

DECISION NOTICE
SMITH CANYON AND WILLIAMSON
GRAZING ALLOTMENTS MANAGEMENT
U.S. FOREST SERVICE
CHINO VALLEY RANGER DISTRICT
PRESCOTT NATIONAL FOREST
YAVAPAI COUNTY, AZ

DECISION

Based upon my review of the Smith Canyon and Williamson Valley Grazing Allotment Management Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement Alternative 1, which will authorize livestock grazing on the two allotments as follows:

Smith Canyon Allotment: Authorize a range of livestock numbers from 200-275 head of cattle yearlong. The upper limit is equivalent to 3,300 Animal Unit Months (AUMs)¹ of available forage use. The annual authorization will vary based on forage production, water availability, and resource conditions. Annual stocking could fall below the low end of the proposed stocking range. There are five large main pastures and two smaller pastures used in a rotational grazing system. Pasture rest and deferment will be scheduled to provide for achieving desired resource conditions.

Williamson Valley Allotment: Authorize a range of livestock numbers from 225-300 head of cattle yearlong. The upper limit is equivalent to 3,600 AUMs of available forage use. Annual stocking would be based on adaptive management, considering forage production, water availability, and resource conditions. Annual stocking could fall below the low end of the proposed stocking range. There are six larger pastures and five smaller pastures used in a rotational grazing system. Pasture rest and deferment will be scheduled to provide for achieving desired resource conditions.

The term grazing permits for these two individual allotments will be issued for up to ten years. The permit will authorize livestock use within parameters identified in this proposal, and subsequent permits may be issued as long as resources continue to move further toward desired conditions or are being maintained in satisfactory condition, as appropriate.

¹ Animal Unit Month (AUM) – The quantity of forage required by one mature cow (1,000 pounds) or the equivalent for 1 month; approximately 26 lbs of dry forage per day is required by one mature cow or equivalent.

OTHER COMPONENTS OF ALTERNATIVE 1

Adaptive Management

Adaptive management is designed to provide sufficient flexibility to allow livestock management to address changes in climatic conditions, seasonal fluctuations in forage production, and other dynamic influences on the ecosystem in order to effectively make progress toward or maintain desired conditions of the rangeland and other resources. Under the adaptive management approach, regular/annual monitoring of short-term indicators determines if there is a need for administrative changes in livestock management. If monitoring indicates that progress toward desired conditions is not being achieved on the allotment, management will be modified. Modifications can include adjustments in timing, intensity, and duration of grazing. Timing is the time of year the livestock are present in a pasture. Intensity is the degree to which forage is removed through grazing and trampling by livestock. Duration is the length of time livestock are present in a given pasture. These modifications would be made through administrative decisions such as: the specific number of head stocked on the allotment annually or in a particular season; the class of animals stocked (cow/calf pairs vs. yearlings, steers or heifers, etc.); specific dates of grazing; livestock herd movement; and periods of rest, deferment, or non-use of portions or all of the allotment for an appropriate period of time, as conditions warrant. Such changes will not result in exceeding the AUMs authorized for livestock use that is included in the selected alternative.

Best Management Practices

Best Management Practices (BMPs) are a practice or combination of practices determined to be the most effective, practicable means of preventing or reducing the amount of pollution generated by nonpoint sources to a level compatible with water quality goals, and are developed to comply with the Clean Water Act (FSH 2509.22_10.5). The Interdisciplinary Team followed the guidance in the Southwest Region Forest Service Handbook 2509.22, Chapter 20, and the National Core BMP Technical Guide, FS-990a, in the formulation of resource protection measures related to range management that also function as BMPs to address water quality and watershed concerns. These resource protection measures will be implemented in order to comply with the Clean Water Act.

New Range Improvements: Structural Range Improvements

This alternative includes construction of the following new structural improvements that have been developed to address resource concerns or improve grazing management. Monitoring may indicate that some of these improvements are not necessary; however, if some or all of these improvements are not implemented, the upper limit of permitted livestock numbers may not be achievable on a sustained basis, or seasonal use periods may be shortened. Different types of water developments may be employed depending on the location.

Smith Canyon:

Because of limited road access for large vehicles like well-drilling rigs, the proposed water developments on the Smith Canyon Allotment would likely be trick tanks (catchment apron that directs rainfall into a storage tank and pipeline system with troughs), or earthen stock tanks (dug out areas that collect rainfall directed from shallow ditches).

