined allowable use, and the appropriate deferment and rest periods are maintained. This alternative meets requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act (CFR 1500 to 1508), Threatened and Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, the 1995 Rescission Act, and the Multiple Use – Sustained Yield Act of 1960.

I have decided not to implement Alternative 2 because the continuous season long grazing regimes, the 60 percent dormant season allowable use standard, and the poor deferment schedules will not improve current conditions. In addition, I decided not to select Alternative 3 because it will not meet the project's purpose and need, nor the Forest Plan goal and objective of maintaining ranching operations.

Alternatives considered but not selected

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered three other alternatives. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA on page 11.

Alternative 2 – Current Action

This action would maintain the grazing strategies in place over the last 10-years. With respect to the FS Houserock, this alternative would allow 137 adult livestock for a continuous season-long grazing period from 12/01 to 03/31. The allowable use standard would be 60 percent on the FS portions. On the BLM lands during this same time period, 59 head would be approved and 196 head authorized from 04/01 to 11/31. The allowable use standard would be 50 percent within the BLM managed lands (when/if decided by the BLM).

The Ryan Allotment (FS) would continue with 186 head from 04/16 to 10/31, and 65 adult livestock from 11/01 to 04/15 with a deferred rotation grazing system. The allowable use standard would be 60 percent during the winter grazing period and 40 percent during the summer months.

The Suicide Allotment would continue with 44 adult livestock from 11/01 to 04/30 with a continuous season-long grazing program utilized. The allowable use standard would be 50 percent (when/if decided by the BLM).

Alternative 3 – No grazing

This alternative is required by regulation (Code of Federal Regulations 1502.8) and would eliminate grazing by domestic livestock on the Houserock and Ryan allotments, and possibly on the Suicide allotment if the BLM decided to take this approach.

Alternative Considered and Dropped from Detailed Study

Alternative 4 would have not entered into a coordinated resource management planning process with the BLM and the allotment management effort would have just considered the FS portions of the Houserock and Ryan Allotments. This was dropped from detailed study since it would not have met the purpose and need.

Public Involvement

This analysis was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in the third quarter of 2006. The proposal was submitted for comment to the public and other agencies on May 6, 2006. As part of the public involvement process a press release was issued detailing the proposal and requesting comments back from the public. The grazing permittees were consulted with prior to the development of the proposed action and their comments documented. In August 2006 an executive summary of the environmental assessment was mailed to public and other agencies for

a 30-day notice and comment period. We received seven comment letters from the public on the initial mailing of the proposed action. A summary of the initial scoping effort and other supporting information concerning this proposal is found in the project record.

The interdisciplinary team developed a list of comments based on the scoping and 30-day review period. The Responsible Official approved the final list of issues and alternatives to address those comments.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect 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. I base my finding on the following:

- A. Context: The setting of this proposed action is local as it pertains to short and long-term effects on both human and natural resources. The effects of this project are limited to the North Kaibab Ranger District and BLM administered lands in Houserock Valley.
- B. Intensity:
 - 1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
 - 2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety through the implementation of Alternative 1. The adherence to best management practices (EA pages 11-13) will prevent degradation of watershed values. These practices have proven effective in maintaining adequate ground cover on other allotments within the forest and maintain water quality above standards.
 - 3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. I have reviewed wildlife effects analysis and have concluded that the severity of impacts within the allotments resulting from implementation of Alternative 1 is low to nonexistent. Those areas considered unique include the Grand Canyon Game Preserve and the Kaibab Squirrel National Natural Landmark (EA pages 40-45). There are no ecologically critical areas such as prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers (EA pages 17-26) found in the project area.
 - 4. The environmental impacts of this project are known and there has been little controversy over the effects. Concerns expressed by interested publics have been disclosed or mitigated through application of best management practices and deferment or rest schedules that provide for the growth of native plants (see effects analysis in the EA pages 17-26 (watershed), 29-68 (plants/wildlife), and pages 69-82 (range)).
 - 5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows that the impacts are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. We have undertaken numerous allotment management plan revisions including the Hat Allotment (1992), Smoot/Moritz (1993), Double A (1995),

Partridge Creek (1995) Rain Tank (1997) and Kane Ranch (2001); all of these allotments have been monitored for improved rangeland health. The increases in rangeland health as disclosed in this effects analysis are based on those former studies and the monitoring that has occurred.

