

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for Walnut Canyon Allotment

**Mormon Lake Ranger District
Coconino National Forest
Coconino County, Arizona**

Background

This decision notice documents my decision for the Walnut Canyon cattle grazing allotment, located approximately 3 miles southeast of Flagstaff, Arizona. This allotment lies in the eastern portion of the Mormon Lake Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest.

The Walnut Canyon Allotment consists of approximately 31,607 acres, divided into nine pastures: Marshall Lake, Cherry, Youngs Lake, Observatory, Holding, Newman, South Newman, Walnut, and West Walnut. The allotment runs up onto the northwestern part of Anderson Mesa. The Anderson Mesa rim runs through the middle of the allotment from west to east. The allotment is located within all or portions of T21N, R8E Sections 34-36, T21N, R9E Sections 32 and 31, T20N R7E Sections 11 and 12, T20N, R8E Sections 7-12, 18-28, and 33-36, T19N R8E Sections 1-3, 9-12, 14-16, T20N R9E Sections 4-10, 15-21, 28-33, and T19N, R9E Section 5.

The eastern half of the allotment is primarily pinyon and juniper with ponderosa pine stringers. The western half of the allotment is primarily ponderosa pine with pockets of pinyon and juniper. Grasslands exist within the central and eastern portion of the allotment. There are no wild and scenic rivers, research natural areas, designated wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas, designated parklands or prime farmlands within the Walnut Canyon Allotment. Walnut Canyon National Monument is just north of the northern allotment boundary fence.

There are eight wetlands within the allotment: Marshall, Little Dry, Fisher/Fry, Vail, and Prime lakes are semipermanent wetlands; Youngs Lake, Lost and Dry tanks are seasonal wetlands. Marshall and Little Dry lakes are within a fenced riparian pasture and only grazed by cattle for up to 10 days in October. Vail Lake is currently excluded from cattle grazing.

The Walnut Canyon Allotment is scheduled for an environmental analysis of grazing use on the Coconino National Forest, as required by the Burns Amendment (1995). This analysis is required in order to ensure cattle grazing is consistent with goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines of the Coconino National Forest Plan (1987, as amended).

In January 2006, a description of the Proposed Action and accompanying maps were mailed to individuals and organizations who have expressed interest in similar past projects or who were otherwise determined to be affected. No significant issues were identified during this public scoping period. Following scoping, an environmental assessment (EA) was prepared and provided for comment.

The purpose of the environmental assessment is to analyze the effects of re-authorizing cattle grazing and to ensure the allotment is managed in a manner that maintains and/or moves the area toward Forest Plan objectives and desired conditions. Recent monitoring indicates rangeland

conditions on the allotment are being maintained at Forest Plan Standards with the current cattle grazing management in place. Continued monitoring will help managers to evaluate the status of maintaining and improving rangeland conditions.

There is a need to continue to maintain and/or improve rangeland conditions and to maintain and protect seasonal and semipermanent wetlands (wetlands with emergent vegetation) on the allotment. There is also a need to maintain the Forest Service and permittee's access to current water claims within the allotment.

A project record document (PRD) located at the Peaks Ranger District contains supporting information and reference materials related to this Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Effect.

Decision

After considering information provided in the EA, comments received from the public, and internal Forest Service specialist input, I have selected Alternative 3 (Proposed Action) for the Walnut Canyon Allotment.

Specifically, Alternative 3 will authorize cattle grazing on the Walnut Canyon Allotment for up to 350 cattle (cow/calf) from June 1 through October 31 (1,761 head months). There will be a 35 percent utilization guideline by cattle and/or wildlife measured at the end of the grazing season. There will be a "moderate" seasonal utilization guideline, which is measured before the end of the growing season and is used when determining pasture moves. Cattle will move from one area to another when seasonal utilization approaches a "moderate" level (approximately 21-50 percent).

In addition, the following activities will be implemented under Alternative 3:

Structural Improvements: The emergent (wetland) vegetation and the surrounding upland buffer at Prime, Fisher/Fry, and Youngs Lakes along with Dry and Lost Tanks will be excluded from cattle grazing by fencing approximately 50 total acres of emergent vegetation and approximately 142 acres of upland buffer. There will be a lane for cattle to access the stock tank water at Youngs Lake and Dry and Lost Tanks. The current water lot at Fisher/Fry will remain as access for cattle to the stock tank. The lanes and waterlot will maintain the permittee's and Forest Service's current water (livestock) claims. The lanes and current waterlot will allow cattle grazing on approximately 6 acres of emergent vegetation and approximately 8 acres of upland buffer.

The riparian vegetation at Babbitt Spring will also be fenced to exclude cattle. The enclosure fence will contain approximately 0.5 acres of emergent vegetation and 15 acres of upland buffer. A quarter mile section of pipeline will be constructed with a drinker for cattle outside the enclosure. Wildlife will be able to access water inside the enclosure as well as at the drinker.

The proposed implementation schedule for these improvements are as follows: Prime and Fisher/Fry lakes will likely be fenced within the first year and the fences at Youngs Lake, Lost Tank, Dry Tank, and Babbitt Spring will likely be built within the first five years. Cattle will not be allowed to graze the pastures these wetlands are in before July 15 until the fences are constructed.