- Construct 3 reliable water developments in Smith Canyon Pasture: one north of Sheridan Lake in the north half of section 21; one on the south benches in NE quarter of section 35; one in north half of section 6. Two of these (section 21 and 35) are to replace existing earthen stock tanks that are non-functional and replace with trick tanks.
- Five additional water developments in the following locations: Cottonwood Pasture SW quarter of section 31; Granites Pasture north half section 4; Moano Pasture west half of section 22 (replace non-functional earthen stock tank); Spider Pasture NE quarter of section 32; Jones Pasture NW quarter of section 33.
- Construct drift fences to better control livestock distribution: one in Smith Canyon Pasture near Sycamore Spring; one in Smith Mesa Pasture along the trail west of Horseshoe Tank; and one in the Granites Pasture along the trail north of Saddle Tank.
- Construct fences (water lots) around Alkaline Tank and Dyke Pond in the Smith Canyon Pasture to better control livestock use patterns in the pasture.
- Construct an east-west fence to split Smith Mesa Pasture into Mesa and Rincon Pastures if controlling access to water does not sufficiently improve distribution and result in achieving desired resource conditions.
- Expand the existing fencing at Alkaline Spring to include protection for the spring area.

Williamson Valley:

Different types of water developments may be employed depending on the location, and could include trick tanks with a pipeline to water troughs, earthen stock tanks, or wells.

- Construct 12 additional water sources in the following locations: Upper Hitt Pasture, section 15 (likely a trick tank), and SE quarter of section 16 on the pasture division fence; Tailholt Pasture, SE quarter of section 22; Lower Hitt Pasture, SW quarter of section 25; shared water source between Burnt and Upper Hitt Pastures in NW quarter of section 26; Burnt Pasture south half of section 27; shared water source for Whiskey and Brushy Pastures in SW quarter of section 33; Brushy Pasture NW quarter of section 36; Stinson Pasture SE quarter of section 17, SW quarter of section 29, SW quarter of section 31; Camp Wood pasture north half of section 33.
- Convert 3 existing earthen stock tanks to trick tanks in order to provide more reliable water supplies: Cottonwood Pasture, Section 23 Tank, Coldwater Tank Tailholt

Pasture, tank in SW quarter of section 10.

- Construct a new holding pasture south of Spades Tank in the Tailholt Pasture.

Maintenance of Range Improvements: The Term Grazing Permit includes a list of all improvements which the permittee will continue to maintain at a level that effectively provides for their intended uses and purposes. Range improvements will be inspected periodically during the term of the permit to document condition. Annual Operating Instructions (AOIs) will identify range improvements in need of maintenance. Existing improvements may be replaced when conditions warrant.

Access to Improvements: Authorization for cross-country motorized travel is provided for the permittee to administer the livestock operation and maintain improvements under the terms and conditions of the Term Grazing Permit.

Annual authorization for actions implementing management direction in the Allotment Management Plan will be included in the Annual Operating Instructions, such as a description of the anticipated level of cross- county travel, travel needed for improvement maintenance, new improvement construction, or reconstruction of existing improvements.

All authorizations for cross-country motorized travel are subject to existing regulations intended to protect natural and/or heritage resources. Cross-country travel is not allowed when such travel would cause unacceptable resource damage.

Monitoring

In order to evaluate whether grazing management is making progress towards meeting desired resource conditions, two types of monitoring will be conducted:

1. Implementation monitoring will be conducted by the Forest Service, with possible assistance from the permittee, and may include but is not limited to the following: livestock actual use data, compliance with pasture rotation schedules, grazing intensity evaluations during the grazing season (within key and critical areas), utilization at the end of the growing season (within key areas), and visual observations of vegetation and ground cover.

2. Effectiveness monitoring to evaluate the success of management in achieving the desired objectives will occur within key areas at an interval of ten (10) years or less. A smaller subset of key areas may be evaluated that are in the areas needing improvement as identified in the EA. Areas already meeting desired conditions can be visually assessed to determine if conditions are being maintained. Effectiveness monitoring may also be conducted if data and observations from implementation monitoring (annual monitoring) indicate a need. This type of monitoring can include species composition, plant cover, frequency or density, and/or vegetative ground cover monitored at key areas and at areas identified with site-specific resource concerns. Both qualitative and quantitative monitoring methods can be used. Methods for monitoring and inventory that are standard, accepted protocols can be found in the following publications: Region 3 Rangeland Analysis and Management Training Guide (USDA 2013 revised),

Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health (Technical Reference 1730-37, 2010), and the Guide to Rangeland Monitoring and Assessment (Smith et al. 2012).

