

**DECISION NOTICE AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
SYCAMORE LIVESTOCK GRAZING PROJECT
U.S. FOREST SERVICE
VERDE RANGER DISTRICT, PRESCOTT NATIONAL FOREST
YAVAPAI COUNTY, ARIZONA**

DECISION NOTICE

Based upon my review of the Sycamore Livestock Grazing Project Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement Alternative 2, which includes the following elements and mitigation measures:

Summary of specific components of Alternative 2, Sycamore Allotment

Grazing System	Grazing Season	Utilization Levels	Stocking Rate	Equivalent Stocking Cattle/Horses	Range Improvements
4 pasture deferred rotation	Yearlong	Upland forage (growing season) – 31-40% Upland forage (non-growing season) – 41-50% Upland Browse – 50% Riparian Woody - 20% Riparian Herbaceous – 50%	Up to 5,484 Animal-Unit-Months ¹	Up to 450 cattle/7 horses	Construct well and pipeline system; expand a corral and holding pasture; install 2 cattleguards

Details of Alternative 2

Authorization

- Grazing would be permitted year-round on the allotment, but may be less in some years depending upon available forage with a proposed permitted use of up to 450 cow/calf and 7 horses yearlong (5,484 Animal-Unit-Months).
- Annual authorized livestock numbers would be based on existing conditions, including available water and forage. Adjustments to the annual authorized livestock numbers (increase or decrease) may occur during the grazing year, based on conditions and/or range inspections.

¹ Animal-Unit-Month (AUM) is the amount of oven-dry forage required by one mature cow of about 1,000 pounds, either dry or with a calf up to six months of age, or their equivalent, for a standardized period of 30 animal-unit-days.

- The Sycamore Allotment's grazing rotation system would continue to emphasize a 4-pasture 1-herd system which would realize one pasture rested fully, 1 year out of 4, and would realize summer growing season deferment or partial deferment in each pasture, 3 years out of 4. This grazing rotation would allow a staggered entry into pastures at different seasons each year. The grazing rotation would target a 4 month grazing window per pasture, but the actual schedule would vary according to adaptive management principles.
- Flexibility in the timing of entry and pasture moves would be determined by available forage and management standards and objectives specified in the Allotment Management Plan (AMP) and Annual Operating Instructions (AOI).
- Livestock grazing during the summer (warm-season, typically July -September), would be managed at conservative (31-40 percent) use intensity based on key herbaceous species identified within key areas² on the allotment.
- Livestock grazing prescribed use levels outside of the summer forage growing seasons would be managed at a moderate (41-50 percent) use intensity based on selected key herbaceous species within key areas on the allotment.
- Livestock grazing prescribed use levels would be managed at moderate (41-50 percent) use intensity based on selected upland key browse species current leader growth at any given time during the year.
- Relative use of current year's production would be managed at 20 percent based on selected key riparian woody species (willow, cottonwood, ash and alder). Livestock grazing on selected key riparian herbaceous species within critical monitoring areas would be managed at a 50 percent relative use.

Range Structural Improvements

Adaptive management would allow for the construction of rangeland improvements if they have been identified and are determined, through monitoring, to be necessary for achieving resource objectives. However, if some or all improvements are not implemented, the upper limits of permitted livestock numbers are likely not achievable. By identifying these structural range improvements, the Forest Service is not implying a commitment of funding for implementation.

- The Tule corral would be expanded by constructing approximately 1/3 mile of fence.
- The Double T holding pasture would be expanded by constructing approximately 3/4 mile of fence.
- One cattleguard would be relocated, and one new cattleguard installed with above-mentioned changes to corral/holding pasture.
- A water development would be installed in Loball pasture to provide additional water for livestock in the uplands and reduce their reliance on Sycamore Creek. The source for this water would be a new well drilled on private property. Specifics of the water development:

² key area- relatively small portion of a range selected because of its location, use or grazing value as a monitoring point for wildlife and domestic livestock grazing use. It is assumed that key areas, if properly selected, will reflect the overall acceptability of current grazing management over the range.

