



# Final Decision Notice for the Wildbunch Allotment Management Plan

USDA Forest Service  
Clifton Ranger District  
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests  
Greenlee County, AZ

## Purpose & Need for Action

The Wildbunch Allotment consists of 23,027 acres of National Forest System lands on the Clifton Ranger District of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. The purpose of the proposal analyzed in the final Environmental Assessment (EA) for with Wildbunch Allotment Management Plan is to consider livestock grazing opportunities on public lands identified as suitable, and to do so in a manner consistent with the desired conditions and other objectives, standards, and guidelines set forth in the 2015 revised forest plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. This proposal additionally is designed to consider necessary long-term management direction on grazing through allotment management plans and subsequent annual operating instructions designed in accordance with the proposed action in this analysis.

This decision is needed at this time because:

- Where consistent with other multiple use goals and objectives there is Congressional intent to allow grazing on suitable lands.
- The Wildbunch Allotment contains lands identified as suitable for domestic livestock grazing in the forest plan and continued domestic livestock grazing on this land is consistent with the goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines of the forest plan.
- It is Forest Service policy to make forage available to qualified livestock operators from lands suitable for grazing consistent with land management plans. (*FSM 2203.1; 36 CFR 222.2 (c)*).
- It is Forest Service policy to continue contributions to the economic and social wellbeing of people by providing opportunities for economic diversity and by promoting stability for communities that depend on range resources for their livelihood.
- The Term Grazing Permit for the Wildbunch Allotment was issued to the present permittee in December 1994 and again in 2009, with environmental analysis not completed.
- Environmental analysis is needed in order to comply with the Rangeland Rescission Act of 1995.

The interdisciplinary team identified gaps between existing and desired conditions, and developed alternatives on that basis, as documented in the final EA.

## Decision

This decision is a result of an iterative process of reviewing existing conditions, refining alternatives, developing adaptive management procedures, consultation with applicable regulatory agencies, and consideration of two timely objections received in accordance with 36 CFR 218. The specifics of the final decision in this document, and the final finding of no significant impact supplement and, where applicable, supersede the Draft Decision and Draft FONSI issued August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Based upon my review of all alternatives in the final EA for the Wildbunch Allotment, as well as the associated specialist reports and the project record, I have decided to implement the proposed action alternative. The chosen alternative is described in full in chapter 2 of the final EA, beginning on page 13 of that document. The chosen alternative is summarized below and will authorize livestock grazing on the Wildbunch Allotment in a manner that is consistent with the revised 2015 forest plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. In addition to authorizing livestock grazing, my decision incorporates authorization for range improvements, adaptive management, monitoring, and specific management practices and mitigation measures developed for this project. The proposed action and chosen alternative consists of three primary components, (1) the grazing permit or authorization, (2) the grazing management that the permit would follow, and (3) the adaptive management framework that would be applied to modify grazing management as needed. These components are summarized here but stated in full in the final EA.

### *Grazing Permit*

A 10-year term grazing permit would be issued, authorizing the following stocking ranges, rotations, season of use, and adaptive management criteria:

- **Stocking:**
  - 188 – 311 cow/calf pairs (from 3/1 – 2/28 annually)
  - 8 horses (from 3/1 – 2/28 annually)
  - 29 – 48 yearlings (from 1/1 to 5/31 annually)
  - 22 – 35 yearlings (from 1/1 – 10/31 annually)
- **Rotation:**
  - 8 pasture deferred rest rotation
- **Season of Use:**
  - Year-long

Adjustments to the annual authorized livestock numbers, within the ranges listed in the permit, may occur during the grazing year based on the on-the-ground conditions. This includes numbers potentially being adjusted downward if conditions are not favorable, such as in the case of drought, insects or other environmental factors. The maximum numbers could be allowed when desired conditions are met.

### *Grazing Management*

This element of the chosen alternative consists of the rest-rotation grazing system, administrative changes to livestock pasture rotations, and the installation of structural range improvements. The large South pasture would be administratively divided into two sections and called the Southwest and Southeast pastures. Chapter 2 in the final EA and the map attached (Appendix A, figure 1) to this document provide more detail and clarification on the actions detailed below.

