

Elkhorn Ranchlands Proposed Action

Dakota Prairie Grasslands Plan Amendment

The USDA Forest Service is proposing to amend the 2002 Dakota Prairie Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan (DPG Plan) to establish management direction for the 5,200-acre Elkhorn Ranchlands and to adjust the management direction assigned to the associated national grassland range allotments (18,000-acres). The **purposes** for the plan amendment are as follows:

- Establish DPG Plan management direction for the Elkhorn Ranchlands.
- Include the associated range allotments in the management area designation for the Elkhorn Ranchlands.
- Preserve historical values.
- Conserve ecological values.
- Restore the land and improve the watershed health.
- Restore the viewshed as seen from Theodore Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch site to native plant communities that blend into the other undeveloped portions of the viewshed.
- Determine capability and suitability of acquired lands for grazing (36 CFR 219.12).

The **proposed action** would amend the DPG Plan to establish management direction on 5,200 acres of recently acquired National Forest System lands, and assign compatible management prescriptions to the associated range allotments (18,000 acres). This includes applying the grasslands wide direction from Chapter 1 of the DPG Plan and allocating the lands to appropriate MA designations (DPG Plan, Chapter 3). Specifically the Forest Service proposes to:

- Assign Management Area 2.1r – Elkhorn Ranchlands Special Interest Area (SIA) (DPG Plan, pp. 3-8 to 3-13) to 4,400 acres of acquired lands and the 17,160 acreage associated with grazing allotments 279 and 280, totaling roughly 21,560 acres.
- Assign Management Area 3.65 “Rangelands With Diverse Natural-Appearing Landscapes” (DPG Plan, pp. 3-32 & 3-33) to the acquired lands in Section 27, Township 143N, Range 101W (640 acs.), and the W1/4 of Section 35, Township 144N, Range 101W. (160acs.) Both of these parcels would be absorbed into the adjacent land management prescription.
- Include the purchased 5,200 acres in the Badlands Setting Standards and Guidelines (DPG Plan Chapter 2, page 2-14) under vegetation, cottonwood and other native tree regeneration in the bottomlands.
- Include in Appendix D that the Elkhorn Ranchlands SIA is subject to valid existing rights for oil and gas and other minerals.

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In addition, DPG Plan Chapter 3 pages 3-8 to 3-13 would be added to as follows:

Standards and Guidelines

Livestock Grazing

2. Manage the Elkhorn Ranchlands SIA as a forage reserve¹.

Infrastructure

2. Allow construction of facilities to enhance conservation education opportunities on the Elkhorn Ranchlands SIA.

Add the following Goals and Objectives for 2.1r:

- Emphasize bottomlands, croplands, riparian areas and un-needed roads for restoration activities.
- Showcase state-of-the-art rangeland management through demonstration and by providing an alternative grazing opportunity during periods of drought, wildfire, and land restoration activities as well as any other land use activities that may impact range availability.
- Showcase proven and experimental vegetation and landscape restoration and enhancement techniques.
- Develop a role model area for conservation education efforts by the agency and its partners, especially emphasizing its unique nature, historical value, and restoration efforts.
- Manage in ways consistent with, and showcasing, the area's national historic significance.
- Engage in restoration actions for the historic viewshed.

On page 3-13, the specific description of the Elkhorn Ranchlands SIA would be added, following the same format as for the other SIAs.

¹ For more information on what a forage reserve is, please go to the Dakota Prairie Grasslands website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/dakotaprairie/> and select the "Opportunity for Flexibility" document.

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Site-specific Projects

In addition, the Forest Service is proposing site specific projects within the approximately 23,000 acre project area, which are intended to:

- Preserve historical values
- Restore the land and improve the watershed health
- Determine what will be done with the buildings, center pivot, and other facilities on the site
- Determine the level of recreation development and what associated facilities would be built on site
- Restore the historic viewshed

The **need** for the projects is based upon the condition of the lands as well as DPG Plan direction for infrastructure and recreation in the badlands setting. The proposed site specific projects proposed would address the landscape conditions and DPG Plan direction. Specifically, the Forest Service **proposes** to:

- Restore roughly 350 acres of plowed fields or hay fields by recontouring and seeding with native grass/forb mix.
- Restore cottonwood and other native trees in the bottomlands including the area that is currently irrigated by pivot, and which may involve utilizing the pivot to help establish the trees.
- Restore springs.
- Decommission roads that are not needed for either oil and gas development or administrative uses.
- Restore native vegetation through the eradication of invasive species.
- Remove all existing buildings on the recently acquired lands (consistent with DPG Plan Chapter 1, page 1-27, #8).
- Construct an organizational camp and associated facilities at the old residence site.
- Construct an interpretive trail system featuring local restoration efforts, historical values, rangeland management, and wildlife habitat.

Please see attached maps:

1. Project Area Map
2. Proposed Management Area Direction Map
3. Site-specific Project Location Map