

Decision Memo

Casner Park/Kelly Seep Grazing Allotment Management Plan

USDA Forest Service Mormon Lake Ranger District, Coconino National Forest Coconino County, Arizona

Background

The Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment is located on the Mormon Lake Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest. The Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment consists of approximately 28,980 acres; approximately 28,047 acres of National Forest System land, approximately 616 acres are in private ownership, and approximately 317 acres are State Trust land (see attached Map). It includes ten pastures: Pumphouse, Mountaineer, Kelly, East Kelly, Saginaw, Coulter, Cowboy, Little Horse, Casner Park, and Odel. The allotment boundary begins approximately 6 miles south of the City of Flagstaff on Interstate Highway 17, and south of the Kachina Village and Mountaineer subdivisions. This allotment is located within all or portions of: T18N-R7E-Sec. 1-3, 11-14, 21-28; T18N-R8E-Sec. 5-8, 17-21, 29, 30; T19N-R6E-1, 2, 11, 12, 14; T19N-R7E-Sec. 2-9, 15-17, 20-23, 25-29, 33-36; T19N-R8E-Sec. 30, 31; T20N-R6E-Sec. 23-26, 35, 36; and T20N-R7E-Sec. 20, 21, 26-35.

Current permitted use for the Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment is 395 head of yearling cattle from June 1 through October 31 (1,391 Animal Unit Months). The permitted use is based on condition and trend studies, the most recent completed in 2007; actual use data for the allotment for the past 17 years; and the effects of this livestock 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 the proposed grazing as well as proper livestock management.

Ponderosa pine and grasslands dominate the vegetation types on the Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment at an elevation ranging from 6,600 to 7,200 feet. The vegetation varies from open grasslands to dense ponderosa pine stands. The major canyons running through the allotment include Kelly Canyon, James Canyon, and Pumphouse Wash. Kelly and James Canyon riparian vegetation is not accessible to livestock because of steep walled canyons and Pumphouse Wash is within a riparian enclosure. No other riparian vegetation exists on the allotment.

Decision

I have decided to re-authorize grazing for up to 395 head of yearling cattle (or the equivalent, not to exceed 1,391 Animal Unit Months) from June 1 through October 31 on the Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment. The authorization will be through a term grazing permit and includes the following design features:

Utilization: The utilization¹ guideline will continue to allow up to 35 percent use by cattle and/or wildlife. This includes a “moderate” seasonal utilization guideline, approximately 21-50 percent, which is

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.

measured before the end of the growing season. Cattle will be moved from one pasture to another when seasonal utilization approaches a “moderate” level. Each pasture will be grazed only once during the grazing season and once this use standard is met in all pastures, cattle will be moved off the allotment.

Adaptive Management: The reauthorization includes the continued use of adaptive management, which provides 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 Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment will occur as funding is available and will include:

- Permittee compliance, allotment inspections, range readiness, forage production, seasonal utilization and utilization (annually)
- Long term trend monitoring at nine permanent plots scattered throughout the allotment, which includes: pictures, plant frequency, ground cover, and species composition by 1/10 acre canopy cover plots (every 5 to 10 years).
- One of the established long term trend plots will be read annually to record annual range observations such as; forage production, utilization, precipitation, plant frequency, canopy cover, ground cover, and photo points. The same long term trend plot will be read each year (annually).

Structural Range Improvement: Re-construct approximately 2.5 miles of the existing, non-functional, electric fence that splits the Coulter pasture with a new 3-strand barbwire/smooth wire fence. This fence will re-establish the North and South Coulter pastures and will improve grazing management by improving timing, intensity, frequency and duration of livestock grazing. This fence will be constructed to specifications recommended by the District Wildlife Biologist.

Decision Rationale

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 (P.L. 108-447), as amended in 2008 (H.R. 2764; P.L. 110-161). 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 Coconino National Forest land and resource management plan.

The Casner Park/Kelly Seep Allotment includes the following Management Areas (MA): MA 3 Ponderosa Pine and Mixed Conifer, <40% Slope; MA 4 Ponderosa Pine and Mixed Conifer, >40% Slope; MA 5 Aspen; MA 6 Unproductive Timber Land; MA 9 Mountain Grassland; MA 10 Grassland and Sparse Pinyon-juniper Above the Rim; MA 12 Riparian and Open Water; MA 28 Schenbly Rim; MA 35 Lake Mary Watershed; MA 38 West; PVT Private Land; and STAT State Trust Land. 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 evaluate the status of rangeland conditions in the future (Project Record Document #7).

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 #7).

Seven long-term vegetation monitoring plots were established on the Casner Park/Kelly Seep allotment in the mid to late 1950's. Currently, six of those historic locations continue to be monitored and three new locations were added in 2007. Based on monitoring data collected in 2000, 2001, and 2007, 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 #7).

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 seasonal utilization level is reached prior to planned rotations and cattle may not enter a pasture if utilization from wildlife already meets the utilization guidelines. Early pasture moves or non-use of pastures has not been routinely needed under the current grazing system and have only occurred on occasion, mainly related to drought conditions.