### **Allowable Use and Use Monitoring:**

Forage utilizations proposed are at conservative (31-40%) levels during the dormant season and light to non-use (0-30%) during the growing season for all pastures with the exception of excluded areas and the Little pasture. Utilization would be measured at key areas, key areas being portions of a range selected because of its location, use or grazing value as a monitoring point for grazing use.

### **Rotation Strategy:**

A pasture rotation strategy would be used to provide rest in six pastures and to allow vegetative recovery in all pastures. Livestock would be managed under a deferred/rest rotational grazing system where the length of the grazing period within each pasture would be determined annually. Rest could include incidental use which is defined as 0 – 5% allowable use. The pasture rotation strategy includes:

- Mud Spring Pasture – Graze up to three months during the growing season one out of two years.
- North/Joe Fritz Pastures – Combine pastures and graze up to one month during the growing season, one out of two years, and rest one out of five years.
- Roan Cow Pasture – Graze up to four months during the growing season, one out of two years, and rest once every five years.
- Southeast Pasture – Graze up to four months during the growing season, two out of three years, and rest one out of three years.
- Southwest Pasture – Graze up to two months during the growing season, one out of five years, and rest two out of three years.
- Indian/Oak Pasture – Graze up to three months during the growing season one out of three years.
- Horse Pasture – Graze yearlong for eight horses. When grazing utilization levels are reached the horses would be removed.
- Little Pasture – Grazed incidentally as livestock are moved off the allotment using FS road 475 and between the Southwest pasture and Mud Springs pasture. Incidental use is limited to between 0-5% allowable use.
- Blue River Pasture – Excluded from livestock use entirely by topography and strategically placed fences that prevent livestock entry into this 945 acre area surrounding the Blue River on both sides. Any drifting livestock would be removed immediately. Such provisions will be incorporated into the Allotment Management Plan and Annual Operating Instructions, in accordance with the provision of the Environmental Assessment and Objection response instructions.

**Range improvements:**

Pasture	Proposed Improvements	Description	Location
Southwest	Big Tank Series Tank #1 Water-lot	¼ mile of fence around Bag Tank Series Tank #1	T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 28
Southwest	Big Tank Series Tank #2 Water-lot	¼ mile of fence around Bag Tank Series Tank #2	T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 28
Southwest	Big Tank Series Tank #3 Water-lot fence	¼ mile of fence around Bag Tank Series Tank #3	T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 33
Southwest	5,000 gallon storage tank	Tank to store water for the existing drinker.	T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 21
Southeast	5,000 gallon storage tank	Tank to store water for the existing and proposed drinkers	T2S, R31E, Middle of section 15
Southeast	150-600 gallon trough	Drinking trough with shut off valves installed to help control distribution and use	T2S, R31E, Middle of section 15
Southeast	150-600 gallon trough	Drinking trough with shut off valves installed to help control distribution and use	T2S, R31E, NE ¼ of section 21

Southeast	1 mile extension of pipeline	1 mile of 1 ¼ inch black poly plastic pipe laid on top of ground.	From existing water tank at T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 22, traveling south to T2s, R31w, SW ¼ of section 27
Southeast	150-600 gallon trough	Drinking trough	T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 27
Southeast/west	Fence	4 miles of fence, dividing south pasture	From Cienega creek #2 corral at T2S, R31E, NW ¼ of section 15 traveling south along ridge top to T2s, R31w, SW ¼ of section 33
Little	Fence	0.88 miles of fence	T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 8 to and SW ¼ of section 7
Horse	Fence	1 mile of fence	From private land at T2S, R31E, SW ¼ of section 8 traveling southeast through T2s, R31w, NW ¼ of section 17 circling back to private land.
Mud Springs	Trick tank and trough	Trick tank and trough with less than a one-acre foot print), with a collection apron, storage tank, pipeline, and trough to collect and hold water, surrounded by up to 0.5 miles of fence. Livestock would use the new trick tanks during the growing seasons	T2S, R31E, Middle of section 15
Roan Cow	Trick tank and trough	Trick tank and trough with less than a one-acre foot print), with a collection apron, storage tank, pipeline, and trough to collect and hold water, surrounded by up to 0.5 miles of fence. Livestock would use the new trick tanks during the growing seasons	T1S, R31E, NE ¼ of section 34

**Adaptive Management and Monitoring**

The chosen alternative includes a framework to enable the application of adaptive management principles. Adaptive management is designed to provide sufficient flexibility to allow 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 may suggest the need for administrative changes in livestock management. The need for management changes would be based on the magnitude and occurrence of deviations from proposed guidelines, or due to a lack of progress toward desired

resource conditions. The timing of such management changes are to be based on the need for the change, with some adjustments to management practices potentially being more urgent than others. Annual operating instructions and the allotment management plan may be modified as appropriate to adapt management within the parameters of this proposed action.