Road Closures: Road closures will be necessary at Youngs Lake and Prime Lake to maintain the integrity of the wetland enclosures. The roads at Prime Lake that will be closed include: Forest Service Roads 9479K (1.3 miles), 9479J (0.25 miles), and 9479M (0.25 miles). Travel to Vail Lake will be routed around Prime Lake via road 129A. The Forest Service Roads at Youngs Lake

proposed for closure include 9480Q (2.6 miles), 9480R (0.2 miles), and 9480S (0.75 miles). Alternative vehicle routes exist around these proposed closures. These road closures will be implemented when the fence is constructed at Prime Lake and Youngs Lake. These roads were identified as high risk, because they go through these wetlands and have a high potential for erosion, and were recommended for closure during the Anderson Mesa Landscape Scale Assessment (USDA 2004).

Routing Horse Traffic on the Arizona Trail around Prime Lake: Walk-through access along the Arizona Trail for foot and mountain bike traffic will be built into the fence at Prime Lake. Horse traffic will be routed to the east around Prime Lake. The rerouting of horse traffic will be done so swing gates will not be needed in the fence. The route around Prime Lake will add a short distance (approximately 0.5 miles) to the length of the trail for equestrian users.

Closing Three Pastures to Livestock Grazing: The South Newman, Walnut, and West Walnut pastures will be closed to grazing. The Walnut and West Walnut Pastures are currently not grazed because they are not fenced and do not have the necessary water to implement cattle management. The South Newman pasture is currently excluded from cattle grazing for resource protection. This pasture will be closed to grazing to continue the protection of Newman Canyon. Closing these three pastures will result in 7,387 acres being permanently withdrawn from permitted grazing.

Rationale

I selected Alternative 3 because cattle grazing is a legitimate use of National Forest System lands and the environmental analysis demonstrates that cattle grazing can be managed on this allotment along with other resources (i.e. wetlands, wildlife, vegetation, soils, water quality). Thus, I did not select Alternative 2 (no grazing). I believe Alternative 3 best manages riparian areas in comparison with Alternative 1. Providing yearlong protection to Prime, Fisher/Fry, and Youngs Lakes, Dry and Lost Tanks, and Babbitt Spring will exceed Forest Plan riparian direction and protect the best riparian nesting habitat for waterfowl on the Walnut Canyon Allotment.

Alternative 3 meets the project's purpose and need by: maintaining and/or improving rangeland conditions; maintaining and protecting seasonal and semipermanent wetlands with emergent vegetation; and maintaining Forest Service and permittee access to current water claims. My rationale for selecting Alternative 3 integrates the following:

Maintain and/or improve rangeland conditions where cattle grazing occurs:

- Rangeland condition is a comparison of existing vegetation and soil conditions to either the potential natural community or desired plant community. Rangeland management status is considered to be in satisfactory condition when the existing vegetation community is similar to the desired condition, or short-term objectives are being achieved to move the rangeland toward desired conditions.
- Condition and trend monitoring determines the effectiveness of the allotment management plan, and long-term range and watershed trends. Contributing information to the condition and trend monitoring are rangeland utilization, soil and riparian condition, forage production, range readiness, and climate. Refer to the EA, Chapter 3, "Vegetation" and Chapter 4, "Monitoring". The Forest Plan Consistency Check has also considered standards applicable to rangeland condition [PRD 17].

- Alternative 3 will help improve soil conditions in impaired basins/swales/valley plains and in unsatisfactory elevated plains soils on the allotment, overall benefiting soils within the watershed. Specifically, fencing seasonal and semipermanent wetlands will improve the rangeland condition for vegetation and soils in wetlands and will likely result in a static to upward trend (a change from the current static trend).
- Outside of wetlands, Alternative 3 will maintain or improve soil and vegetation conditions as it relates to cattle grazing. Rangeland condition and trend is expected to remain static or improve, except on steep slopes or where dense pinyon and juniper trees limit improvement potential. Even if cattle were removed, the vegetative trend in these areas will not improve because the trend is tied to tree density and encroachment. This decision is not authorizing any actions to reduce tree density and encroachment. The tables in Appendix B list several past, present, and reasonably foreseeable activities related to vegetation treatments (i.e., restoring grasslands and meadows).

Maintaining and protecting seasonal and semipermanent wetlands with emergent vegetation:

- Exclosure fences will be built to protect the emergent vegetation and surrounding upland buffer at Prime, Fisher/Fry, and Youngs Lakes and Dry Tank and Lost Tank, with lanes to access the stock tank water at Youngs Lake, Dry Tank and Lost Tank. The current water lot at Fisher/Fry would remain as access for cattle to the stock tank. The lanes and waterlot would maintain the Forest Service and permittee's current (livestock) water claims. Additionally, an exclosure will be built around Babbitt Spring.
- Fencing protects almost all of the emergent vegetation in all of the semipermanent and seasonal wetlands and springs on the Walnut Canyon Allotment. The emergent vegetation at Vail, Marshall, and Little Dry lakes and Youngs spring is already fenced. Additional exclosure fencing will protect 17 out of 17.5 acres of emergent vegetation at Fisher/Fry Lake; all 13 acres of emergent vegetation at Prime Lake; 12 out of 15 acres at Youngs Lake; 4 out of 5 acres each at both Lost and Dry Tanks; and all emergent vegetation (approximately 0.5 acre) at Babbitt Spring.
- The only portions of these wetlands that will be affected by cattle grazing will be within the lanes to stock tanks accessing Forest Service and permittee filed water claims at Youngs Lake, Dry Tank and Lost Tank. These three lanes, plus the existing water lot at Fisher/Fry Lake, affect roughly 6 acres (approx 2 percent of 336 total acres) of emergent vegetation and 8 acres (approx 5 percent of 164 total acres) of upland buffer across the allotment.
- The fencing and protection of wetlands and their associated upland buffer is a change from past and current cattle grazing management. It has only been within the last 3 years that cattle grazing has not been allowed until after July 15 in seasonal and semipermanent wetlands. This decision will go further in protecting wetlands through additional fencing and permanently protect (98 percent 330 out of 336 acres) of emergent vegetation in seasonal and semipermanent wetlands on the allotment, which is an improvement over current management (83 percent or 279 out of 336 acres).
- Alternative 3 is consistent with Forest Plan Management Area 12 direction which states "Wetlands and open water containing emergent vegetation which provide nesting habitat are protected from disturbing uses that will harass nesting birds, such as activities that are noisy or would damage nests or nesting habitat from May 1 to July 15."