Of the approximately 28,047 acres of National Forest System lands on the Casner Park/Kelly Seep allotment, all have satisfactory rangeland management status (range condition) 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 (PRD #7).

The Terrestrial Ecosystems Survey (TES) for the Coconino National Forest (USDA, 1995) was the basis for soil condition status assessment on the Casner Park/Kelly Seep allotment. Based on TES values and field reviews/surveys, satisfactory soil conditions exist on approximately 27,849 acres (96%) of the allotment and impaired soil conditions exist on approximately 1,122 acres (4%) (PRD #4).

There are approximately 12.6 miles of riparian stream courses on the allotment. Riparian conditions on approximately 10.8 miles (86%) of riparian stream courses within the allotment were assessed in 2005 using protocol set forth in BLM's Riparian Proper Functioning Condition Assessment. Based on this assessment, all 10.8 miles were determined to be in Proper Functioning condition. The remaining 1.8 miles of riparian stream courses on the allotment have not been surveyed, but are not impacted by livestock due to topography (PRD #4).

Munds Canyon is the only perennial stream associated with the allotment that has water quality measurements by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality. Based on the most recent

assessment (2006), water quality measures display that there are no exceedences for water quality standards in Munds Creek (PRD #4).

Of the approximately 28,047 acres of National Forest System lands on the allotment, 100 percent are in satisfactory range condition, 96 percent have satisfactory soil conditions, 100 percent of surveyed riparian stream courses are in Proper Functioning Condition, and there are no known water quality issues. Based upon this information, nearly all National Forest System lands on the Casner Park/Kelly Seep allotment are considered to be in satisfactory condition, with the remainder moving towards satisfactory conditions at an acceptable rate.

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 #8).

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 is a determination of “may affect not likely to adversely affect” for Mexican spotted owls and their critical habitat. This determination is based on the criteria outlined in the Framework for Streamlining Informal Consultation for Livestock Grazing Activities (USDA Forest Service 2005). The determination is appropriate as all three of the following criteria are met:
 - Livestock grazing or livestock management activities will occur within protected activity centers (PAC), but no human disturbance or construction actions associated with the livestock grazing will occur in PACs during the breeding season.
 - Livestock grazing and livestock management activities within PACs, in the action area, will be managed for levels that provide the woody and herbaceous vegetation necessary for cover for rodent prey species, and maintain the residual biomass that will support prescribed natural and ignited fires that would reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the Forest.
 - In owl foraging areas, forage utilization will be maintained at conservative levels (30-40%).

PAC habitat within the allotments is approximately 3,193 acres of mostly steep habitat with high canopy cover restricting understory growth and is rarely used by livestock. Given the current utilization standards the proposed action is unlikely to result in adverse affects to Mexican spotted owls (PRD #16, #17, #21).

- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds: There are no wetlands or municipal watersheds in the project area. One floodplain (Pumphouse Wash) exists within the project area. The Proposed Action defers cattle grazing within the Pumphouse Wash area, and therefore no extraordinary circumstance exists from this project to the Pumphouse Wash floodplain.
- 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: Thirteen Native American Indian groups 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 #5, #6).

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 January, 2007. On August 11, 2008, a detailed Proposed Action with a map was mailed to 25 interested individuals/agencies/groups for a 19-day scoping period. Additionally, the Proposed Action and the request for comments were posted on the Coconino National Forest website. Five comments were received during scoping; two responded supporting the Proposed Action, one responded supporting the Proposed Action but also encouraged the use of grazing best management practices, and two provided no comments but wished to remain on the mailing list. On July 7, 2007, thirteen Native American Indian groups were consulted about this project; no concerns about this project were received. No significant issues were identified during scoping or consultation (PRD #22).

Compliance with Other Laws

In addition to meeting Coconino National Forest Plan standards and guidelines and Section 339 of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-447), as amended in 2008 (H.R. 2764; P.L. 110-161), 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 forage producing National Forest System lands will be managed for livestock grazing and the allotment management plans will be prepared consistent with land management plans.
- 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 36 CFR 251.91.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

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

The Casner Park/Kelly Seep 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, Forest Supervisor, Coconino National Forest, Appeal Reviewing Officer and Mike Elson, District Ranger, Peaks/Mormon Lake Ranger Districts, Deciding Officer within 45 days from the date of this decision.

Appeals should be sent to:

Nora Rasure, Forest Supervisor, Appeal Reviewing Officer
Coconino National Forest
1824 S Thompson Street
Flagstaff, AZ 86001-2529

Mike Elson, District Ranger, Deciding Officer
Peaks Ranger District
5075 N US Highway 89
Flagstaff, AZ 86004

Appeals may be filed electronically. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to appeals-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. Please put the project name in the "subject" line.

The Deciding Officer is willing to meet with the permit holder to hear and discuss any concerns or issues related to this decision. This decision may be implemented during an appeal unless the Reviewing Officer grants a stay under 36 CFR 251.91.

Contact Person

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

/s/ Michael T. Elson
MICHAEL T. ELSON
District Ranger

September 26, 2008
Date