Implementation monitoring would occur at the end of the growing season within each of the main grazing pastures by measuring grazing utilization. Utilization is defined as the proportion or degree of current year’s forage production that is consumed or destroyed by animals. Utilization is measured at the end of the growing season when the total annual production can be accounted for, and thus the effects of grazing in the whole management unit can be assessed. Utilization and intensity measurements would be taken in key areas which reflect grazing effects within an entire pasture. Utilization guidelines are not intended as inflexible limits. Utilization measurements can indicate the need for management changes prior to this need being identified through long-term monitoring, and are used in conjunction with additional information in order to determine stocking levels. This grazing system is designed to promote flexibility in the grazing program and to buffer the adverse effects of drought. Utilization data would be used along with actual-use, climate and trend data to determine stocking levels and pasture rotations for future years.

Long-term effectiveness monitoring determines if management practices are moving the allotment toward desired conditions and management objectives. Effectiveness monitoring may include measurements of attributes such as plant composition, ground cover, frequency, and other indicators. They would be monitored once every five to ten years, and at least one monitoring site per pasture is to be used as a key area. If monitoring indicates that progress toward desired conditions are not being achieved on the allotment, management would be modified in cooperation with the permittee. Modifications may include adjustments in livestock numbers, timing, intensity and/or duration of grazing. In addition to the management evaluation points, adaptive management would be triggered when allowable use or incidental use levels are exceeded for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years.

<b>Management Evaluation Point: <i>The “If” Statement</i></b>	<b>Adaptive Management Response Options: <i>The “Then” Statement</i></b>
<b>For all pastures</b>	
If allowable use (grazing utilization) is reached before the planned season of use is reached	Then move livestock to another pasture.
<b>For Southeast and Southwest pastures</b>	
If livestock herding is not effective in distributing livestock away from the Big Tank Series ( <i>for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years</i> )	Then erect one mile of fence around the Big Tank Series and Salt Ground Tank.
If, after the tanks are fenced, the allowable use levels are exceeded in the southwest pasture ( <i>for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years</i> )	Then erect a four mile fence to physically divide the southwest and southeast pastures OR reduce the duration of use in SW and SE pastures OR adjust livestock numbers downward, if it is not feasible to build the fence due to funding availability or personnel
<b>Little Pasture</b>	
If incidental use levels are exceeded ( <i>for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years</i> )	Then 0.88 mile fence would be constructed to divide the pasture into two small pastures. The fence would provide the ability to rest portions of the pasture

<b>Management Evaluation Point: The “If” Statement</b>	<b>Adaptive Management Response Options: The “Then” Statement</b>
If incidental use levels are exceeded after the pasture is split. <i>(for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years)</i>	Then exclude the portion with very poor range condition from livestock use.
If incidental use levels are still exceeded after the pasture is split and portions are excluded. <i>(for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years)</i>	Rest the entire pasture by excluding it from use.
<b>Horse Pasture</b>	
If allowable use levels are exceeded <i>(for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years)</i>	Then erect up to one mile of fence to divide the pasture into two pastures. Remove livestock to provide rest to the pasture.
If allowable use levels are exceeded after the pasture is split into two pastures <i>(for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years)</i>	Then exclude the portion with very poor range condition from livestock use.
If allowable use levels are exceeded after a portion is excluded from use <i>(for two consecutive years or in any two out of five years)</i>	Then exclude the entire pasture from livestock use.

### Rationale for the Decision

When compared to the other alternatives this alternative will best meet the stated purposed and need for the project and best align with the Forest Service’s multiple-use management goals. This alternative and the associated rationale meet applicable requirements under the following statutes:

- *Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act*
- *Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act*
- *Federal Land Policy and Management Act*
- *National Forest Management Act*
- *Endangered Species Act*
- *National Environmental Policy Act*
- *Rangeland Rescission Act*

This decision is in compliance with the existing Forest Plan, guidance provided by law, regulation, and policy, and consultations with District and Forest specialists and the US Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service. The project record shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of various views, and the acknowledgement of unavailable information and risk. My interdisciplinary team has considered the best available science to contribute to this decision, which is reflected in the project record. Further, when compared to the No Action alternative in the environmental assessment, the proposed action responds to the purpose and need for the proposal by authorizing livestock grazing, while addressing the site-specific resource concerns and achieving the desired conditions identified for the project area (EA pp. 3-10):

- This alternative will provide for improvements in vegetation composition and density resulting in maintenance of or attainment of satisfactory Range Management Status (EA pp. 26-29).

