

**2021 Bush Fire –
Sunflower Grazing Allotment
AOI Modification**




**Mesa Ranger District, Tonto National Forest,
Maricopa County, Arizona**

Prepared by:  Date: 2/2/2021
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In consultation with and agreed to by:

_____ Date: _____
Sunflower Allotment Grazing Permittee

Approved by:  Date: 2/25/21
Matthew Lane
Mesa Ranger District

Approved by:  Date: 2/22/21
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Cave Creek Ranger District

Emergency Wildfire/Drought Grazing Management Plan

This modification to the Annual Operating Instructions (AOI) for Horse Creek Farms is in response to the 2020 Bush Fire and 2021 exceptional winter drought the area is witnessing. The modification will address stocking rate, timeframes and use by allotment while allowing a season of growth on herbaceous species within the burned area. This AOI is a guide for management of the Sunflower Allotment for the 2021 grazing year (GY). This plan is made part of your Term Grazing Permit as specified in Part 2, Number 8(a) of the permit and supersedes your amended 2020 AOI.

Objective and Authority

Our objective is to minimize grazing impacts within recently burned areas during a drought and provide available forage in order to maintain a viable ranching operation for Sunflower Allotment. We will do this by utilizing an adjacent active vacant allotment, along with unburned areas and one of Sunflower's unauthorized pastures with a short-term authorization under FSH 2209.13 Chapter 10, section 19, Drought Management, an administrative change to authorize the use of available forage when drought or other emergency situations exist. We will also be employing adaptive management strategies at a reduced capacity to weather current droughty conditions. The permittee will follow the management actions made in this modification for the 2021 grazing season. This modification was approached in a collaborative manner with other specialists and the permittee to address threatened and endangered species concerns. Mitigation measures and requirements identified from that review are listed in *Rotation Schedule and Permittee Responsibilities* section below.

Background and Allotment Information

The 2020 Bush Fire burned approximately 193,455 acres of the Mesa and Tonto Basin Ranger Districts of the Tonto National Forest. Additionally, the area is experiencing exceptional drought conditions as the result of the worst monsoon season on record followed by mediocre winter precipitation levels, when compared the last 20 years. The current SPI rating (12/31/2020) is -1 to -2, and NOAA 3-month outlooks a 50% below average trend.

Horse Creek Farms- Pat Esch, holder of Sunflower Allotment Term Grazing Permit # 12216 issued on 8/10/2017 is for the following Animal Unit Months (AUM):

LIVESTOCK			PERIOD OF USE		GRAZING ALLOTMENT
NUMBER	KIND	CLASS	FROM	TO	
125	Adult	Cow	3/1	2/28	Sunflower: Cottonwood East
125	Adult	Cow	3/1	2/28	Sunflower: Cottonwood West
150	Adult	Cow	3/1	2/28	Sunflower: Cline
125	Adult	Cow	3/1	2/28	Sunflower: Dos S
0	Adult	Cow	3/1	2/28	Sunflower: Desert/Dos S

Per the Allotment Management Plan (AMP), permitted use may vary from 225 to 525 head of livestock yearlong. Initial stockings were created from the 2017 AMP per the 2015 Environmental Assessment (EA) that analyzed the effects of grazing and the status of improvements. The allotment utilizes a modified multi-herd rotational grazing system that is designated yearly in the AOI. For the 2020 grazing season Sunflower Allotment was occupied by 2 herds consisting of 178 C/C pairs, 31 Bulls, and 20 horses. The Cline unit has not been stocked, as construction and maintenance activities identified through the EA, hadn't been completed prior to the Bush fire. Stocking of Cline unit was to take place in grazing year 2021 and livestock were being purchased for the third herd at the time of the fire and kept

on private deeded leases. Since August of 2020, Horse Creek Farms has been slowly reducing livestock numbers because of the impending drought and recovery following the fire.

The agreed upon stocking for Horse Creek Farms is authorized to run the following numbers for the 2021 Grazing Year:

Kind	Number	Class	Season of Use
Cattle	159	Cow/Calf	3/1 to 2/28
	27	Bulls	3/1 to 2/28

Rotation Schedule and Permittee Responsibilities

Below is the discussed rotation that will be implemented for GY 2021. Adjustments to pasture rotation, season of use, and numbers may vary depending on several factors including, but not limited to, precipitation, water availability and forage conditions. If an adjustment to the rotation is needed and/or management concerns exist, please contact the District Range Staff in advance to arrange an adjustment to the rotation.

