

Decision Memo

Black Bill Summit Grazing Allotment Management Plan

USDA Forest Service Peaks Ranger District, Coconino National Forest Coconino County, Arizona

Background

The Black Bill Summit Allotment is on the Peaks Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest. The allotment consists of approximately 4,116 acres, divided into three pastures (see Map 1). These pastures include: Summit, North Black Bill, South Black Bill/Burn. The allotment boundary begins approximately three miles north of the City of Flagstaff on Highway 89, and lies just west of the Timberline subdivision. This allotment is located within all or portions of T22N, R8E Sections 4, 5, 8, 9, 16, 17, 20, 21, 28 and 29, and T23N R8E Sections 32 and 33.

Current permitted use for the Black Bill Summit Allotment is 60 head of cow/calf pairs (357 AUM), from June 1 through October 15. The permitted use is based on condition and trend studies completed in 2006, actual use data for the allotment for the past 17 years and the effects of this use on resource conditions. It also reflects the estimated annual forage production available for cattle on the allotment considering climate, duration, timing, frequency, and intensity of grazing proposed as well as proper livestock management.

Grasslands and ponderosa pine dominate the vegetation on the Black Bill/Summit Allotment at an elevation ranging from 6,700 to 7,300 feet. This vegetation varies from open grasslands to dense ponderosa pine trees. The allotment lies on the lower slope of the San Francisco Peaks. No major canyons or riparian areas exist on the allotment.

Decision

I have decided to re-authorize grazing for up to 60 cattle (cow/calf) from June 1 through October 15 (357 AUM) on the Black Bill Summit Allotment. The authorization will be through a term grazing permit and includes the following design features:

Utilization: The current utilization¹ guideline will continue to allow up to 35 percent use by cattle and/or wildlife during the cattle grazing season of June through October. This includes a “moderate” seasonal utilization guideline which is measured before the end of the growing season and is used when determining cattle need to move. Cattle will move from one pasture to another when seasonal utilization approaches a “moderate” level, approximately 21-50 percent. Pastures will not be grazed again during the grazing season. Once this use standard is met across the allotment, cattle will be moved off the allotment.

¹ 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.

Adaptive Management: The reauthorization includes the continued use of adaptive management, which provides more flexibility for managing cattle. Adaptive management allows the Forest Service to adjust the timing and duration of grazing, movement of cattle within the allotment, and cattle numbers. If adjustments are needed, they are implemented through the Annual Operating Instructions, which will adjust numbers so cattle use is consistent with current productivity. This allows plant, soil, and watershed conditions to be maintained or improved. An example of a situation that could call for adaptive management adjustments is drought conditions.

Adaptive management is designed to provide sufficient flexibility to adapt management to changing circumstances. 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, class of animal or modifications in pasture rotations, but such change will not exceed the limits for timing, intensity, duration, and frequency defined in this Decision Memo.

Monitoring: The type and frequency for monitoring the Black Bill Summit Allotment will occur as funding is available and will include:

- permittee compliance, allotment inspections, range readiness, forage production, rangeland utilization (annually)
- condition and trend (every five to ten years)
- frequency and canopy cover plots and a soil condition rating will be continued at long-term monitoring sites throughout the allotment (every five to ten years)

Decision Rationale

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment under Section 339 of the FY 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-447). A 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 grazing management.

My decision continues current livestock numbers and grazing management, as described in the “Background” section of this Decision Memo.

2) Monitoring indicates that current grazing management is meeting, or satisfactorily moving toward, objectives in the land and resource management plan, as determined by the Secretary.

The Black Bill Summit Allotment includes the following Management Areas (MA): MA 3 Ponderosa Pine and Mixed Conifer Less Than 40% Slopes and MA 33 Doney Park. Existing condition information described below indicates rangeland conditions on the allotment are being maintained or improved with the current cattle grazing management in place. Continued monitoring will help managers to evaluate the status of maintaining and improving rangeland conditions (PRD 12).

Current permitted cattle numbers, under the current grazing management system, fall within the carrying capacity of the allotment. Carrying capacity for this analysis is based on: actual use data, condition and trend monitoring, cattle and wildlife use patterns, cattle health and condition, soil surveys (USDA 1995), forage production estimates, and professional opinion (PRD 12).

The overall trend for this allotment is static to upward. Increases in ponderosa pine on some portions of the allotment are slowing an improvement in trend. Impacts from historic uses by cattle and elk in isolated areas, poorly located roads, flooding during snowmelt, and heavy thunderstorms may also slow improvements in trend (PRD 12).