- This alternative will provide for improvements in livestock distribution when compared to current management, using adaptive management, BMPs, and structural range improvements (EA pp. 13-22).
- This alternative will attain and maintain greater soil stability and productivity when compared to current management, while still providing for livestock use (EA pp. 33-34).
- The adoption of Best Management Practices will contribute to the maintenance of satisfactory watershed conditions and water quality where they exist, and aid in improvements where conditions are currently unsatisfactory (EA Appendix C).
- This alternative is expected to maintain proper functioning condition in riparian areas of the allotment where it exists, while helping to attain PFC in certain Functioning-At-Risk areas on the allotment. The alternative establishes conservative use levels in riparian areas, which will provide riparian vegetation of adequate height and cover to protect soil surfaces and dissipate energy during overland flows (EA pp. 35-37).
- Permitted livestock use will provide a method for the livestock grazing community to continue to provide jobs and federal payments to counties (EA pp. 68-71).
- The Wildbunch Allotment was identified as suitable for livestock grazing in the revised 2015 Forest Plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (EA p. 10).
- This Decision brings the Term Grazing Permit issued for the Wildbunch Allotment into compliance with the Rescission Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-19).
- This Decision provides the basis for the Allotment Management Plan and Annual Operating Instructions to the permittee, which, among other things, will enforce the exclusion of livestock from the Blue River in accordance with the Environmental Assessment.

### **Other Alternatives Considered or Eliminated**

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered one other alternative in detail and one alternative was dismissed from detailed analysis. A detailed description of these alternatives alongside the proposed action can be found in the final EA, on pages 13-24.

#### **No Action (No Grazing)**

Under the No-Grazing alternative, all authorized livestock grazing on the Wildbunch allotment would be phased out over a two year period. The no action alternative or consideration of no grazing is required by Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 2209.13 Chapter 90. Under the no action alternative, livestock grazing on the Wildbunch allotment would be discontinued and the term grazing permit would be cancelled after a 2-year notification to the permit holder (FSH 2209.13-16.24).

#### **Continue Current Management Alternative**

This alternative would have continued livestock grazing under the current management strategy that has been in place since 1994. This alternative was not carried forward for further analysis since it would not meet the purpose and need to improve livestock distribution across the allotment and to improve rangeland condition.

### **Public Involvement and Scoping**

As described in the background, the need for this action arose originally with the Rangeland Rescission Act of 1995. The proposal was listed in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests' Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since 1995. The project has been on all quarterly SOPA updates since that time. The permittee was also invited to participate in the planning of this project in March 1999.

In the course of the NEPA process, this environmental analysis has been scoped with the public twice, (in 2000 and 2004) and draft or preliminary assessments have been released to the public for comment twice (in 2006 and

2014). Between both scoping and comment processes, 27 letters have been received regarding this project within the allotted time frames for scoping and comment. In accordance with provisions of 36 CFR 220.7, this project and the proposed action have been developed incrementally, in order to address various concerns expressed by the public and permittee. The interdisciplinary team's work to respond to comments received during scoping and comment periods is documented in an appendix to this report as well as in a table of comments and responses located in the project record and on the Forest Service website at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=5636>.

All relevant issues raised during the combined scoping process were considered by the interdisciplinary team when developing alternatives, mitigations/monitoring and environmental analyses for the current action. The issues raised in scoping that are addressed in the environmental analysis below include socioeconomic effects, rangeland improvements, and concerns about sensitive species and range conditions. To address these concerns, the Forest Service created and iteratively modified the alternatives described above, including the proposed action alternative.

## Final Finding of No Significant Impact

The following is a summary of the project analysis to determine significance, as defined by Forest Service Handbook 1909.15-05. "Significant" as used in NEPA requires consideration of both context and intensity of the expected project effects that result from our interdisciplinary analysis summarized in the final EA and available in full detail in the project record.

