

Decision Memo

Willow Livestock Grazing Willow Allotment

USDA Forest Service
Verde Ranger District, Prescott National Forest
Yavapai County, Arizona
Legal Description: T.12 N, R.4 & 5 W, Gila and Salt River Meridian

Background

The Willow Livestock Grazing project area is situated approximately 6 miles northeast of Dugas and involves approximately 4677 acres of Prescott Forest lands. While there is private land within the analysis area, activities authorized by the Decision will only occur on the National Forest System lands.

The Willow Allotment, was apart of the Sycamore Allotment until 2004 when 3 pastures (Willow, Bootleg and Whoop-em Up) were split off to form the allotment. A fourth pasture was added in 2006, when the Willow pasture was split in half. Elevations on the allotment vary from 4700 feet in the west portion to 6678 feet atop Tule Mountain. The allotment has chaparral and pinyon-juniper woodland vegetation types. The woodland is dominated by juniper and the chaparral is dominated by shrub live oak. There are both cool and warm season grasses.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose and need of the proposed action is to:

- Maintain current grazing management on the Willow Allotment through the issuance of 10-year term permits containing the parameters under which continued livestock grazing would be implemented.
- Continue to improve/maintain soil conditions by striving to attain/maintain effective litter and vegetative basal area (vegetation ground cover).
- Continue to manage for a diverse population of flora that provides for watershed health, wildlife habitat, and forage for herbivores.
- Continue to maintain the hydrologic system necessary to maintain state water quality standards.
- Be responsive to regulations [36 CFR 222 Subpart A, 222.2 (c)] that direct the Forest Service to make forage available for livestock under direction contained in the Land Management Plan of the Prescott National Forest.

Decision

I have decided to implement the proposed action which is to continue to authorize livestock grazing on the Willow Allotment under current management which includes the following terms and conditions that define the limits for the duration, intensity, frequency and timing of grazing:

- Duration: Grazing will be permitted on a yearlong basis on the allotment, but may be less in some years.

- Intensity: Forage utilization on upland forage will be 35% in pastures used during the growing season (sufficient re-growth and plant recovery of grazed herbaceous forage plants is expected prior to the end of the growing season). Use in pastures during slow growth and the dormant season will be 50% (little to no re-growth of grazed herbaceous forage plants is expected prior to the end of the grazing season). Utilization on upland shrubs will be 50% of available leaders and utilization on riparian forage species will be 20% of current year's growth.
- Frequency and Timing: Management systems will continue to incorporate a 4 pasture growing season deferred rotation in order to provide for grazed plant recovery. Timing of pasture moves will be dictated by utilization monitoring and management objectives specified in the allotment management plan. Specific dates of use and numbers of livestock (not exceeding equivalent permitted use) will be determined using an adaptive management process based on monitoring of resource conditions and comparison to management objectives. These will be designated in the annual operating instructions and the Bill for Collection. The decision recognizes the need to be adaptive in order to respond to changing resource conditions. Therefore, the decision will incorporate management flexibility by providing a range of allowable numbers (up to 960 head months) that reflects variations in resource conditions and management objectives over time. It will allow for adjusting duration, timing and frequency of allotment/pasture use based on monitoring of forage availability, utilization, and resource conditions. Generally stocking will be adjusted within the range of numbers, although stocking could be less than the range in any given year to allow for extreme fluctuations of weather and available forage.

Updated allotment management plans (AMP) will be prepared for the allotment. The AMP will incorporate the proposed actions listed above and include the following mitigation measures and best management practices to avoid or minimize effects to soil, water, and wildlife:

- Preparation of the annual operating instructions with the permittee to allow for consideration of current allotment conditions and management objectives.
- Periodic field checks to identify needed adjustments in season of use and/or livestock numbers.
- Periodic field checks to measure forage use to determine if desired grazing use levels are being reached and inform the permittee of needed pasture movement.
- Periodic field checks to assess vegetation health and trend as well as soil function.
- Application of standard grazing management practices such as salting, herding, and controlling access to water to achieve proper distribution or lessen the impact grazing on areas which are sensitive or are natural concentration areas.
- Cooperate with permittees to make stock water supplies available for wildlife needs during critical periods, if water is available at the sources (e.g. storage tank).

Rationale for this Decision and use of Section 339 CE Authority

In making this decision, I have given consideration to law, regulation and policy, allotment condition, plus the work and recommendations of forest specialists as they evaluated the Willow Allotment.