Monitoring activities would be focused on those resources that need improvement or where there is a concern for an important habitat type. For this project, on the Smith Canyon Allotment, Smith Canyon Pasture key soil map units TEUI 427 & 461 will be monitored for similarity to potential diversity and vegetative foliar cover, and to determine that the residual vegetative cover remaining after grazing is sufficient to allow for improvement of the soil resource. On the Granites Pasture, key soil map unit TEUI 461; on the Spider Pasture, key soil map unit TEUI 486; and on the Smith Mesa Pasture, key soil map unit TEUI 490 will be monitored to make sure that the residual vegetative cover remaining after grazing is sufficient to allow for improvement of the soil resource.

On the Williamson Valley Allotment, Little Pine Pasture key soil map unit TEUI 48 will be monitored for similarity to potential diversity and vegetative foliar cover, and that the residual vegetative cover remaining after grazing is sufficient to allow for improvement of the soil resource. Tailholt Pasture key soil map unit TEUI 490, and Camp Wood Pasture key soil map unit TEUI 542 will be monitored to make sure that the residual vegetative cover remaining after grazing is sufficient to allow for improvement of the soil resource. Key grazing areas will be visited after the grazing season to monitor utilization levels so that satisfactory vegetation conditions are maintained.

DECISION RATIONALE

I have selected Alternative 1 because it meets the purpose and need for action described in the EA while allowing desired conditions to be achieved over the long term for the landscapes where the allotments are located. I have also factored into my decision Alternative 2 would also allow desired conditions to be met, but it would not meet the Congressional intent to allow grazing on suitable lands, nor would it comply with Forest Service policy to make forage available to qualified livestock operators from lands suitable for grazing, while contributing to the economic 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 2203.1, 2202.1).

The Smith Canyon and Williamson Valley Grazing Allotment Management EA documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Notice of the intention to initiate the present analysis of the proposed action for this allotment was provided in the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) at <http://www.fs.fed.us/sopa/> beginning in January of 2016 and was updated regularly. A scoping letter dated January 19, 2016 describing the proposed action was sent to the permit holder of the allotment and to members of the public, non-profit groups, and other entities who have expressed interest in livestock grazing activities. It was also sent to State and Federal government entities and to six Native American

Tribes interested in activities in the area inviting them to provide information regarding concerns or opportunities related to the proposal. The content of the scoping responses was reviewed by the ID Team and Deciding Official and resulted in the identification of no additional issues for the allotments that were not addressed within the design criteria of the proposed action.

The Environmental Assessment for the Smith Canyon and Williamson Valley Grazing Allotments Management was mailed to scoping respondents and the grazing permittees, and a legal notice announcing the start of the 30-day comment period was posted in the Prescott *Daily Courier* newspaper on May 26, 2016. There were eight responses received during the 30-day comment period. The responses were reviewed by resource specialists and the Deciding Official to determine if any new information was received that would have bearing on a decision between

the three alternatives. No new concerns were raised by the comments. The comments and responses are located in the back of the final Environmental Assessment as Appendix 5.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The significance of environmental impacts must be considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27)

Context

The context for the management of these allotments is local in nature and would not have notable impacts beyond the project areas. The Smith Canyon Allotment represents an area of approximately 48,000 acres. The allotment is located in the southwest portion of the district, approximately 17 miles west of Chino Valley, Arizona. Elevation ranges from 3,195 feet at the junction of Smith Canyon and Cottonwood Creek to ~6,200 feet on Sheridan Mountain. Over 80% of the allotment is in the Santa Maria River watershed and the remaining area is in the Big Chino Watershed. Major drainages include Smith Canyon and Cottonwood Canyon which are tributaries of the Bill Williams and Colorado Rivers.