### Context

For site-specific actions, like the Proposed Action detailed in this final EA, significance usually depends upon the effects in the local rather than in the world as a whole. This project is limited in scope and duration. This project is a site-specific action that does not have international, national, region-wide or statewide importance environmentally. The intended decision is made within the context of local importance in the area associated with the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests and the Clifton Ranger District.

There are 92 active allotments on the Forests, 22 of which are located on the Clifton Ranger District. The district consists of approximately 550,000 acres, with livestock grazing currently authorized across 20 of the 22 allotments on the district, including the Wildbunch Allotment. Approximately 404,000 acres of the Clifton Ranger District are occupied by active grazing allotments, totaling around 73 percent of the District.

In terms of scale and scope of grazing authorization for the Wildbunch Allotment, this allotment contains 23,027 acres of National Forest System land. All of these acres could potentially be grazed under the Proposed Action with the exception of excluded areas totaling approximately 1,226 acres that would decrease the area affected to 21,801 acres. The acres proposed for grazing here represent approximately four percent of the acreage in the entire Clifton Ranger District, and just over one percent of the total land area of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests.

### Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis, found summarized in chapter 3 of this final EA, and the references in the project record. The effects of authorizing grazing within the Wildbunch Allotment have been appropriately and thoroughly considered with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. The agency has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. This finding of no significant impact is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b). If these factors exist, there is not necessarily a significant impact; rather, the responsible official must evaluate these factors in light of context and intensity to determine if there are significant impacts.

**1) Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on the balance the effects will be beneficial.** Under the Proposed Action, range improvements would be added which would improve distribution of livestock. With the increased livestock distribution, the Proposed Action would maintain or improve upland vegetation. Flexibility given to resource managers to adjust the timing, intensity, frequency, and duration of livestock grazing will ensure that plants are not used beyond levels that will provide for recovery, improved vigor, and recruitment of desirable species. Light to conservative use levels, in addition to mitigation measures such as not placing salt and/or mineral supplements within stream or riparian corridors will minimize effects to riparian areas and stream channels will be minimal. In addition, vegetation on the allotment will likely increase in desirable forage plant densities and litter. Authorization of incidental use may result in some localized impacts through disturbance from livestock grazing. No significant adverse effects were identified during the analysis (see EA Chapter 3, Environmental Consequences).

**2) The degree to which the Proposed Action affects public health or safety.** We conclude that 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 Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, without issues related to public health and safety. It is worth noting here that as part of Chapter 3, water quality was considered as part of the hydrology, riparian, and watershed analysis, and discussed E. coli impairment to the Blue River including reaches that border the allotment. However, given the closure of the Blue River pasture to livestock and strict adherence to management practices and mitigation measures in the proposed action, such as salting/supplement locations up out of the drainages, the proposed action is not expected to contribute to the extant E. coli impairment, nor cause any additional impairments. The proposed action will not impact this impairment based on current assessment data, which was inconclusive as to the source of the impairment. The Gila Watershed Working Group indicated that livestock grazing was only one of several likely sources for the impairment, with particular concern being centered on feral livestock ranging in the lower Blue and non-point-source recreation impacts in the upper Blue.

**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. A portion of the Lower San Francisco Inventoried Roadless Area overlaps with the allotment, however, the proposed action does not include any changes to existing transportation nor does it authorize the construction of new roads. There are no Wilderness or Recommended Wilderness areas within the Wildbunch Allotment. There are no eligible or designated Wild and Scenic River reaches within the grazed area. The reach of the Blue River that runs through the excluded area of the allotment is listed as a suitable stretch of river eligible for "wild" designation, but it is not grazed under the proposed action. Plan Standards that apply to Wild and Scenic River stretches are consistent with the proposed action and will be adhered to in the implementation of the AMP. As discussed in chapter 3 of the final EA, the allotment is known to contain cultural resources of both prehistoric and historic periods. The proposal to continue livestock management is considered to have a no adverse effect on the heritage properties located within the Wildbunch Allotment since the construction of new range developments will be designed to avoid impacts to cultural resources, and relevant tribes have been consulted with throughout the project-level planning process.