- Water would be piped above ground from the source well to two water trough areas in LoBall Pasture, and would also be piped from near the private parcel above ground to the T-anchor corrals located in the Loball Pasture and to Hiball Pasture. At full implementation, three segments of pipeline would originate from the well. Solar-powered water pumps would be used to supply the upland stock tanks.
- In order to drill the well, the permittee would access the private property via a temporary road, using an old existing travel way³ for alignment. This existing travel way served as the access to this private property, but is no longer used. It may be necessary to remove juniper trees in, or adjacent to the travel way prior to use.
- Use of this temporary road is only authorized as needed for construction of the well. Any other use is not authorized. The temporary road would be closed after well installation. Any future maintenance would need to be reauthorized.
- If monitoring shows that livestock reliance on Sycamore Creek still needs to be reduced beyond the well development, a trick tank (i.e., guzzler) could be installed along with storage tank and water trough. If the trick tank is installed, it would provide an opportunity for additional water in the Hiball Pasture.

Monitoring

In order to evaluate continued progress toward meeting range management objectives, grazing monitoring would be conducted as described in the EA. Additionally, in order to ensure that Alternative 2 would not exceed agreed to parameters for the Gila chub, populations and critical habitat would be monitored and a yearly report outlining monitoring results would be provided to the USFWS and the permittee.

Adaptive Management

The following adaptive management strategies may be implemented:

- Timing of livestock movements on the Sycamore Allotment would be determined by utilization levels, forage conditions, water availability, and would be specified in the AOI.
- The timing, intensity, and/or duration of grazing in any pasture of the Sycamore Allotment would be adjusted to lower levels as needed to achieve resource objectives. Additional vegetation growth would be allowed before any re-entry into a pasture.
- Gila chub monitoring measures employed for Sycamore Creek would be managed to the described grazing use and streambank thresholds. Upon meeting these thresholds the permittee would immediately manage livestock away from Sycamore Creek into another portion of the pasture and if that is not possible, into the next available pasture.
- Gila chub monitoring measures: Gila chub population, pool habitat, and proper functioning condition (PFC) would need to show stable or upward trends or consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would be re-initiated.

³ Travel Way – Any transportation facility that allows vehicle passage of any sort, that came into existence without plans, design or standard construction methods, that is not maintained or signed and has a very low traffic volume.

Mitigation Measures

Mitigation measures are included under Alternative 2 and are designed to avoid or reduce potential resource conflicts, respond to issues, or improve implementation effectiveness. The use of applicable best management practices (see Appendix A of EA) is also intended to minimize impacts to resources under Alternative 2.

1. A physical retention structure designed to retain sediment will be placed in the erosive gully in the Holding Pasture. This designed feature will include placement in the gully itself and additional structures adjacent to the gully including mechanical contouring.
2. Monitoring will be conducted specific to conditions in the holding pasture for grazing and soil. A key area will be established in the holding pasture. Specific soils effectiveness monitoring will be conducted on the gully's physical control structure. In addition, through monitoring of the key herbaceous vegetation, soil conditions will be interpolated as needed to determine trend. In the event that soil trend is downward, additional grazing management changes would be implemented including modifications to timing, intensity, or duration in the holding pasture.
3. Fences that are constructed or reconstructed will be designed to meet Forest Service specifications for safe wildlife passage. Fence design will be approved by the Forest Service prior to implementation
4. Place approved wildlife escape ramps on all water developments (both new construction and retrofit for existing), as appropriate.
5. Provide pronghorn fawning cover in the small mesa area in the southern part of the Holding pasture during the pronghorn fawning period of March-May each year (approximately 160 acres), by grazing at conservative use levels.
6. Well Monitoring – A piezometer with a pressure transducer to measure stream level would be installed in reach 1 of Sycamore Creek before the well is drilled to identify baseline groundwater conditions. Following installation of the well, a pump test should be conducted. The Forest hydrologist will work with the permittee to establish a maximum drawdown rate to ensure adequate ground water is moving through the system in order to mitigate impacts on downstream Gila chub critical habitat. A data logger may be installed in the well to record water levels over time.