Maintain Forest Service and permittee access to current water claims:

- The Forest Service and the permittee both have water claims for livestock use within this allotment [PRD 36]. Filed water claims are part of the Lower Colorado River adjudication process and a decision on their status has not been made by the State of Arizona at this time. We worked with the Walnut Canyon permittee to identify their water access needs at water claims associated with seasonal and semipermanent wetlands. The permittee has agreed that access to the water claim at Prime Lake is not needed at this time, so it will be entirely fenced to exclude cattle grazing. In the past, the water claim at Vail Lake was not needed and this lake has already been entirely excluded from the cattle grazing on the allotment.
- Alternative 3 will maintain access to filed water claims at Youngs Lake, Lost Tank and Dry Tank by adding lanes for cattle to access the stock tank water. The proposed wetland fencing at Fisher/Fry will not affect the existing water lot and thus it will remain as access for cattle to obtain water at this stock tank. Water claims at Marshall and Little Dry Lakes are accessible when this riparian pasture is open to grazing for up to 10 days in October.
- The lanes associated with Youngs Lake and Lost and Dry Tanks, plus the existing water lot at Fisher/Fry Lake, will affect a total of 6 acres of emergent wetland vegetation. I believe it is acceptable to impact these acres of emergent vegetation at these 4 wetlands in order to maintain the Forest Service and permittee's filed water claims. In conjunction with other proposed and existing wetland and spring fencing, these 6 acres equate to less than two percent of 336 total acres of emergent vegetation across the allotment.
- There are stock tanks not in wetlands on the allotment that remain accessible to the permittee and result in no impact to the filed water claims at these stock tanks.
- I considered but eliminated from detailed study two other alternatives that would have specifically affected water claims. These two alternatives would have fenced individual wetlands without lanes or fenced several together as a complex (group). These fencing alternatives would have affected the Forest Service and permittee's access to their filed water claims and would have required construction of replacement stock tanks and/or trick tanks.

Other Factors in My Decision

As part of selecting Alternative 3, I am incorporating the following key components in the EA as part of my decision (*see* Chapters 2 and 4):

- Design Features
- Mitigation Measures
- Monitoring

Design Features

Adaptive Management and Annual Operating Instructions: Adaptive management provides more flexibility for managing cattle and allows the Forest Service to adjust the timing and duration of grazing, movement of cattle within the allotment, and cattle numbers. An example of a situation that could warrant adaptive management adjustments is drought conditions.

If adjustments are needed, they are implemented through the annual operating instructions (AOI), which can change numbers so cattle use is consistent with current productivity. This allows plant, soil, and watershed conditions to be maintained or improved while range improvements are implemented over time. The AOIs are established at the beginning of each grazing season (spring) and published on the Coconino National Forest Web site (www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/publications). The AOIs may be adjusted throughout the grazing season as conditions change. Cattle numbers may go up or down annually but will not exceed the maximum number (1,761 head months) set in this decision. The annual minimum cattle number is zero.

If monitoring indicates that desired conditions are not being achieved, management will be modified in cooperation with the permittee. Changes may include administrative decisions such as the specific number of livestock authorized annually, specific dates of grazing, or class of animal or modifications in pasture rotations, but such change will not exceed the limits for timing, intensity, duration, and frequency defined in Alternative 3.

Grazing Schedules: Example grazing schedules for each pasture in the allotment are detailed in Appendix C of the EA. These grazing schedules are given as a guide for future use; however, they may be adjusted as a result of monitoring, weather, or other conditions.

Cattle Guards: There is a need to keep cattle contained to pastures and prevent forest users from leaving pasture gates open. Where roads are open for public use, cattle guards will be maintained. There are currently 13 cattle guards in this category. Where roads are identified for closure, in past and future road decisions, no cattle guards are necessary. If gates are left open more often, new cattle guards may need to be installed. Cattle guard maintenance is shared between the Forest Service and the permittee for level 3 roads (main surfaced roads). Cattle guard maintenance on level 2 roads (smaller, secondary roads) is the responsibility of the permittee.

Structural Improvements: Cultural, wildlife, and recreation coordination will occur when implementing construction of structural improvements for the grazing system (i.e., proposed waterlots and wetland fencing).

Utilization: The definition of utilization and seasonal utilization come from standard protocols established by the Society of Rangeland Management and the new guidelines established by Region 3 Regional Forester (Smith et al. 2005). The definitions and procedures for utilization are further described under "Monitoring" in this decision notice and Chapter 4 of the EA.