**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 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Land Management Plan, and the suitability of this project area for grazing was determined in that EIS (see also figure 3, chapter 1 of EA). Management actions such as those discussed in Chapter 2 for the Proposed Action are implemented in other areas throughout the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests and on many other national forests in both the Southwestern Region and across the larger United States. Furthermore, the effects of the Proposed Action and alternatives have been analyzed in line with *40 CFR 40 1500.1* and *36 CFR 220.7* in Chapter 3. While some mem-

bers of the public are opposed to livestock grazing on public lands and others view the Forest Service as too restrictive in its management, this action and its potential impacts does not represent anything highly controversial within the larger context of the *National Environmental Policy Act*. The analysis in this final EA represents the judgement and expertise of resource management professionals who have applied their knowledge to similar projects and resources in the past. There has been no information presented that would demonstrate that the action would cause adverse impacts that could not be mitigated. Accordingly, we conclude that it is unlikely that the environmental effects associated with the action will be highly controversial. The intensity of grazing and management practices proposed are consistent with the best scientific information currently available and current Forest Service direction.

**5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The staff of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests and the interdisciplinary team that conducted the analysis have considerable experience with actions that are highly similar to the Proposed Action. Further, our analysis shows the effects of implementing the Proposed Action are not uncertain, and do not involve any unique or unknown risk. This action is similar to many past actions, both in this analysis area and the larger Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. It is highly likely that the effects of implementing this Proposed Action will be similar to the effects of past, similar actions. The interdisciplinary team that conducted the analysis used scientifically accepted analytical techniques and the best available information to estimate potential effects associated with the proposal, including agency scientific guidance specific to rangeland management (See various subsections within EA Chapter 3).

**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 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. We conclude that this action does not establish precedent for future actions, which will be evaluated through an environmental analyses process on a project-by-project basis, in compliance with *40 CFR 1500-1508* and *36 CFR 220*.

**7) 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 across a wide variety of resource areas. Based on the discussions in the EA, specialist reports, and information identified during public review, we 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 in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant 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. In the fall of 2013, the Clifton Ranger District engaged in consultation with the Arizona SHPO and received concurrence on the development of a new range management plan and some associated improvements. The District has supplemented this information in the current NEPA analysis process for the Wildbunch Allotment.

The adaptive management option alternatives for the Wildbunch Allotment include new fence construction, existing fence maintenance and repair and water distribution and collection developments. According to the Programmatic Agreement between the Forest Service and the State Historic Preservation Officer, maintenance, replacement, or reconstruction of existing facilities are not considered undertakings and do not require additional survey. However, to ensure that the requirements of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act are met, any new range improvement projects that will result in ground-disturbing activity associated with the proposed improvements will require case-by-case consultation and clearance from the Apache-Sitgreaves NF Heritage Program Manager. All areas affected by the improvements will be surveyed prior to project implementation to make

certain that there are no adverse effects upon heritage resources. In the event that cultural resources are discovered, project concurrence by the Arizona State Historic Preservation Officer will be sought prior to project implementation.

Inventories shall be conducted in accordance with the stipulations set forth in the *First Amended Programmatic Agreement*. Archeological clearance must be approved with all necessary consultation with SHPO prior to the construction, modification, or removal of all improvements. This approach, based on long-term consultation with SHPO and on U.S. Forest Service Region 3 policy as embodied in the *First Amended Programmatic Agreement Regarding Historic Property Protection and Responsibilities*, and specifically, Appendix H, the *Standard Consultation Protocol for Rangeland Management* developed pursuant to Stipulation IV.A of the *Programmatic Agreement* is considered to be the standard operating procedure for treating potential grazing impacts to heritage resources on the Southwestern National Forests, including the Apache-Sitgreaves. By following these guidelines, the project will be in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, and section 101(b)(4) of the National Environmental Policy Act. Finally, the Proposed Action has a determination of “No Adverse Effect” on cultural resources located within the Wildbunch Allotment.

**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.** There are federally-listed threatened or endangered species or their habitat within the project area. The Wildlife, Fisheries, and Rare Plants Report serves as the Biological Evaluation for the Wildbunch Allotment and documents the effects on species and habitat, as summarized in chapter 3 of the final EA. A biological assessment (BA) analyzed the effects of the Proposed Action on seven federally-listed species and their designated or proposed critical habitat, and was submitted to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which concurred with our assessment and determinations.

