

Chapter 1

Purpose of and Need for Action

Purpose of and Need for Action

This chapter describes the proposed action, the purpose of and need for action, the analysis area/project area, direction from the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended, (USDA Forest Service 1996), referred to as the Forest Plan, the decisions to be made, public scoping, and the key issues associated with the proposed action.

Introduction

This Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the potential environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). It provides the decision maker with information needed to make a project decision that is consistent with the Forest Plan and is relevant to the specifics of the project proposal and alternatives.

This EA addresses the potential impacts of the proposed action on the Rio Grande National Forest. This EA is not a decision document. This EA discloses the environmental consequences of implementing the proposed action and alternatives to that action.

Proposed Action

The Divide Ranger District is proposing a seven pasture deferred grazing system for the Canon Cattle and Horse (C&H) Allotment. The allotment is approximately 30 miles southwest of Creede, in Hinsdale and San Juan Counties, Colorado (See Vicinity/Allotment Map, Appendix C). Additionally, the Divide Ranger District is proposing to develop an Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for the Canon Allotment. The AMP would function to implement the NEPA decision and incorporate Forest Plan standards and guidelines.

Livestock grazing would be authorized for 179 cow/calf pairs and a grazing season of June 26 to October 1. There would be 585 Animal Months permitted. The proposed action would allow for combination of the West Lost Trail and Lost Trail pastures.

Management activities included as a part of the proposed action include:

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Specify permitted livestock use.

Implement an appropriate grazing system to maintain or improve ecological status of plant communities with no downward trend.

Monitor for compliance with Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines.

Add range improvements to control livestock distribution.

Purpose and Need for Action

The 1996 Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Range Permit Issuance, Canon and Alder/Silver Allotment Range Permit, selected Alternative B, authorized permitted livestock numbers and season on the Canon allotment. The selected alternative reduced permitted livestock numbers by 35%, and shortened the grazing season. The recommendations were fully implemented in 1998.

This analysis is tiered to the Environmental Assessment for Term Grazing Permit Issuance for the Canon and Alder/Silver Allotments (1996).

Additionally, the Forest Plan establishes that the Canon allotment is available for grazing by livestock, but does not detail specifics of livestock management on the allotment.

Allotment Management Plans (AMP) direct how livestock grazing will be conducted on the allotment, and identifies projects that will facilitate allotment management or mitigate impacts from allotment management.

The Canon allotment does not have a current AMP to guide long-term allotment management. The decision to prepare an AMP requires site specific NEPA analysis, which is the basis for this document.

The purpose of this proposed action is to implement direction and objectives of the Forest Plan (including compliance with applicable laws, regulation, and policies) on the Canon Allotment. The AMP becomes a part of the Term Grazing Permit, and is therefore subject to all terms and conditions contained within the permit.

The purpose of the EA is to analyze alternatives (any of which could be selected in whole or modifications thereof in the Decision Notice) and discuss environmental effects of domestic livestock grazing on the Canon allotment.

1 Purpose and Need

Analysis Area/Project Area

The Analysis Area contains approximately 21,700 acres, located in the western portion of the Divide Ranger District, Rio Grande National Forest. The allotment lies within Hinsdale and San Juan Counties and is approximately 30 miles west of Creede, Colorado. The vicinity map (Appendix C) shows the Analysis Area in a context with local communities. The Project Area is focused on the future management of the Canon livestock allotment.

Forest Plan Direction

Lands within the Rio Grande National Forest are managed for a particular emphasis or theme referred to as a Management-area Prescription (MAP). Each MAP in the Forest Plan has a description of the physical setting for the area, a description of the desired conditions for the area, and a list of the Standards and Guidelines that apply to the area. The MAPs found in the Canon Analysis Area are displayed in Appendix C.

The Forest Plan and Rio Grande National Forest's May 2003 Rangeland Suitability Determination identified lands as capable (areas having physical characteristics conducive to livestock grazing) and suitable (areas that are appropriate for livestock grazing) for livestock grazing which includes the Project Area (See Capability and Suitability Map, Appendix C). Each of the MAPs on National Forest System lands shown in Table 1.1 allows grazing as an appropriate and authorized use.

Table 1.1 - Management Area Prescriptions

	Acres
1.11 Wilderness – Pristine	4,679
1.13 Wilderness – Semi - primitive	112
3.3 Backcountry	12,753
4.3 Dispersed Recreation	3,954
PVT Private	202

The project is designed to achieve the Forest wide Desired Conditions (Forest Plan pages I-1 to I-6) and the Regional and Forest wide Objectives (Forest Plan, pages II-12 to II-6).