Decision Rationale

I have selected Alternative 2 because it best meets the Purpose and Need for Action described in the EA, while addressing the multiple use resource needs of the Agency as expressed in the Desired Conditions (page 3 of EA). Alternative 1 would 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 effects of implementing Alternative 2 have been disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA for Vegetation, Soil/Watershed, Fisheries, Wildlife, Heritage, Recreation and Wilderness. I have reviewed these findings and conclude that the design of the Alternative and the associated mitigation measures will allow for Desired Conditions to be met and will be in compliance with the Prescott National Forest Land Management Plan. Alternative 2 provides grazing opportunities for the rancher while providing for protection of important riparian resources in Sycamore Creek. This Alternative allows for water development outside the riparian area to reduce direct livestock impacts. The presence of the endangered species, Gila chub, in Sycamore Creek was a resource concern considered in the development of Alternatives. The planned upland water developments will distribute livestock away from Sycamore Creek and thereby reduce direct impacts to Gila chub and their habitat. Alternative 2 provides for monitoring of Gila chub populations every year. Gila chub critical habitat will be monitored to ensure that pool quality or frequency is not being impacted by livestock, and that streambank alteration by livestock is limited to no more than 20% of the banks.

Alternative 2 uses the principles of adaptive management to quickly respond to changing resource conditions while allowing the rancher flexibility to utilize the best available pastures instead of strict rotation schedules and timeframes. An adaptive management approach uses the results of short- and long-term monitoring to adjust the timing, intensity, frequency, and duration of grazing activities. This approach allows for quick response to changing conditions such as drought or long-term climate fluctuations. Alternative 2 specifies an upper limit of stocking that would be authorized on the Sycamore Allotment, but actual stocking would be determined on a yearly basis considering forage production, water availability, status of range improvements, and results of past range inspections. Yearly stocking determinations will be made in close coordination with the grazing permittee.

The Sycamore Livestock Grazing Project EA documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

Public Involvement

The proposal has been listed in the Prescott National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since the second quarter (01/01/2007 to 03/31/2007) for fiscal year 2008. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency has met with Sycamore Allotment permittee and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A scoping letter was mailed to 20 individuals and organizations on June 23, 2008. The letter described the proposed action and requested comments on the proposed Sycamore Livestock Grazing Project. Six responses were received from which 69 comments were generated. These scoping comments were reviewed and are included in the project planning record. Each comment was reviewed to determine if it constituted an issue.

A cover letter and Summary of the Environmental Assessment for the Sycamore Livestock Grazing Project was mailed to 20 individuals on November 25, 2008, and a legal notice was posted in *The Daily Courier* newspaper on November 26, 2008, which initiated a 30-day comment period. The summary EA included the purpose and need and alternatives, as well as a summary of the potential impacts by resource area and comparison by alternatives. Four responses were received, from which 33 comments were generated. Public comments and Prescott National Forest responses are included in the project planning record.

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 project area is situated along the southeast boundary of the Prescott National Forest around the small unincorporated community of Dugas. The legal description for the Sycamore Allotment is Township (T)10, 11N, Range (R) 2, 3, 4 E, Gila and Salt River Meridian. The Sycamore Allotment consists of approximately 28,118 acres of forest system lands within the northern reaches of the Agua Fria Grasslands. The primary watersheds being evaluated for cumulative effects are the Sycamore Creek, Little Sycamore Creek, and Bishop Creek watersheds. None of the other three 6th HUC watersheds (Silver Creek, Indian Creek, and Gap Creek-Lower Verde River) have any more than 0.5 percent of their area occupied by the Sycamore Allotment.