Monitoring of forage availability and utilization, range readiness and resource conditions have been used to determine that management is being properly implemented and that actions have been effective at achieving or moving toward desired conditions as described in the Prescott National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. (PR#1, 21-40)

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS) under Section 339 of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act. The categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because this action meets the provisions outlined in the Appropriations Act as follows:

1) The decision continues current management:

Allotment	Grazing System	Grazing Season	Utilization Levels	Head Months	Equivalent Cattle (cow/calf)	Change from Current Management
Willow	4 pasture deferred rotation	Yearlong	Upland forage (growing season) – 35%. Upland forage (non-growing season) – 50%. Upland Browse – 50%. Riparian Woody - 20%	Up to 960	Up to 80	No Change

Current management also includes the mitigation measures and best management practices described in the appendix of this document.

2) Monitoring data from the Prescott National Forest (PNF) Terrestrial Ecosystem Survey, PNF Ecological Inventory Database, PNF Soil Pedon Data, Arizona Department of Environmental Quality water quality monitoring data, United States Geologic Survey monitoring data, Rangeland Health inspections, Soil Condition inspections, and riparian Proper Functioning Condition assessments indicates that there is no need to change management as conditions on the allotment are meeting or moving toward the Forest Plan desired conditions (PR#s 21-40). The Desired Future Conditions, Standards and Guidelines from the Forest Plan are listed in the Project Record (PR # 1)

3) There are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. I considered the following resource conditions in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warranted further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS:

- a. **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.**

Fifty-four species were evaluated for the project including: five endangered species, three threatened species, twenty-five sensitive species (including one candidate species), eleven management indicator species (including one species that is also considered sensitive), and ten wildlife species of special concern (Arizona Game and Fish Department designation) were considered as part of the Wildlife Specialist Report

and Biological Assessment and Evaluation. It should be noted that when the report was done, the Bald eagle was categorized as Threatened. The eagle's status has since been downgraded to Sensitive.

Thirty-eight of the species do not occur within the project area or have habitat within the project area. Of the species that do occur or have habitat within the project area, they are not impacted by grazing in the area. For a species by species account, see the (PR# 19, 17, 20 Wildlife Specialist Report and Biological Assessment and Evaluation in the Project Record). For the Gila chub, lowland leopard frog, Arizona toad, and some macroinvertebrates, a BA & E was prepared for the Gila chub and a "may affect but is not likely to adversely affect" was determined. For the other species, a "may impact individuals, but not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing" was made. (PR#17). The U.S. FWS concurred with the findings (PR#20).

b. Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds

Small floodplains and riparian wetlands associated with some drainages are within the project area, this decision will not adversely affect these areas as some of the riparian ecosystem is inaccessible to livestock as a result of steep gradients, rock outcrops, and boulders. There have been numerous monitoring efforts conducted in conjunction with the project. (PR#21, 24-30).

"No municipal watersheds are located within the project area.

c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.

The Cedar Bench wilderness has approximately 1,280 acres within the Willow Allotment (PR#16). This wilderness is hard to get to, receives limited human visitation, and does not get very much grazing use either.

d. Inventoried roadless areas.

There is about 600 acres of the Arnold mesa IRA within the allotment. Since there are no trails in this area, there is limited human visitation to the area. Livestock use is limited but does occur. There are no records of complaints regarding negative experiences concerning interactions between recreationists and livestock (PR#14). This decision has no impact to roadless character.

e. Research natural areas.

There are no research natural areas involved in this project (PR#14).

f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

Native American Tribal Governments were consulted regarding religious or cultural sites and surveys have been conducted for archaeological and historic properties on areas of the project (PR#15). The Forest Archaeologist has determined that there will be no effect to heritage resources (PR#18).

Public Involvement

This project was originally scoped as part of the Sycamore/Willow/V-Bar Livestock Grazing project and included the Sycamore and V-Bar allotments in addition to the Willow Allotment. This Decision covers only the Willow Allotment; a separate Decision Memo is being prepared for the V-Bar allotment. The Sycamore Allotment will be completed at a later date.

This project has been listed in the Prescott National Forest's Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since April 2007.

Scoping of internal resource specialists began in December 2006. This scoping process was used to define the size and dimension of the proposal, determine the complexity of the analysis and to identify management concerns (PR#2).

Information on existing conditions was collected and was used by the Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) to develop a proposed action for the project.

A scoping letter was sent out to agencies, organizations, permittees, and interested publics that had previously expressed an interest in the project or were thought by the Decision Maker to be interested for review and comment in December 2006 (PR# 07). The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), AG&FD, and the allotment Permittee responded (PR#8, 9, 10). The Deciding Official held meeting with CBD and AG&FD to discuss their comments and concern for the project.