Objectives

In order to facilitate the analysis of the proposed action, an interdisciplinary team (IDT) developed the following management objectives using the Forest Plan as a

Objectives

guide.

Maintain or improve the riparian resource to at least upper mid-seral ecological status with no ecological status in a downward ecological trend.

Maintain or improve the upland grassland vegetative resource. Ensure sustainable forage utilization while maintaining most rangeland vegetation in mid-to-high seral stages.

Ensure permitted livestock use is within the carrying capacity of the allotment.

Decision to be Made

The land allocation identified in the Forest Plan, in combination with public comments and predicted environmental impact of Alternatives documented in this assessment, will guide considerations in the selection of a reasonable, balanced, and appropriate decision.

This EA for comment is not a decision document. It is a document disclosing environmental consequences of implementing the proposed action and alternatives to that action. The decision will be documented in a separate EA and Decision Notice signed by the Forest Supervisor. As a portion of the allotment is within designated Wilderness, the Forest Supervisor is the appropriate decision making authority.

The specific decision that the Responsible Official will be making in the Decision Notice is to select a management alternative for the Canon Allotment. This will include cattle numbers, season of use, number of pasture units, grazing system, and range improvements. Additionally, decisions as to mitigation measures and monitoring schedules will be included.

Public Review and Comment

Public involvement for the Canon Allotment began in 1995 with the Rescissions Act requirement to complete allotment specific NEPA analysis for term grazing permit issuance. Public involvement consisted of mailing a detailed scoping statement, which described the permit issuance process to interested individuals. Five individuals responded with comments.

Additional scoping for the Canon analysis area has occurred using the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), which is mailed out quarterly to individuals, organizations and agencies. One individual commented based on the SOPA.

A legal notice will be published in the *Valley Courier* outlining the proposed action and offering the availability of this Environmental Assessment for comment.

Native American consultation was completed for the Canon Analysis Area by mailing scoping letters to potentially affected tribal governments.

1 Purpose and Need

Issues

Key issues have been identified by Forest Service resource specialists, through scoping with other agencies and the general public.

The IDT used comments from the public, State, other Federal Agencies, and tribal governments to identify key issues to be analyzed with the proposed action. The validity and level of concern expressed by the IDT team and the public was used to differentiate between key issues and other issues. The key issues are described below and will drive the development of alternatives.

Key Issues Associated with the Proposed Action

Key Issue 1 – Wildlife/livestock conflicts

What impact does big game grazing have on the ability of the permittee to manage his livestock, and what impact does livestock grazing have on big game habitat quality and quantity?

Indicators of the Issue:

Potential wildlife displacement associated with livestock grazing

Potential decrease in wildlife habitat effectiveness associated with grazing

Potential livestock/cattle competition for forage

Key Issue 2 – Overall health of soils, watershed, and fisheries

What impacts are livestock having on stream banks and what are historical and current livestock impacts to the soil resource?

Indicators of the Issue:

Stream bank stability

Greenline trend

Duration of livestock in pastures

Soil productivity

Key Issue 3 – Recreation/livestock conflicts

What impacts do livestock cause around the Lost Trail Summer Home area? What are livestock impacts to Lost Trail Campground and the Ute Creek Trailhead? Do livestock impact the Continental Divide and Colorado Trails? How much impact to allotment management is caused by recreational users leaving gates open? Do lack of fence maintenance and lack of herding livestock affect both recreational use and livestock management?

Indicators of the Issue

Duration of cattle adjacent to Lost Trail summer home area

Developed sites fenced

Gates/cattleguards needed on roads and trails

Duration of cattle on Continental Divide and Colorado Trails

Areas removed from allotment

Key Issue 4 – Overall capacity and health of the rangeland resource

Do range capability determinations reflect actual conditions? Is stocking capacity, entry date onto the allotment, class of stock and grazing system suited for this allotment? Are range conditions/ecological trend studies reflective of actual conditions?

Indicators of the Issue:

Physiological needs of plant met

Range condition and trend by area

Capable acres per permitted animal

Key Issue 5 – Livestock grazing as a traditional, cultural and economic land use

How will livestock grazing continue to be a traditional land use, and remain an aspect of the local economy?

Indicators of the Issue:

Grazing continued as a traditional forest use

Cost to permittee for management practices

Present Net Value to FS and permittee

Literature Cited

USDA Forest Service. 1996. Revised Land and Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement, Record of Decision, as amended. Rio Grande National Forest, CO

USDA Forest Service. 1996. Environmental Assessment for the Term Grazing Permit Decision for the Canon and Alder-silver Allotments. Rio Grande National Forest, CO

USDA Forest Service. 2003. Rangeland Suitability Determination. Rio Grande National Forest, CO