Fencing: All new fencing will have a smooth bottom wire at an 18-inch height for wildlife passage. Where possible, fences will be located within tree lines to limit impacts to visual quality. Elk jumps and goat bars (PVC pipes placed on the bottom two strands and on the top strand at a crossing point) will be constructed along new fences or along existing fences on game trails and known migration corridors as volunteers and funding are available. As fence inventories are completed, those fence segments that restrict wildlife movement will be modified as funding becomes available.

Stock Tanks: There are no new stock tanks or removal of existing stock tanks proposed in Alternative 3. The eight stock tanks located within seasonal and semipermanent wetlands

(Marshall, Little Dry, Fisher/Fry, Vail, Prime, and Youngs Lakes and Lost and Dry Tanks) will not be maintained for the next ten years.

The other 50 stock tanks on the allotment that are *not* within seasonal or semipermanent wetlands may be maintained as needed (when sediment levels reach 50 percent) and will have to meet the following standards: maintenance will be limited to the original boundary of the stock tank; maintenance will be limited to removal of sediment that has accumulated in the stock tank and maintenance of the tank berm and spillway; equipment that will be used includes but is not limited to a dozer, backhoe, or front end loader; maintenance frequency will range from no maintenance to whenever needed, depending on the amount of sediment flowing into the stock tank; maintenance will be done when the stock tanks are either dry or the water level is low enough so that the equipment will not get stuck in the mud; and any requirements or timing restrictions related to water quality, wildlife, archaeology, or Forest Plan standards and guidelines will be followed.

Watershed Protection: Best management practices (BMP) were incorporated into the project design in order to comply with Arizona State and Federal Water Quality Standards. The following BMP is designed to protect resource values, uses and maintenance of soil productivity, stability, and water quality:

- Monitor ground conditions before and during construction activities to avoid wet ground conditions that can negatively affect soil condition and water quality.

The following grazing practices were also selected to help protect soil and water quality:

- Grazing systems are alternately rested and grazed in a planned sequence.
- Grazing at a level that will maintain enough cover to protect the soils and maintain or improve the quantity and quality of desired vegetation.
- Fencing to improve cattle management, control access, prevent soil loss, and improve water quality.

Mitigation Measures

The Forest Service will apply the following mitigation measures in order to minimize and reduce potential impacts from Alternative 3.

Noxious Weeds: State-listed noxious weeds located in this allotment will be treated as necessary. The procedure for inventorying and treating noxious weeds is further described under “Monitoring” in this decision notice and in Chapter 4 of the EA.

Microphytic soil crusts: To mitigate the potential negative affect to microphytic (cryptogamic) soils from cattle, salting will not be allowed in TES Units 436 and 465 (elevated plains).

Bald Eagle: Livestock management activities such as salting, herding and construction actions associated with grazing operations within the project area will not occur within one-quarter mile of a bald eagle roost or nest site during any time of occupation by bald eagles.

Mexican Spotted Owl: Mexican spotted owl habitat occurs on the Walnut Canyon Allotment. The following mitigation measures will be implemented.

- No human disturbance or construction activities associated with cattle grazing operations will occur within PACs during the breeding season (March 1 through August 31).

- Continue to monitor grazing use by cattle and wildlife in the ponderosa pine/gambel oak type. The utilization guideline for cattle and/or wildlife is 35 percent within the PACs.
- Livestock distribution techniques, such as salting and herding should be used, to provide for better use of a pasture. The following guidelines will be used for placing salt, mineral blocks, or supplements:
 - do not place these items in riparian areas, mountain meadows, or non-riparian drainages in ponderosa pine;
 - do not place these items in spotted owl PACs or goshawk PFAs; and
 - rotate salt and mineral supplement sites regularly, at least every 2 weeks, within spotted owl restricted habitat.
- Follow best management practices as listed under “Watershed Protection.”
- Follow utilization guidelines to provide for favorable growth of forage species.
- If utilization guidelines are exceeded, stocking and management may need to be adjusted to maintain productivity of the allotment for the future.

Sensitive Plant Species: Sensitive plant surveys will be completed before constructing fences. If sensitive plant species are located, coordination with a wildlife biologist or botanist will occur to mitigate impacts as needed (i.e. flagging specific plants and adjusting the location of the improvement).

Cultural Resources: Activities associated with allotment improvements will be managed to avoid cultural resource sites and ensure no effect to cultural resources. Before initiating any activities as part of this project, a District Archaeologist will be notified to ensure the proposed activities have cultural resource clearance and project personnel are aware of the conditions specified in the final Walnut Canyon Allotment Management Plan Cultural Resource Clearance Report. Management practices that tend to concentrate cattle, such as placement of salt, construction of waters or corrals, etc., will be located away from cultural resources. Ground disturbing activities, such as the construction of improvements (e.g., pipelines, stock tanks, cattle guards, etc.), will require separate archaeological survey and clearance prior to implementation.

The District will periodically monitor known archaeological sites to ensure they have been avoided, and such inspections will be reported in writing to the forest archeologist. Should any additional prehistoric or historic archaeological sites be encountered during the course of this project, they are to be avoided and immediately reported to a District or Zone Archaeologist. If any of these new discoveries are rock shelters, they will be closely monitored and if cattle are using these sites for shelter and impacting the fragile nature of the site, the shelter should be excluded from future grazing. Should the tribes identify any plants in the area having traditional importance; the District will encourage and protect the natural regeneration of such plants.

