

Decision Memo

Cosnino Grazing Allotment Management Plan

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

Background

The Cosnino Allotment is located on the Peaks Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest. The Cosnino Allotment consists of approximately 10,900 acres (see attached Map). Included within the allotment are approximately 700 acres of private land and approximately 700 acres of State Trust land. The allotment contains six main grazing pastures: Upper Burn, Lower Burn, Pinyon, Wildcat, Home, and Monument. The Cosnino Allotment boundary begins approximately 7 miles east of the City of Flagstaff and is bisected by Interstate 40. This allotment is located within all or portions of: T21N-R9E, Sections 15-18, 19-21, and 29-30; T21N-R8E, Sections 1-3, 11-15, and 23-25; and T22N-R8E, Sections 30 and 35.

Current permitted use for the Cosnino Allotment is 160 head of cattle (cow/calf pairs) from June 1 through October 31 (805 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 18 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.

Juniper woodland and blue grama are the dominant vegetation type; elevation ranges from 6,200 to 7,300 feet. The juniper, ponderosa pine, and grassland vegetation types vary from open grassland to dense trees. The allotment lies between the Turkey Hills cinder cones (northwest) to the edge of Walnut Canyon (south). Walnut Canyon is excluded from the allotment and no other major canyons or riparian areas are on the allotment.

Decision

I have decided to re-authorize grazing for up to 160 head of cattle (cow/calf pairs; or the equivalent, not to exceed 805 Animal Unit Months) from June 1 through October 31 on the Cosnino 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 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

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.

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 Cosnino 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 seven 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:

- Remove approximately 1 mile of fence. This fence is non-functional and is no longer needed for livestock management on the allotment.

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 Cosnino Allotment includes the following Management Areas (MA): MA 33 Doney; MA 37 Walnut Canyon; 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 #5).

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 #5).

Seven long-term vegetation monitoring plots were established on the Cosnino allotment in 1956. Based on monitoring data collected in 1999 and 2006, 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 #5).

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 9,500 acres of National Forest System lands on the Cosnino 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 #5).

The Terrestrial Ecosystems Survey (TES) for the Coconino National Forest (USDA, 1995) was the basis for soil condition status assessment on the Cosnino allotment. Based on TES values and field reviews/surveys, satisfactory soil conditions exist on approximately 9,193 acres (97%) of the allotment, impaired soil conditions exist on approximately 190 acres (2%), and satisfactory, but inherently unstable soil conditions exist on approximately 56 acres (1%) (PRD #2).

There are no identified riparian stream courses within the project area; therefore, there are no effects to riparian condition. There are no live streams within the project area; as a result, there is no water quality data for the project area (PRD #2).

Of the approximately 9,500 acres of National Forest System lands on the allotment, 100 percent are in satisfactory range condition, 98 percent have satisfactory soil conditions, there are no effects to riparian conditions, and there are no known water quality issues.

Based upon this information, nearly all National Forest System lands on the Cosnino 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 #3).

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 and endangered species or critical habitat in the project area. (PRD #17, #18).
- 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: 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 #21, #22).

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, 2006. On February 27, 2008, a detailed Proposed Action with a map was mailed to 71 interested individuals/agencies/groups for a 30-day scoping period. Additionally, the Proposed Action and the request for comments were posted on the Coconino National Forest website. Seven comments were received during scoping; four responded supporting the Proposed Action, and three responded opposing the proposed action based on impacts to private land, user conflicts, and livestock/vehicle safety issues. On August 15, 2008, 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 #20).

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 Cosnino 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