On July 21, 2015, the letter from the Clifton Ranger District was received in the USFWS Ecological Services office on that date requesting initiation of formal section 7 consultation under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act) (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.) for ongoing livestock grazing and effects to seven listed species and proposed and designated critical habitat under the Wildbunch Allotment Management Plan (AMP) on the Clifton Ranger District, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (ASNFs), Arizona. A Final Biological Opinion (02EAAZ00-2015-F-0849) was issued on February 2, 2017.

The consultation process with the USFWS and resulting Biological Opinion on threatened or endangered species on the Wildbunch Allotment indicated that the Proposed Action was neither likely to have an adverse effect on Yellow-billed cuckoo, the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, the Mexican Spotted Owl, or narrow-headed garter-snake nor an adverse effect on their critical habitat, representing 4 of the 7 threatened or endangered species with habitat or range overlapping with the allotment. However, for the Chiricahua leopard frog, loach minnow, and spokedace, USFWS found the action likely to adversely affect the species. This determination for the Chiricahua leopard frog was based on the presence of *occupiable* riparian habitat on the WBA, as opposed to the existence of the species on the allotment at present. Surveys have not found the Chiricahua leopard frog on the allotment. Such a determination for the loach minnow and spokedace is based primarily on upland sediment disturbance within the allotment potentially impacting downstream habitat for these aquatic species, though the habitat itself is excluded from direct impacts. Loach minnow spokedace are present within the allotment, although not within a grazed area due to the Blue River pasture being excluded from livestock grazing through topography and strategically placed fencing.

With respect to these three species, it is important to emphasize the USFWS further concluded that the Proposed Action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of these three species or destroy or adversely modify their critical habitat(s).

The final Biological Opinion received from USFWS provided the following term and condition for the proposed allotment management, in accordance with our proposed action: “*The ASNFs shall ensure that allotment and pasture fences are maintained to ensure that cattle are not using the Blue River for forage or watering. If fences are*

*found to be damaged they shall be immediately repaired. If livestock are found in the Blue River they will be immediately removed.*” No additional reasonable and prudent measures were issued by the USFWS.

**10) Whether the action threatens a violation of 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 consistent with the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Land Management Plan and the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), Clean Water Act, and the Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976.

## Conclusion

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA and specialist reports, we have determined that the Proposed Action, alternative 2, will not have significant effects 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.

## Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

### *National Forest Management Act (NFMA)*

This decision to implement the proposed action is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives for livestock grazing as listed on pages 96-98 of the 2015 revised land and resources management plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for livestock grazing, wildlife, rangeland vegetation, and soil and watershed health.

## Objection Opportunities

The analysis for this Decision Notice was completed under the authority of the Project-level Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process per 36 CFR 218 parts A and B. The legal notice for the objection filing period was published on August 8, 2018. Two timely objections to the draft decision were received. Forest Supervisor Steve Best reviewed the project in light of the issues presented in the objection letters received. Review found that the project is in compliance with all applicable laws and the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest Plan. However, the need several points of clarification were directed to the Clifton District Ranger. In light of this, I have compiled additional clarification on how the proposed action was modified to respond to the issues. Information in the project record was summarized to consolidate support for the findings that the proposed action will not adversely impact any of the Blue River's ORVs, and a findings statement is included in this decision as to how the project meets certain relevant Forest plan standards. Additionally, the final FONSI includes the mandatory Term and Condition for loach minnow and spikedace, as directed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Through the lifespan of the project, the district will continue consultation processes with Arizona State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) as required by the Standard Consultation Protocol for Rangeland Management. Finally, details on Allotment Management Plan (AMP) implementation, planning, and enforcement have been added to the Final Decision Notice (see above- *decision* and *decision rationale* sections, respectively).

## Implementation Date

Implementation of activities under the selected action will occur based on this Decision Notice. Once this decision is signed, implementation of the Wildbunch Allotment Management Plan can begin immediately pursuant to regulations at 36 CFR 218.

## Permittee Appeal Rights

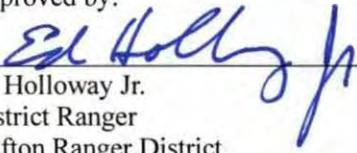
This decision is appealable under 36 CFR 214.4(a) by the grazing permit holder only.

### Copies of the EA and Further Information

Copies of the EA are available from the Clifton Ranger District, 397240 AZ Hwy 75, Duncan, AZ 85534. Electronic versions of the EA as well as other related documents are available online at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=5636>.