Monitoring

Monitoring includes the following activities: permit compliance, allotment inspections, range readiness, forage production, rangeland utilization, condition and trend, soil condition, noxious weeds, and threatened and endangered species. Monitoring frequency varies by each activity and may be accomplished by either the permittee and/or Forest Service personnel.

Permit Compliance: Throughout each grazing season Forest Service personnel will monitor to determine accomplishments of the permit terms and conditions, the allotment management plan (AMP), and the AOI.

Allotment Inspections: Allotment inspections are a written summary completed each fall by Forest Service personnel to document compliance monitoring and to provide an overall history of that year's grazing. This document may include weather history, the year's success, problems, improvement suggestions for the future, and a monitoring summary.

Range Readiness: Each spring, Forest Service personnel and/or the grazing permittee will assess range readiness prior to cattle coming on the allotment to determine if vegetative conditions are ready for cattle grazing. The range is generally ready for grazing when cool season grasses are leafed out, forbs are in bloom, and brush and aspen are leafed out. These characteristics indicate the growing season has progressed far enough to replenish root reserves so that grazing will not seriously impact these forage plants.

Forage Production: Production surveys for this allotment will be done every 9 to 13 years. Methods used for these surveys will use the best available methods at that time. These values will be used as tools to manage this allotment, but will not be the sole measurement to establish carrying capacity. The most recent forage production surveys were done as part of this analysis in 1999. The next survey is scheduled to occur after 2009.

Rangeland Utilization: Long-term condition and trend monitoring is the primary standard for monitoring of this cattle grazing management system. Utilization is used as a tool to understand and achieve the goals of long-term management. Utilization guidelines are intended to indicate a level of use or desired stocking rates to be achieved over a period of years.

The definition of utilization and seasonal utilization come from standard protocols established by the Society of Rangeland Management and the new guidelines established by Region 3 Regional Forester (Smith et al. 2005). The following definitions and procedures for utilization were taken and adapted to fit this project.

Utilization is the proportion or degree of current year's forage production that is consumed or destroyed by animals (including insects). It is a comparison of the amount of herbage left compared with the amount of herbage produced during the year. Utilization is measured at the end of the growing season when the total annual production can be accounted for and the effects of grazing in the whole management unit can be assessed. Utilization guidelines are intended to indicate a level of use or desired stocking rate to be achieved over a period of years.

Utilization measurements will be taken in one key area at a minimum which will reflect grazing effects within the allotment. One key area will be established in the allotment, at existing long-term monitoring sites if possible, to represent overall allotment utilization. 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. Utilization data will not be used alone, but will be used along with climate and condition/trend data, to set stocking levels and pasture rotations for future years.

Cattle will move when seasonal utilization in a pasture approaches a "moderate" level. For Alternatives 1 and 3 (35 percent utilization guideline), moderate seasonal utilization will be approximately 21-50 percent. Moderate seasonal utilization is an approximate value because it takes into account any additional growth which might occur later that year and considers season of use, wildlife use, weather conditions, availability of forage, and water in pastures. This

moderate seasonal utilization level leaves residual cover for wildlife and soils and provides for long term health of the grazed plants.

If monitoring shows utilization rates exceed the utilization guideline in a given year, the grazing schedule and/or cattle numbers will be adjusted the following year so utilization guidelines are not exceeded again. If utilization is exceeded after these adjustments are made, then the grazing management system will be changed to ensure this does not happen in the future.

Condition and Trend: Watershed and vegetative condition and trend monitoring will help determine the effectiveness of the allotment management plan, and long-term range and watershed trends.

Parker Three-Step and paced transect monitoring points were established throughout this allotment in the 1950-1960s. These transects are one of the best historic records of range condition and trend. The photo points and vegetative ground cover data show how the site has changed over time. Canopy cover and frequency plots were placed with the Parker Three-Step transects in 1999 to add to this historic data.

Ocular plant canopy cover 0.10-acre plots were used to compare existing conditions with potential and desired vegetative community conditions. Over time, these plots will show how canopy cover changes. Canopy cover will provide an indication of how plants are growing, assuming that if they are getting bigger and occupying more space, then they are doing well and can be a relative gauge of vigor.

Frequency and ground cover data were collected using the widely accepted plant frequency method (Ruyle 1997). These plots will monitor trends in plant species abundance, plant species distribution, and ground cover. This will provide information on plant composition and additional information on regeneration.

These transects will be read at least every 10 years by Forest Service personnel. These plots will help determine the effectiveness of current management.

A new frequency and cover plot will be added near the Walnut National Monument boundary as a comparison to new plots to be established by the National Park Service within the Monument. Over the long term, these plots will show the effects of cattle grazing compared to cattle grazing exclusion for general range data.

Precipitation: Precipitation is currently recorded at the Flagstaff National Weather Service Office at Bellemont. Precipitation data may be recorded within or near the allotments for more localized information. Precipitation data may be recorded throughout the year and summarized in the annual inspection. This data assists managers with forage utilization and production data collection.

Soil and Riparian Condition: The intergovernmental agreement between the Forest Service and State of Arizona that controls water quality and the Clean Water Act requires implementation and effectiveness monitoring. The objectives of monitoring are to: (1) collect data sufficient to evaluate effects of management activities on soil and water resources; and (2) support changes in management activities to protect soil and water quality. Monitoring will help determine how successfully managers are implementing guidance practices and how effectively those practices are protecting soil and water quality. The current and proposed cattle grazing system incorporates best management practices (BMP) and grazing practices and constitutes compliance with Arizona State and Federal Water Quality Standards. Arizona Department of Water Quality (ADEQ) will continue to monitor water quality in the area.