Three monitoring plots were established on the Black Bill/Summit Allotment in 1956 and 1957. Range trends within the ponderosa pine/grassland communities on the allotment have varied since the 1950s. Monitoring in 2006 indicate trends have remained static on two plots, and are static to upward on the third plot. As tree density increases, grass, forb and shrub production declines (PRD 12).

These range condition trends exist under the current cattle grazing system and within the current utilization guideline for cattle and wildlife. Grazing has remained within this utilization guideline and cattle have been able to use the allotment for the full length of the grazing season. Cattle must be moved early if the utilization level is reached prior to planned rotations, or cattle may not enter a pasture if utilization from wildlife already meets the utilization guideline. However, wildlife grazing has not been that high on this allotment. Early moves or skipping pastures has not been routinely needed under the current grazing system and have only occurred on occasion, mainly related to drought conditions.

Of the 4,116 acres on the Black Bill/Summit Allotment, all have satisfactory rangeland management status and a mid to high-similarity to the desired natural community with static to upward trends. Cattle currently graze a large portion of these satisfactory acres.

Soil condition status is obtained from the Coconino National Forest Terrestrial Ecosystems Survey (TES) (USDA 1995). Based on TES predictions and field surveys, only satisfactory soils exist on the Black Bill/Summit Allotment. Of 4,116 acres on the allotment, 100 percent is in satisfactory range condition. There are no impaired or unsatisfactory soils. Based upon this information, Forest Service lands on the Black Bill/Summit Allotment are considered to be in satisfactory condition.

Based on this information and the project record (which includes monitoring information), I find my decision is consistent with the 1987 Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Coconino Forest Plan), as amended (PRD 19).

3) There are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that 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 (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30.3).

- Threatened and endangered species or their critical habitat: There are no threatened or endangered species or critical habitat affected by this project. This determination is made based on the fact that the project will not alter or impact habitat conditions, nor will it create a disturbance to threatened and endangered species of concern on the District's Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species List (Biological Assessment and Evaluation, PRD 10).

- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds: There are no flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds in the project area.
- Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas: There are no congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas in the project area.
- Inventoried roadless areas: There are no inventoried roadless areas in the project area.
- Research Natural Areas: There are no Research Natural Areas in this project area.
- Native American areas of traditional cultural importance, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas: 13 Native American tribes were consulted and none of them expressed concern with the project. An archeological survey and clearance report was completed and no effects to archeological resources or sites are anticipated (PRD 33).

The project record, located at the Peaks Ranger District, contains further documentation supporting the findings of no extraordinary circumstances. In reviewing the project record, I have determined the analysis considered the best available science.

Public Involvement

This project has been listed in the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since October 2004. On November 1, 2006, a detailed Proposed Action with a map was mailed to five interested individuals/groups for a 30-day scoping period. One comment was received during scoping, with a general question about cattle trespass onto private land. In December 2006, 13 Native American tribes were also consulted about this project. Three representatives responded with appreciation for the information and no concerns. No significant issues were identified during scoping or consultation.

Compliance with Other Laws

In addition to meeting Coconino Forest Plan standards and guidelines, this project is also 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).
- Federal regulation (36 CFR 222.2 (c)) which states that National Forest System lands will be allocated for livestock grazing and these allotment management plans will be prepared consistent with land management plans, and the Clean Water Act of 1948, Clean Air Act of 1955, Endangered Species Act of 1973, and 13186 (Conservation of Migratory Birds), and National Historic Preservation Act 1966, as amended.
- Authorization of livestock grazing permits for a ten-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 ten years, or it will be in best interest of sound land management to specify a shorter term.

Implementation Date

This project can be implemented immediately following the decision date. The decision may be implemented during the permittee appeal period, unless the Reviewing Officer grants a stay under 251.91.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal under 36 CFR 215.12(f). The Black Bill Summit Allotment permittee may appeal this decision under 36 CFR 251. A Notice of Appeal must be consistent with 36 CFR 251.90 and filed simultaneously with Nora Rasure, Appeal Reviewing Officer, ATTN: Slate Mountain/Wild Bill Appeal, Coconino National Forest, 1824 S Thompson Street, Flagstaff, AZ 86001-2529; and Gene Waldrip, Deciding Officer, Peaks Ranger District, 5075 N US Highway 89, Flagstaff, AZ 86004 within 45 days from the date of the decision.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning my decision, please contact Mike Hannemann, Range Staff for the Peaks and Mormon Lake Districts at (928) 526-0866.

/s/ Gene Waldrip
GENE WALDRIP
District Ranger

June 18, 2007
Date