The Williamson Valley Allotment represents an area of approximately 49,000 acres. The allotment is located in the southwest portion of the district, approximately 16 miles west of Chino Valley, Arizona. Elevation ranges from 4,750 feet in Hitt Wash and Williamson Valley Wash on the eastern boundary to 7,200 feet on Camp Wood Mountain in the northwest corner of the allotment. The topography is rough and broken with some areas of gentle hills and wide washes along Hitt and Williamson Valley Washes in the northeastern portion of the allotment. Roughly two thirds of the allotment is in the Big Chino watershed and one third in the Santa Maria River watershed. Major drainages on the allotment include Pine Creek, Hitt Wash, and Williamson Valley Wash which are tributaries of the upper Verde River. Hitt Wash and Williamson Valley Wash have mainly herbaceous riparian vegetation such as sedges, rushes, horsetails, and other grass-like plants. There are localized areas of velvet ash, willow, sycamore, and cottonwood within riparian areas on the allotment.

Vegetation on both allotments consists primarily of piñon and juniper with evergreen shrub and interior chaparral plant species. Canopy cover from shrub species is moderately to extremely thick in some locations to the extent that herbaceous forage is reduced or absent. A portion of the forage base of the allotment is provided by browse species such as turbinella oak with mountain mahogany, deerbrush, and skunkbush found in smaller quantities. Perennial grasses can be locally abundant, especially in juniper woodlands that have been previously thinned, and on warmer southern aspects of hills. Important forage grasses on the allotments include blue grama, sideoats grama, threeawns, sand dropseed, tobosa, curly mesquite, and squirreltail.

Precipitation patterns for these areas are bi-modal with monsoon events occurring during the summer and a second period of precipitation occurring within the winter season. Precipitation at the Chino Valley station recorded 13.7" for 2015, and likely ranges from 12-16 inches in the project area. The average minimum temperature typically occurs in December, and is around 20 degrees, and the average maximum temperature occurs in July at just over 90 degrees.

Recreational activity on these allotments is primarily associated with dispersed camping, off road vehicle use, and hunting. Access is not limited. There are some motorized trails on both allotments that receive some use from off-highway vehicles, although these trails are rough and used only by experienced riders. There are no developed recreation sites for camping on either allotment, though several areas receive heavy impact from dispersed camping, in particular the Camp Wood area on the Williamson Valley Allotment. Big game hunting opportunities exist for deer, elk, bear, turkey and javelina. There are no designated wilderness areas on either allotment.

Intensity

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial. Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action.

The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety because rangeland management activities similar to those described in the EA have occurred in this area, as well as over most of the Forest, without issues related to public health and safety.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. There are no Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) within the allotment and no wilderness areas. There are no eligible or designated Wild and Scenic River reaches. The allotments are known to contain cultural resources of both prehistoric and historic periods. The level of need and extent of new field surveys or inspections for grazing impacts will be determined by the Forest Archaeologist. Complete field surveys of any given allotment or grouping of allotments will not be required. These procedures comply with the First Amended Programmatic Agreement Regarding Historic Property Protection and Responsibilities between the USDA Forest Service Region 3, the State Historic Preservation Officers of AZ, NM, TX, and OK, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, signed 12/24/2003, and specifically, Appendix H: the Standard Consultation Protocol for Rangeland Management, signed 05/17/2007. A no adverse effect on the cultural resources is based on the Forest Service's proposal to continue the authorization of livestock grazing under an adaptive management system and in a manner consistent with the goals and objectives and the standards and guidelines of the PNF Land and Resource Management Plan. If cultural resources are located where new range improvements are proposed then the resources will be avoided during the implementation of the projects.

The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action. This environmental analysis is tiered to the Land Management Plan (LMP) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Forest-wide effects of LMP's standards were disclosed in that EIS. The selected alternative with the identified resource protection measures meets LMP standards. In addition, extensive scoping was completed during the analysis in order to identify areas of potential controversy. The scoping activities are identified in the EA, this Decision Notice, and the project record. There has been no information presented that would demonstrate that the action would cause adverse impacts that could not be mitigated. I conclude that it is very unlikely that the environmental effects associated with the action will be highly controversial.

The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The Agency has considerable experience with actions that are similar to the selected alternative. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. This action is similar to many past actions, both in this analysis area and adjacent areas. Effects of this action will be similar to the effects of past, similar actions. Livestock grazing has occurred on the Prescott National Forest for over 100 years. The Interdisciplinary Team that conducted the analysis used the results of past actions as a frame of reference, and combined that insight with scientifically accepted analytical techniques and best available information to estimate effects of the proposal (See EA Chapter 3).