Watershed condition can be assessed using information from the monitoring schemes above. Monitoring of plant abundance, ground cover, species diversity, and estimates of overall soil condition (using the methods described throughout this monitoring section) will indicate whether or not management practices are effectively meeting management goals. Trends toward improvements in species abundance and diversity should indicate that management practices are effectively improving soil condition and, by inference, maintaining or improving downstream water quality and complying with water quality standards. Conversely, decreases in plant abundance and species diversity may indicate that management practices are not effective and need to be changed. Environmental factors, especially precipitation, will be considered when evaluating monitoring results.

Condition and trend monitoring was established at the following wetlands using photo point and plant inventories in the fall of 2003: Marshall, Little Dry, Prime, Fisher/Fry, Youngs, Dry and Lost. Additional monitoring of these plots may occur in the next 10 years if funding is available. Canopy cover, frequency and composition plots were also established at these wetlands. Additional monitoring of these plots may occur in the next 10 years if funding is available.

If Babbitt Spring is grazed by cattle before the enclosure fence is constructed, woody species will be monitored to ensure use is less than 20 percent. Cattle will be removed from the area before 20 percent utilization is reached.

Noxious Weeds: The permittee and Forest Service will coordinate the weed inventory and treatment with responsibilities identified through the AOI. Noxious weed monitoring is carried out at the same time allotment inspections are conducted. As noxious weed populations are found they are mapped, monitored, and in some areas, manually removed. Other treatment methods will follow guidelines established in the “Final Environmental Impact Statement for Integrated Treatment of Noxious or Invasive Weeds” (USDA 2005b).

Threatened and Endangered Species: Threatened and endangered species are monitored in compliance and consultation with the USFWS. A vegetation monitoring point (key area) has been established on the allotment and is monitored annually, according to consultation requirements¹:

- Management Area: ponderosa pine
- Pasture: Observatory
- Location: 0.5 mile southeast of Prime Lake
- Key Species: wheat grass, blue grama

My decision includes my review and determination of:

- Consistency with the Coconino National Forest Plan (*see* EA, Chapter 1, “Management Direction” and PRD 17);
- Consistency with the Anderson Mesa Pronghorn Plan (*see* EA Chapter 2, “Design Features”);

¹ “This key area would normally be one-quarter to one mile from water, located on productive soils on level to intermediate slopes, and be readily accessible for grazing. Size of the key forage monitoring area could be 20 to 500 acres. Within key a forage monitoring area, select appropriate key species to monitor average allowable use”(Coconino Forest Plan, p. 66-1).

- Consideration and integration of the Anderson Mesa Landscape Scale Assessment information as applicable to the project’s purpose and need statement (*see* EA, Chapter 1, “Management Direction” and PRD 57).

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, the Forest Service considered six other alternatives; two were analyzed in detail and four considered and eliminated from detailed study. These alternatives are summarized below. More detailed descriptions and a comparison of alternatives can be found in the EA (*see* Chapter 2, Tables 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8).

Alternative 1 - Current Management

Alternative 1 would have re-authorized cattle grazing on the Walnut Canyon Allotment under the current grazing management system for cattle numbers, season of use, and utilization guidelines. No wetland fences or other improvements would have been constructed, and thus no road closures would be necessary. Equestrian traffic on the Arizona Trail would not be re-routed. South Newman, Walnut, and West Walnut pastures would remain open to grazing once necessary improvements were in place. Seasonal and semipermanent wetlands would not be grazed by cattle from May 1 to July 15 through pasture rotations (the rotation schedule would avoid Observatory, Youngs, and Marshall Lake pastures during this timeframe).

Alternative 2 - No Action/No Grazing

Alternative 2 would not re-authorize cattle grazing on the Walnut Canyon Allotment. With no cattle use, the season of use, utilization guidelines, or adjustments to AOIs do not apply. Under this alternative, no new structural improvements would be built. Existing structural range improvements would require a separate analysis and coordination with other agencies to determine whether or not to maintain or remove these improvements. No pastures would be permanently withdrawn and no changes to equestrian use on the Arizona Trail would be implemented.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

During development of the proposed action and alternatives, four additional alternatives were considered but eliminated from detailed study. One alternative considered fencing wetlands completely (without lanes) and providing water outside the fenced wetlands. Another alternative looked at reducing cattle numbers and the utilization guideline. There was an alternative that considered discontinuing cattle grazing in the Marshall Lake riparian pasture (which is currently grazed up to 10 days in October). Finally, one alternative considered fencing Prime, Vail, and Fisher/Fry Lakes together as a wetland “complex” [PRD 12]. The EA provides details of these various alternatives and explains the rationale for eliminating them from detailed study (*see* Chapter 2, pp. 29-33).

Public Involvement

This project was first listed in the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in April 2004. Thirteen Native American tribes have also been consulted with on this project since August 2004. The permittee has been involved early on in the development of this project [PRD 5]. On January 26, 2006, a description of the Proposed Action and a series of maps were mailed to over 50 individuals and organizations who have expressed interest in similar past projects or who were otherwise determined to be affected (adjacent landowners, interest groups, and agencies). Three comment letters were received during this public scoping period and no significant issues were identified [PRD 38].