For further information concerning this project, contact Orry Hatcher, Sitgreaves Zone NEPA Planner, during normal business hours, either at 928-368-2108 or at [ohatcher@fs.fed.us](mailto:ohatcher@fs.fed.us).

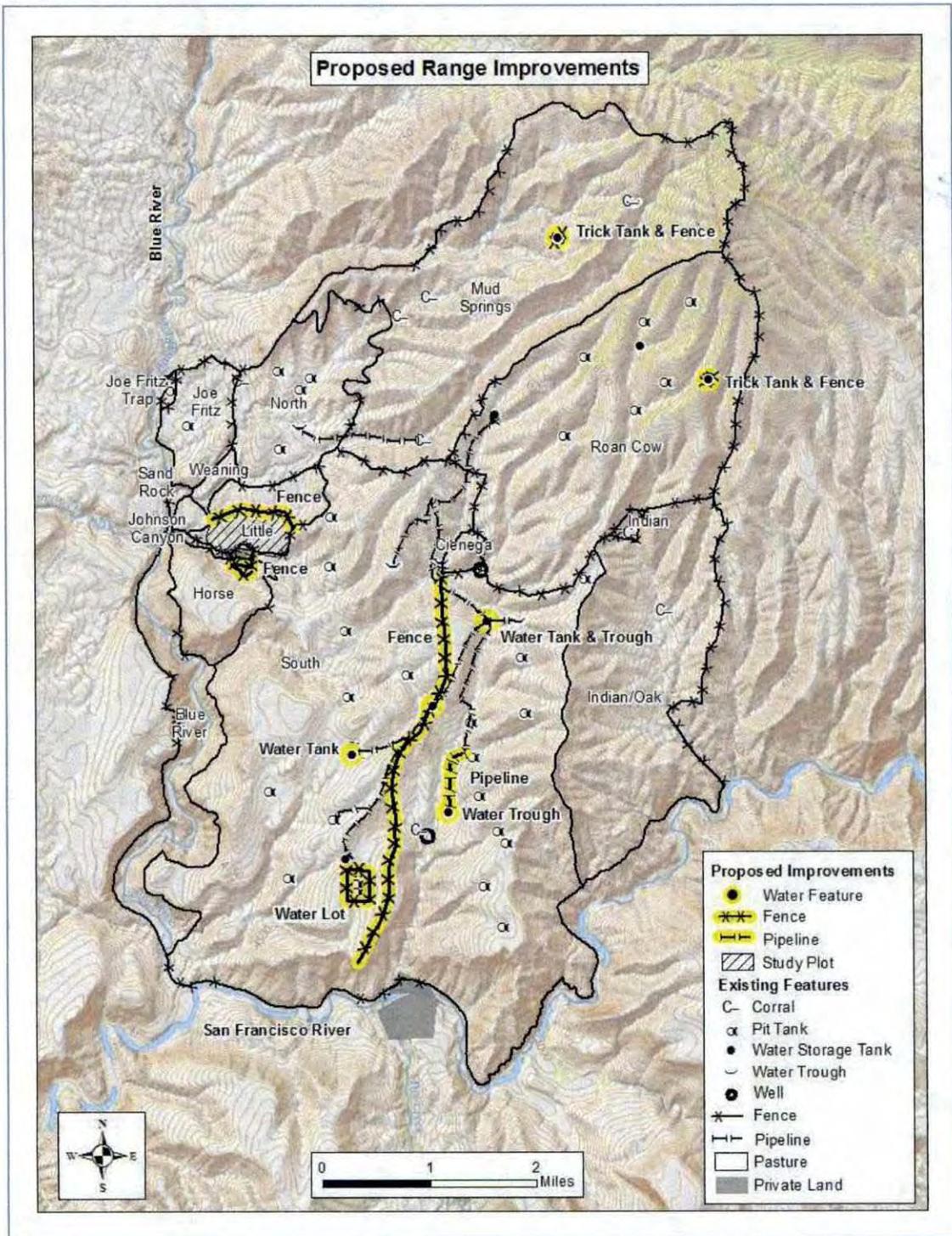
Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Ed Holloway Jr.  
District Ranger  
Clifton Ranger District  
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests

2/7/2019  
Date

## Appendix A: Maps

Map of proposed improvements and Action Area



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