For the 2021 grazing season Horse Creek Farms has elected to reduce the herd further to the 2021 authorized numbers due to resource concerns over the exceptional drought. If additional numbers are removed please communicate with the Range Staff so it can be documented.

The rotation and timing that were agreed upon is as follows:

<u>Pasture</u>	<u>Numbers</u>	<u>Dates</u>
*Log Corral	159 C/C, 27 Bulls	March 01 to April 15
East Bartlett/Upper Otero	70 C/C, 15 Bulls	April 16 to October 31
East Bartlett/Upper Otero	40 C/C, 15 Bulls	November 01 to February 28
Maverick	30 C/C	November 01 to February 28
Cottonwood Unit South	30 C/C, 12 Bulls	May 01 to February 28
Cline Unit	TBD	TBD

**Reductions to the herd are occurring at permittee's request and may continue to occur given seasonal drought predictions. Reductions are happening because of resource concerns by allotment permittee to pre-plan for long-term management actions. Currently Sunflower's herd is at 159 c/c and may reduce further based on several management factors. All continued management actions will take place with FS Range Personnel and need to be approved with reasonable time. Please accurately state numbers to the Range Staff so they can be recorded.*

Throughout the 2021 grazing year the Sunflower allotment permittee will separate herd into several smaller herds and distribute across the landscape using intensive management techniques where water is more permeant to extend time. Permittee will ensure to allow enough time to move livestock by pasture move date(s) and avoid unauthorized and/or excess use. A one-week buffer is allowed on either side of the move date to get cattle moved. If additional time is needed it must be discussed and approved by the Forest Service.

The desired utilization level for 2021 grazing season is 35% on key species in the key areas and we would like to monitor utilization with you after the livestock leave a pasture. Utilization levels will ultimately determine the length of the grazing period in each pasture. The establishment of the utilization

standards is consistent with 36 CFR 222 regulations, FSM 2210 and 2230, and FSH 2209.21. Grazing will be managed so that conservative use levels are achieved over the long-term. Considerable research has been done showing that conservative use levels will allow for sustaining and improving watershed conditions.

Conservative utilization levels are as follows:

Vegetation	Use Threshold
Upland Herbaceous	30-40% of current year's growth.
Upland Browse	50% of current year's growth.
Riparian Herbaceous	Limit to 40% on plant species biomass for deer grass and maintain 6-8" of stubble height of emergent species such as rushes and sedges.
Riparian Woody	Limited to 50% of leaders from current year's growth.

All aspects of Parts 1, 2 and 3, including Special Terms and Conditions of Sunflower Allotment, will be made part of the short-term extension authorization. The permittee and people working for the permittee will be responsible for adhering to these permit terms and conditions. The permittee will also be responsible for maintenance of improvements within Bartlett East, Log Corral, and Upper Otero in-order to turn out livestock within those pastures. Improvements within these pastures have been maintained and ranch manager, Jeff Haight, is in Bartlett Pastures every week checking status.

Bartlett East and Upper Otero will be utilized together, with one unit consisting of 159 C/C pairs and 27 Bulls reducing to 40 C/C pairs and 15 Bulls utilizing focused targeted grazing management in the following areas:

Bartlett East Pasture- Herd will be kept east of Cottonwood Tank and Summit Horizontal Well using natural boundaries, protein supplements, and weekly ridings. This will be a short-term authorization to utilize Bartlett's vacant pastures as a grass bank to provide rest within the burned area of Bush Fire. A portion of the Verde River bisects the Bartlett Pasture. This riparian habitat supports Southwestern willow flycatchers (ESA Endangered) and Yellow-billed cuckoo (ESA Threatened) as well as designated critical habitat. In order to remain in compliance with the Endangered Species Act, it is imperative that livestock remain at least two miles from the Verde River during the breeding seasons; use of this pasture is which are from May 1 to August 30 and Mid-June to September respectively. With focused management livestock use will be over two miles from the river and boundary features, natural and constructed, will be expected to be used and maintained. If the permittees livestock are found within the river corridor, or within the two-mile buffer, all livestock will be removed from the pasture immediately.

Upper Otero Pasture- Herd will be kept north of Sections 20, 21, and 22 of Otero Pasture using natural boundaries, protein supplement, select water management, and weekly ridings. This will be a short-term authorization to utilize an unauthorized Sunflower Pasture as a grass bank to provide rest within the burned area of Bush Fire. Special management techniques will be applied to keep herd west and out of Sycamore Creek and Mesquite Wash riparian areas. If temporary improvements are needed to comply with the request, please work with District Range Staff in doing so.