An EA was prepared and a legal notice of opportunity to comment was published in the *Arizona Daily Sun* (the newspaper of record) on May 10, 2006. The official comment period ended on June 9, 2006. Three comments were received in response to the EA; they have been analyzed for content and it was determined that no significant issues were brought up. Our responses to these public comments are disclosed in Appendix D.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA for Alternative 3, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect 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. I base my finding on the following:

Context: The context of this action is limited in nature. The project area is immediately south of Walnut Canyon, which is managed under the National Parks/Monuments system and draws visitors from around the country and world. However, visitors do not access the monument via the Walnut Canyon Allotment; the entrance is located on the north side of the canyon and allowable hiking is limited to designated trails on the north side or within the canyon. The Arizona Trail passes through the allotment area, however use is concentrated to the trail corridor and overall trail use is considered low in comparison to other destinations and trails on the Coconino National Forest or within the State of Arizona. Environmental effects are limited to resources contained within the allotment boundaries and/or watershed area and have little influence upon regional or state resources.

Intensity:

1) Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered in my decision. Benefits include protecting wetlands, waterfowl nesting habitat, and maintaining and/or improving soil and vegetation condition trends. I also recognize that Alternative 3 will result in some adverse effects (*see* EA, pp. 146-147); however these adverse effects are short-term in nature (less than one year) and will not impair long-term productivity (*see* EA, p. 148) and as thus, are not considered significant. Additionally, there are no irreversible commitments of resources associated with this project; irretrievable commitments of resources are associated with implementing wetland fencing in order to better protect these resources.

2) There will be no significant effects on public health and safety. Dust can be generated by cattle when they are herded and transported, however these are isolated, short duration instances that do not result in a measurable effect to air quality. There is little interaction between cattle and people due to the low level of dispersed recreation that occurs in this area. Fences and cattle guards are interspersed across the landscape but do not currently pose any public safety risks.

3) There will be no significant effect on wild and scenic rivers, research natural areas, designated wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas, or designated parklands or prime farmlands since these areas do not exist within the Walnut Canyon Allotment (EA, p. 1). There are eight classified wetlands within the allotment; however the mere presence of these unique resources does not correlate to a significant effect. The degree to which cattle will affect these eight wetlands is limited, based upon the existing and proposed wetland fencing described earlier in my decision. Implementing Alternative 3 will result in protecting 330 out of 336 total wetland acres (98 percent) on the allotment, which is an improvement over current management.

4) Case Law interpretations have helped to describe controversy in the context of NEPA: *Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project v. Blackwood*, 161 F.3d 1208, (9th Cir. 1998); *Town of Cave Creek, Arizona v. Federal Aviation Admin. And Dept. of Transportation*, 325 F.3d 320 (DC Cir. 2003); *Found. For N. Am. Wild Sheep v. U.S. Dept of Agric.*, 681 F.2d 1172, 1182 (9th Cir. 1982). The effects on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial, because there is no substantial dispute existing as to the size, nature or effects of Alternative 3. For this project, we considered and reviewed numerous publications and research in support of and in opposition to our conclusions about effects to soils, water quality, wetlands, vegetation, and wildlife. We also integrated studies, monitoring results, and published research findings to support our analysis. The degree of public interest and number of respondents to scoping and the EA was very low and no significant issues were brought up (*see* PRD 38 and Appendix D: Public Comments and Responses). Controversy in this context applies to determining if an EA or EIS is the appropriate analysis, rather than the mere existence of opposition to a use.

5) We have ample experience with implementing the proposed activities (authorization of cattle grazing, range structural improvements, road closures, rerouting recreation/trail traffic, adaptive cattle management, and resource monitoring). The environmental effects analysis demonstrates that the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (*see* EA, Chapter 3).

6) The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because this is a site-specific decision for deciding whether or not to authorize cattle grazing within the project area and in what manner. This decision applies only to National Forest System lands.

7) Cumulative effects are disclosed in the EA (Chapter 3). Throughout the analysis, there were no cumulative effects determined to be significant.

8) The State Historic Preservation Office has reviewed this project and agreed that the project will have no effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Activities associated with structural improvements will be managed to comply with the final Walnut Canyon Allotment Management Plan Cultural Resource Clearance Report [PRD ##] and, thus ensure no effect to significant cultural or historical resources.

9) The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973 (*see* EA, pp. 82-89). Consultation was completed [PRD 67] and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the Forest Service's determination that the project may affect but will not likely adversely affect Mexican spotted owl restricted habitat [PRD 74].

10) This action does not threaten to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements designated for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were reviewed and considered in the EA (*see* EA pp. 9-12) and are summarized hereafter.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

The planning and decision-making process for this project was conducted in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, policies and plans. Shown below is a partial list of Federal laws and executive orders pertaining to project-specific planning and environmental analysis on Federal lands. This project is consistent with the following:

- Congressional intent to allow grazing on suitable lands (Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960, Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, National Forest Management Act of 1976).
- Forest Service policy on rangeland management (FSM 2202.1, FSM 2203.1, FSH 2209.13).
- Federal regulation (36 CFR 222.2 (c)) which states that National Forest System lands will be allocated for livestock grazing and allotment management plans (AMP) will be prepared consistent with land management plans.
- Authorization of livestock grazing permits for a 10-year period is required by law (FLPMA Sec. 402 (a) & (b) (3) and 36 CFR 222.3), unless there is pending disposal, or it will be devoted to other uses prior to the end of 10 years, or it will be in the best interest of sound land management to specify a shorter term.