As the Deciding Official for the project, I reviewed the comment letters and reflecting on the results of the meetings, decided that there were no significant issues raised, all comments were covered under the proposed action, and that the project could be categorically excluded from the preparation of an EA or EIS under Section 339 of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with Section 339 of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act and the following laws:

Clean Air Act of 1970 (as amended) - This Act is to prevent deterioration of air quality. The project does not affect air quality as vegetative ground cover is maintained and there is limited road access reducing the potential for increased particulates. All activities will be implemented in accordance with provisions of the Clean Air Act as administered by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.

Clean Water Act of 1977 (as amended) -This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of BMPs. This decision incorporates BMPs to improve or protect the soil and water resources (PR#13, 21).

Endangered Species Act (1973) – This decision will not jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered, threatened, or proposed species or adversely modify existing or proposed critical habitat for any species (PR#17, 19, 20).

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) -This Order requires consideration of whether projects will disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Order. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision-making. Public involvement did not identify any adversely

impacted local minority or low-income populations. Therefore, this decision is not expected to disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 – Under this act permits, leases, and easements are granted for occupancy, use, or crossing of NFS lands when the need for such is consistent with planned uses and Forest Service policy and regulations. This decision is consistent with this Act in that a new permit outlining appropriate use will be issued (DM pg 2).

Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (an amendment to FLPMA) – This Act requires permittee involvement in the planning process. This decision is consistent with this Act in that permittee involvement was solicited (PR#7). The affected permit holder responded in a positive manner (PR#8).

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act) - This Act requires the development and implementation of long-range land and resource management plans (Forest Plans). The Prescott Forest Plan was approved on August 4, 1987, as required by this Act. This decision is consistent with the Forest Plan's goals and objectives as they relate to the project scope (PR#1).

Floodplains Management (Executive Order 11988) – This Executive Order is to avoid adverse impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains. The only floodplains subject to this order are in the Verde River Valley (Forest Plan FEIS, p. 102). This decision will not impact the functional value of these floodplains since the project does not involve activities within Verde River floodplains and proposed activities will not add cumulatively to watershed effects (PR#13, 21).

Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960 - This act directs management to utilize all the various renewable surface resources of National Forest in a harmonious and coordinated combination that will not impair the productivity of the land. This act was complied with when the Forest Plan allocated resources (PR# 1). I have determined that the activities and mitigation measures of the proposed action are in compliance with the provision of this Act because the actions are consistent with the Prescott Forest Plan (PR#1).

National Environmental Policy Act (as amended) – This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The entirety of documentation for this decision supports compliance with this Act (DM).

Laws Governing Heritage Resources:

National Historic Preservation Act - Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to take into account the effect of a project on any district, site, building, structure, or object that is included in, or eligible for inclusion in the National Register.

The Archaeological Resources Protection Act covers the discovery and protection of historic properties (prehistoric and historic) that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It affords lawful protection of archaeological resources and sites that are on public and Indian lands.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act covers the discovery and protection of Native American human remains and objects that are excavated or discovered in federal lands. It encourages avoidance of archaeological sites that contain burials or portions of sites that contain graves through "in situ" preservation, but may encompass other actions to preserve these remains and items.

This decision complies with the cited Acts. Native American Tribal Governments have been consulted regarding religious or cultural sites and surveys have been conducted for archaeological and historic properties on areas of the project. The Forest Archaeologist has determined that there will be no effect to heritage resources. (PR# 18).

Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670) - This Manual direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species, those species for which population viability is a concern. Potential effects of this decision on sensitive species have been analyzed and documented. This decision will have no adverse impact on sensitive species (PR#17, 19).

Wetlands (Executive Order 11990) – This Executive Order is to avoid adverse impacts associated with destruction or modification of wetlands. This decision will not adversely affect wetlands (DM pg 4, PR#13, 21).

Consideration of Best Available Science (USDA Forest Service Policy) – The best available science for assessing the resource conditions and then determining the ecological effects associated with livestock grazing was considered. (PR #12, 13,14,16,18,19,21).


Implementation Date

This project will be implemented on or after October 1, 2007.

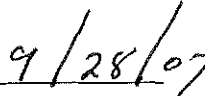
Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative review (appeal) under 36 CFR 215.

Deciding Official



Dee Hines
Verde District Ranger


Date

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Willow Allotment General Vicinity Map Verde Ranger District Prescott National Forest