Intensity

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

1. **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.
2. **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 incident of issue with public health and safety.
3. **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 that includes the Pine Mountain Wilderness and portions of the Pine Mountain Wilderness Contiguous Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA). Project actions would not affect the characteristics of the IRA since no new roads would be built there, and actions would be in compliance with the Roadless Area Conservation Final Rule (36 CFR Part 294 Special Areas) (EA page 58). The access route being authorized to drill the well is outside the IRA. This temporary access route is for approved resource management activities as authorized in the forest plan (p. 19), and will not affect the status of existing Travel Management planning. The Sycamore Allotment includes approximately 7,600 acres of the 20,100 acre Pine Mountain Wilderness. Allowing up to 450 cow/calf and 7 horses to continue grazing on the Sycamore Allotment year round would not have any adverse impacts on the wilderness resource or on visitors in the Pine Mountain Wilderness. Wilderness conditions would be as they currently are (EA page 59). The project area is known to contain cultural resources of both prehistoric and historic periods. The Forest Service's proposal to continue livestock management is considered to have a no adverse effect on the heritage properties located within the Sycamore Allotment (EA page 56).
4. **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 LMP Environmental Impact Statement. Forest-wide effects of LMP's standards were disclosed in that EIS. The selected alternative with the identified mitigation considered in the EA 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 Chapter 1 and 4 of the EA (pages 6-7, 61, respectively), 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.

5. **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 like the one proposed. 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, pages 20-60)
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 action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects because effects of this project are predictable, given that similar actions have occurred in the watershed for many decades. Major follow-up actions will not be necessary. I conclude that this action does not establish precedence for future actions with unknown risks to the environment.
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. Chapter 3 of the EA (pages 20-60) discusses the combined effects of the project with other past, current and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Based on the discussions in the EA and information identified during public review of the EA and given in the Decision Notice, I have concluded that there are no significant, cumulative impacts.
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 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, because areas proposed for ground-disturbing activities have been surveyed and contain no known sites or structures that are currently listed or eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act has been completed for grazing and proposed improvements and the SHPO has concurred with the no adverse effect determination (see EA page 56).
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.** A Biological Assessment for Gila Chub and its Critical Habitat was completed on 2/12/2010 and submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for formal consultation. A Biological Opinion (BO) was issued on 7/29/2010 that concluded the proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Gila chub and will not adversely modify its critical habitat (BO page 24). The project area contains

restricted pine/oak habitat for the Mexican spotted owl in the Pine Mountain Wilderness, but owls have not been documented in the area. The project area contains no designated critical habitat for Mexican Spotted Owl as defined by the Endangered Species Act. For these reasons, the project was determined to have no effect on Mexican spotted owl (EA pages 51-52).

- 10. 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. Chapters 1-3 of the EA (pages 1-60) document the analysis for this project which does not threaten or violate any federal, state or local law imposed 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. The project was designed in conformance with LMP direction concerning resources including vegetation, soils and watersheds, wildlife and fisheries, and wilderness areas (EA pages 3-4).

A Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and EA were considered. 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. The EA analyzed a reasonable range of alternatives, including the No Grazing alternative. It also 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 and any potentially affected tribes have been consulted. Clearance for this project has been received, with concurrence by the State Historic Preservation Officer.

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

Administrative Review (Appeal) Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to regulations at 36 CFR 215. Individuals or organizations who provided comment or otherwise expressed interest in the proposed action during the 30-day comment period may appeal. The permittee may appeal this decision under 36

CFR 251. Interest expressed or comments provided on this project prior to or after the close of the comment period do not have standing for appeal purposes. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, express delivery, or messenger service) with the appropriate Appeal Deciding Officer. Submit appeals to:

Alan Quan
Forest Supervisor
Attn: Sycamore Livestock Grazing Project
Prescott National Forest
344 S. Cortez St.
Prescott, AZ 86303-4398
Fax: 928-443-8208

If hand delivered, the appeal must be received at the above address during business hours (Monday - Friday 8:00 am to 4:30 pm), excluding holidays. Electronic appeals may be submitted to: appeals-southwestern-prescott@fs.fed.us (.doc, .rtf, or .txt formats only). 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.


Appeals, including attachments, must be in writing, fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, and filed (postmarked) within 45 days following the date this notice is published in the *Courier*, the newspaper of record. This publication date is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframes provided by any other source.

Implementation Date

If no appeals 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 appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Christine Thiel, ID Team Leader, Chino Valley Ranger District, (928) 777-2211.


Linda Jackson

Acting District Ranger

9/24/2010
Date

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