Clean Air Act of 1955: Cattle grazing is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to air quality (*see* “Air Quality” in Chapter 3 of the EA).

Clean Water Act of 1948, as amended: This project complies with Arizona State laws regarding natural resource protection, including but not limited to water quality [PRD 40].

Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960: This project is consistent with applicable Coconino National Forest Plan standards and guidelines [PRD 17].

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended: A cultural resources clearance report has been completed for this project [PRD ##] and concludes under the Programmatic Agreement for Compliance with Section 106 of the NHPA that the project will have no effect on cultural properties and values. Native American tribes and communities were consulted.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended: The effects of the Proposed Action and alternatives have been analyzed and are disclosed in a document available for public review and input.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended: The analysis and disclosure of effects to endangered, threatened, and proposed species is complete. Consultation with USFWS for effects to threatened and endangered species within the project area was completed [PRD 67]. The USFWS concurred with the Forest Service’s determination that the project may affect but will not likely adversely affect Mexican spotted owl restricted habitat [PRD 74].

Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) of 1974, as amended: This project is consistent with applicable Coconino National Forest Plan standards and guidelines [PRD 17].

National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, as amended: This project complies with the Coconino National Forest Plan and associated amendments [PRD 17]. This project incorporates

all applicable Forest Plan forestwide standards and guidelines and management area direction as they apply to the project area. This project is also in compliance with Forest Plan goals and objectives. All required interagency review and coordination has been accomplished.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978: This project will not deny American Indians access to land within the project area for traditional and cultural purposes nor will it infringe upon the rights of Native Americans to worship through ceremonies or traditional rights within the project area.

Executive Order 13007 (Indian sacred sites): Access to and ceremonial use of sacred sites by Indian religious practitioners will be accommodated, and activities associated with this project will avoid adversely affecting the physical integrity of such places.

Executive Order 12898 (environmental justice): Implementation of this project is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to minority or low-income populations (*see* “Environmental Justice” in Chapter 3 of the EA).

Executive Order 11990 (wetland protection): The project area was inventoried for wetlands from 2002 to 2005 [PRD 22]. These wetlands will be managed consistent with MA 12 in the Forest Plan. This decision will protect up to 94 percent of seasonal and semipermanent wetlands (emergent vegetation) plus associated upland buffers within the project area through the construction of grazing exclosures. There is no proposed construction within wetlands (besides minimum disturbance in fence/lane construction), or disposition of wetlands to other ownership, nor easement through wetlands. No additional stock tanks are planned in any alternative, and there is no proposal to remove stock tanks in any alternative. Stock tanks within seasonal or semipermanent wetlands (Marshall, Little Dry, Fisher/Fry, Vail, Prime, and Youngs lakes and Lost and Dry tanks) will be not be maintained for the next 10 years.

Executive Order 13186 (migratory birds): This project is consistent with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, as well as Agency guidelines for conformance with the act [PRD 53]. Implementing standards and guidelines tied to MA 12 will provide opportunities to restore and enhance habitat for migratory bird species of concern in seasonal and semipermanent wetland areas.

Forest Service Sensitive Species: Effects to Forest Service sensitive species were considered and a biological assessment and biological evaluation has been completed for the 16 sensitive plant and wildlife species found within the Deep Lake Allotment [PRD 53]. A determination was made for each species in the EA (*see* “Sensitive Plant and Wildlife Species” in EA, Chapter 3).

Management Indicator Species: The EA (*see* “Management Indicator Species” in EA, Chapter 3) addressed management indicator species by linking Forest Plan management areas located within the allotment with the management indicator species representative for those management areas and habitat components (*see* EA, Chapter 3, Tables 19 and 20). This decision will not result in a change to forestwide habitat or population trends, as applicable to each MIS.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.7. The permittee has the right to appeal under either 36 CFR 215 or 251, but not both regulations. A written notice of appeal, clearly stating it is a Notice of Appeal being filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215, shall be filed within 45 days of the date of publication of legal notice of this decision in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the

newspaper of record. The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations that submitted comments or otherwise expressed interest before the end of the EA comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14. An appeal must be filed by regular mail, fax, e-mail, hand delivery, or express delivery with the appeal deciding officer. Written appeals must be submitted to:

Forest Supervisor
Appeal Deciding Officer
Coconino National Forest
ATTN: Walnut Canyon EA Appeal
1824 S. Thompson Street
Flagstaff, AZ 86001-2529

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Adobe (.pdf), or Word (.doc) to appeals-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us. Appeals must have an identifiable name attached to it. Verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. When using the electronic mailbox, you will receive an automated reply if the message is received. If you do not receive this automated reply, it is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure the appeal is received by the deadline (36 CFR 215.15).

Implementation

This project may be implemented 5 business days following the close of the appeal filing period established in the legal notice of decision published in the *Arizona Daily Sun*. If an appeal is filed, implementation may begin 15 business days following a final decision on the appeal. Implementation is defined as actually doing the ground-disturbing actions described in this notice.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Katherine Sánchez Meador at the Peaks Ranger District, 5075 N. Highway 89, Flagstaff, AZ 86004, TEL (928) 526-0866.

/S/ GENE WALDRIP

JULY 28, 2006

GENE WALDRIP
District Ranger

Date