6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because it is similar to decisions regarding grazing within other allotments found on this forest. Alternative 1 reduces time within individual pastures, lowers the allowable use standard on FS lands, constructs additional water sources, and provides for a higher deferment success within the FS Houserock Allotment for cool-season growing plants. Based on other management plan decisions, I expect fully that range, watershed, and wildlife values will improve as predicted.
7. There will be cumulative impacts and these are found in the EA in Chapter 3.
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Implementation of any of these actions will have no adverse effect on heritage resources. Current survey work has found no significant damage from livestock grazing on heritage resources within the Houserock, Suicide and Ryan Allotments. Livestock grazing generally has no adverse effect when grazing use and animal traffic is dispersed (EA page 87-89).
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened animal species or habitat (see EA page 40 and Appendix B) (Also see wildlife BA/BE in the PR). Improvements in wildlife habitat are predicted as the selected alternative reduces stocking levels and changes season of use to increase cool season grass abundance and eliminates wildlife/cow competition on the Houserock allotments. The Paradine plains cactus conservation area overlaps both the FS and BLM Houserock allotments. This project complies with the conservation strategy (see plant BA/BE in PR).
10. The selected alternative conforms to all applicable Federal, State, local laws and requirements (EA pages 16-89).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to authorize livestock grazing on the FS Houserock, and Ryan Allotments under Alternative 1 is consistent with the intent of the Kaibab National Forest Plan's long-term goals and objectives listed on pages 17-20. The project conforms to the land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines identified for producing forage for wildlife and livestock on a sustained yield basis (Kaibab Land and Resource Management Plan, pages 22 to 61).

In addition to consistency with those laws already addressed above, this decision also complies with the following additional laws:

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 that requires maintenance and promotion of habitat critical for the continued existence of plants and animals that are listed. This project will not impact

threatened or endangered wildlife species or their habitats. Alternative 1 will provide for protection and management of the Paradine plains cactus since by complying with the management strategy developed between the BLM, FS, and FWS. Grazing will only occur when the cactus plants are below ground and cannot be impacted by livestock activities (see EA pages 38-40 and plant BA/BE in PR).

Sensitive species have been identified and analysis completed as required by direction found in the National Forest Management Act and Forest Service Manual (2670). The analysis demonstrates that the projected effects of Alternative 1 will not impact habitat quality predicted for these species (see EA pages 40-68 and Appendix B).

The National Forest Management Act. The Kaibab National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan was adopted on April 15, 1988 and has been amended seven times. Projects are to be consistent with the Forest Plan per regulations at 36 CFR 219.8(e) per 2005 NFMA regulations. The project was designed in conformance with the Kaibab National Forest LMP long-term goals and objectives on public lands for term permit grazing authorizations (EA pages 6-7). I find that all actions included in Alternative 1 are consistent with direction in the *Kaibab National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan* as amended.

Management Indicator Species (MIS). Requirements for the relevant Management Indicator Species in the Kaibab National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan are summarized on EA pages 41-42. The effects on species are disclosed on EA pages 51-68 and MIS project specific report in the Project Record. The Plan specifically requires population monitoring or surveys for the following species that occur in the project area: Northern Goshawk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and wild turkey (as detailed on Plan pages 125-130). The project-specific report for Management Indicator Species found that the selected alternative would have no effect on population numbers or trends. There would be no net loss of habitat for Northern Goshawk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, or wild turkey as a result of this action (see MIS report at in the Project Record). This population analysis and habitat information meets NFMA obligations for Management Indicator Species under 36 CFR 219.14(f).

Clean Water Act of 1977 (as amended). This Act was created to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act by incorporating Best Management Practices (BMP's) into project implementation. These BMP's are designed to improve or protect the soil and water resources (see EA pages 17-26).

Federal Land Policy and Management Act. The regulations found in 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. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), as amended by the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978, requires consultation and coordination with the permittee in the development of the allotment management plan. This has occurred during project planning (see EA page 9).

The Grand Canyon National Game Preserve was created to provide protection for game animals, probably more for big game such as the North Kaibab deer herd. The selection of Alternative 1 would be beneficial to game species within the allotments (see EA pages 42-68). Additional

benefits will be gained through anticipated increases in both grass and forb plants in the grasslands and ponderosa pine ecosystems, and additional water sources. Therefore, the activities associated with the revision of these allotment management plans are not in violation of the Grand Canyon National Game Preserve's original intent. This management action maintains the conditions for which the Kaibab Squirrel National Natural Landmark was established (see EA pages 45-68). An analysis was completed for Neotropical migratory birds in compliance with the Executive Order for migratory birds (see EA pages 44-68).

Implementation Date

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation on FS allotments may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal for administrative review by written notice pursuant to 36 CFR 215. Holders of livestock grazing permits may appeal this decision under 36 CFR 215 or 251, but not both. A written notice of appeal must be filed within 30 days after publication of the legal notice of this decision. The appeal period begins the first day after the date of publication of the legal notice in the *Arizona Daily Sun* (Flagstaff, AZ). The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer. Written appeals must be submitted to:

Appeal Deciding Officer, Kaibab National Forest, 800 South Sixth Street, Williams, Arizona, 86046-2899.

Appeals may be faxed to the Appeal Deciding Officer at (928) 635-8208. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to appeals-southwestern-kaibab@fs.fed.us. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. Please put the project name in the "subject" line.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Jonathan Beck at jmbeck@fs.fed.us, Kaibab National Forest, 800 South 6th Street, Williams, Arizona 86046-2899.

/s/ Kyra Sanders, Acting District Ranger

Jill Leonard
District Ranger
North Kaibab Ranger District

September 29, 2006

Date

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