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 action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects because it is a stand-alone decision and each grazing allotment is evaluated independently on its own merits. Major follow-up actions will not be necessary. I conclude that this action does not establish precedent for future actions.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. The cumulative impacts have been displayed in this analysis in both the EA and in specialist reports contained in the project record. Chapter 3 of the EA discusses the combined effects of the project with other past, current and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Based on the discussions in the EA, specialist reports, and information identified during public review, I have concluded that there are no significant, cumulative impacts.

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 Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. 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. Areas proposed for ground-disturbing activities will be surveyed and all cultural resources or historic sites will be avoided. Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act will be completed prior to signing this decision.

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. There are no Federally-listed Threatened or Endangered species or designated habitat within the project area. The Wildlife, Fisheries, and Rare Plants Report serves as the Biological Evaluation for the Smith Canyon and Williamson Valley Allotments and documents the effects on species and habitat.

Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. This project is fully consistent with the Prescott National Forest Land Management Plan and the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), Clean Water Act, and the Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976.

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision is consistent with the Prescott National Forest Land Management Plan (LMP). The project was designed in conformance with LMP direction concerning resources including range management; soils, watershed and riparian areas; wildlife, rare plant, fish, and aquatic species; and heritage resources.

The Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and EA were evaluated to determine if further analysis is needed. I determined these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will not be prepared.

The National Environmental Policy Act provisions have been followed as required by 40 CFR 1500 and 36 CFR 220. The EA discloses the expected impacts of each alternative and discusses the identified issues. This document describes the decision I have made and my rationale for the decision.

The selected alternative complies with the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and any potentially affected tribes have been consulted. Documentation of surveys conducted for new range improvements that will be implemented within 2 years of this decision will be submitted to the SHPO for concurrence prior to finalizing this decision.

Water quality standards will be met. There are no classified floodplains or wetlands within the project area.

Administrative Review (Objection) Opportunities

The Chino Small Grazing Allotments Management project is an activity implementing a land management plan and not authorized under the HFRA and is subject to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B.

How to file an Objection and Timeframe

Objections will only be accepted from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with §218.5(a). Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after the designated comment opportunities.

Objections, including attachments, must be filed via mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays) to: Reviewing Officer Teresa Chase, Forest Supervisor, 344 South Cortez, Prescott, AZ 86303, FAX: (928) 443-8008, or electronically at: objections-southwestern-prescott@fs.fed.us. Electronically filed objections may be submitted by email in word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), and hypertext markup language (.html). Please include Smith Canyon and/or Williamson Valley Grazing Allotment(s) in the subject line.

Objections must be submitted within 45 calendar days following the publication of the legal notice in the Prescott Courier. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The regulations prohibit extending the time to file an objection.

At a minimum, an objection must include the following (36 CFR 218.8(d)):

1. The objector's name and address, with a telephone number, if available;
2. A signature or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for email may be filed with the objection);
3. When multiple names are listed on an objection, identification of the lead objector (verification of the identity of the lead objector shall be provided upon request);
4. The name of the proposed project, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the name(s) of the National Forest(s) and/or Ranger District(s) on which the proposed project will be implemented;
5. A description of those aspects of the proposed project addressed by the objection, including specific issues related to the proposed project if applicable, how the objector believes the environmental analysis or draft decision specifically violates law, regulation, or policy; suggested remedies that would resolve the objection; supporting reasons for the reviewing officer to consider; and

6. A statement that demonstrates connection between prior specific written comments on the particular proposed project or activity and the content of the objection.

Incorporation of documents by reference is permitted only as provided in §218.8(b). It is the objector's responsibility to ensure timely filing of a written objection with the reviewing officer pursuant to §218.9. All objections are available for public inspection during and after the objection process.

The decision is appealable under 36 CFR 214.4(a) by the grazing permit holder only.

Implementation Date

If no objections are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, the 5th business day from the close of the objection filing period. When objections are filed, there will be a 45-day period to resolve the objection.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Sarah Tomsy, Acting Chino Valley District Ranger, Chino Valley Ranger District, (928) 443-8000.



Signature

9/30/16

Date

Omero Torres, Chino Valley District Ranger

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