Cottonwood and Cline units will be run as separate herds removed from the Bartlett herd. Management techniques and targeted grazing management will utilize the following methods:

Cottonwood Unit South- Management will include a small herd south of burned area in the Cottonwood Unit utilizing unburned/un-grazed forage with special management techniques. This will be a short-term authorization to utilize portions of an authorized Sunflower unit as a grass bank to provide rest within the burned area of Bush Fire. The extant population of Gila topminnow (ESA Endangered) within Hidden Water Spring will be protect through the installation and/or maintenance of fencing within Cane Springs Canyon to ensure livestock are excluded from the spring.

Cline Unit focused- Depending on improvements and vegetative response, management will utilize targeted grazing to focus on the non-native Lehmann's lovegrass (*Eragrostis lehmanniana*). currently growing and thriving within the Cline Unit of Sunflower Allotment. A small herd with young calves using specific water and supplement placement will be used to target new, palatable growth on lovegrass. Area will need to be inspected and agreed upon prior to entry with daily to weekly inspections.

Grazing will be managed to achieve Forest Plan objectives. It is the responsibility as permittee to act so that livestock grazing does not exceed vegetative use thresholds. Please communicate with district range personnel if there is a concern regarding available forage and that livestock need to move. Adaptive management will be used to lessen the impact on livestock within the area. Salting locations, maintenance of improvements, and daily management actions listed in the Sunflower Permit will be made part of the short-term extension authorization of Bartlett Allotment.

MONITORING

Monitoring dates are tentative, and some may not be required. Range personnel from the Mesa District may contact you prior to monitoring visits. We encourage your participation in these inspections, as it provides an opportune time to discuss resource conditions and management items. Vegetation GIS Data System (VGS) Monitoring may also be conducted in the spring and/or fall. A priority for monitoring may be based upon those allotments with forthcoming NEPA.

ADMINISTRATION

The records submitted by the permittee to satisfy the "Ownership Requirement" portion of the permit must be maintained. The permittee must hold ownership of the corporation (if applicable), deed for the base property, and brand associated with that permit for the entire term of the permit. Any undocumented changes in ownership are a violation of the terms and conditions of your term grazing permit under Part 2, Sec. 7.

Please Submit a new updated Brand Certificate to District Range Staff so he may update your permit.

SALT AND MINERAL BLOCK

Salting may be used to aid in livestock distribution and management. Salting must be located no closer than ¼ mile from waters, streams, rivers, riparian areas, trails, and known archaeological sites.

RANGE IMPROVEMENT CONSTRUCTION I MAINTENANCE

The permittee shall maintain all range improvements that are assigned for maintenance in the Term Grazing Permit. All work involving the use of heavy equipment will be accomplished only after approval of the Forest Officer in charge of the allotment.

Sunflower Allotment Improvement Work Schedule, 2021		
Improvement Type	Improvement Name	Work Period and Notes
Springs	Burned Area	Repair, Replace, Fix and Maintain as needed within footprint of fire
Dirt/Earthen Tanks	Burned Area	Repair, Replace, Fix and Maintain as needed within footprint of fire
Fences	Burned Area	Repair, Replace, Fix and Maintain as needed within footprint of fire
Water Systems	Burned Area	Repair, Replace, Fix and Maintain as needed within footprint of fire

Maintenance of existing improvements are exempt from additional heritage (archaeological) clearances; however, they may require a biological review before work may proceed. Timing restrictions for project work may also be stipulated based on the type of equipment used to perform the work. Please provide the Forest Service with advanced notice of any maintenance you wish to perform so there is enough time to complete any required reviews.

PROTECTION

The permittee, his agents and employees, when acting within the scope of their employment, and his contractors and subcontractors will protect the land and property of the United States, waived private land and other land under jurisdiction of the Forest Service covered by and used in conjunction with this permit.

ALLOTMENT INSPECTIONS

Forest personnel may conduct periodic brief inspections of pastures within the allotment at any time to verify actual use, improvement conditions, or other non-range related activity.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Failure to comply with any of the terms and conditions specified in Parts 1, 2, and 3 of your Term Grazing Permit may result in suspension or cancellation, in whole or in part, after written notice. This is found in Part 1, Section 3, of your permit

This agreement will be made part of Sunflower Allotments permit file and attached to Bartlett Allotments permit and 2210 monitoring file.