

SCOPING SUMMARY

Alisos, Oak Bar and Santa Cruz Allotments Analysis

Sierra Vista Ranger District
 Coronado National Forest
 Santa Cruz County, Arizona

Introduction

The Sierra Vista Ranger District, Coronado National Forest is proposing to authorize grazing, implement range improvements and develop allotment management plans (AMPs) for the Oak Bar, Santa Cruz and Alisos Allotments. Where consistent with the goals, objectives, standards and guidelines of Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMPs), it is Forest Service policy to make forage from lands suitable for grazing available to qualified livestock operators (*Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2202.1, FSM 2203.1, 36 CFR 22.2 (c), Multiple Use and Sustained Yield act of 1960, Wilderness Act of 1964, Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974*). Federal actions such as the authorization of grazing and development of range improvements must be analyzed to determine potential environmental consequences and effects must be disclosed (*National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, NEPA; Rescission Act of 1995 (P.L. 104-19)*). This report has been prepared to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist in the NEPA review of the proposal.

The three allotments¹ are share common boundaries and together encompass approximately 34,300 acres on the west side of the Patagonia Mountains in portions of Townships 22, 23 and 24 South, Ranges 15 and 16 East (Map 1). The eastern boundary of the project area is the crest of the Patagonia Mountains. Information on recent livestock use on the allotments is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Allotment size, stocking and recent use: Alisos/Sierra Tordilla, Oak Bar and Santa Cruz Allotments.

		Oak Bar	Santa Cruz	Alisos	Sierra Tordilla
Total Acres		11,313	11,651	6,184	5,176
Capable Acres ²		8,036	9,437	4,818	4,421
Current Permitted Use		220 cow/calf	380 cow/calf	192 cow/calf	160 cow/calf
Management System		3 pasture deferred rotation	7 pasture deferred rotation	8 pasture deferred rotation	
Recent Actual Use	2000-2001	148 cattle	251 cattle	210 cattle	
	2001-2002	113 cattle	113 cattle	204 cattle	
	2002-2003	75 cattle	140 cattle	216 cattle	
	2003-2004	75 cattle	140 cattle	112 cattle**	
	2004-2005	210 cattle	***	55 cattle	

** All livestock were removed June-November 2003 due to drought. 55 head restored in November 2003

***Santa Cruz and oak Bar allotments combined with 210 head total. Both allotments rested during 2004 growing season.

¹ Since 1995, the Alisos and Sierra Tordilla allotments have been managed as one unit but with separate permits. The proposed action would combine the two into a single allotment, called the Alisos allotment.

² Capable acres are defined as areas under 40% slope and capable of producing 100 pounds of dry forage per acre. Areas considered “not capable” are not used to calculate grazing capacity.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to implement management actions that would maintain or improve National Forest land and resource conditions on the Oak Bar, Santa Cruz and Alisos Allotments and promote the attainment of desired conditions on the allotments consistent with Forest Service policy and the Coronado National Forest LRMP. Specific proposed actions and their associated purpose and need are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Existing Condition

Elevations in the project area range from 3,900 feet on the western side of the analysis area at the Forest boundary to over 7,000 feet on Mount Washington. Topography ranges from steep inaccessible peaks to broad mesas. The majority of suitable and capable rangelands are found on gentler hills and valleys at elevations under 5,000 feet. Broadleaf evergreen woodland is the dominant vegetation type in upper elevations in the project area. Lower elevations are semi-desert grasslands. In the 1950's, the exotic Lehman lovegrass (*Eragrostis lehmanniana*) was seeded following mesquite removal in lower elevations west of the Patagonia Mountains. This grass is the dominant understory species throughout most of the lowlands in all three allotments. Drainages in the project area include Sycamore, Providencia, Paloma, Maggies and Three R Canyons. These drainages run seasonally in response to precipitation events, but water persists year round in only a few locations, primarily seeps and earthen stock tanks. Vegetation associated with stream courses is a mixture of evergreen oaks and deciduous riparian trees, primarily sycamore and mesquite.

Ecological condition and production/utilization data were updated in 2003 and 2004. Uplands in the project area are largely in fair or better ecological condition. However, canyon bottoms and flatter areas on the allotments are in lower condition than desired. This is due in large part to the extensive presence of Lehmann lovegrass, but historically poor livestock distribution has also contributed to this condition.

Desired Condition

The Coronado LRMP identifies the following goals for the range program on the Forest.

- To restore rangeland to at least moderately high ecological condition (70% to 75% of potential production, fair range condition) with stable soil and a static to upward trend.
- Produce livestock products consistent with other resources and uses.
- Eliminate grazing from areas not capable of supporting livestock without significant detriment to range or other resources.
- Balance permitted grazing use with grazing capacity.

Actions proposed are intended to support these goals and achieve the following specific objectives, which constitute the desired condition in the analysis area:

- Improvement in ecological condition as expressed by the number of acres in fair or better condition.
- Increase in range production and movement toward site potential for each soil/vegetation site.
- Improvement in riparian condition.

Proposed Action

The Sierra Vista Ranger District proposes to continue to authorize grazing on the Alisos, Oak Bar and Santa Cruz allotments under the following terms and conditions:

- Maximum forage utilization will be limited to 45% of current year’s growth of key species in key areas.
- Management on each allotment will be designed to insure that pastures receive periodic growing season rest or deferment.

The proposed action incorporates management flexibility by providing a range of allowable use expressed as animal unit months (AUM)¹. To insure that permitted use is consistent with capacity on the allotments, the range of numbers proposed is based on recent production and utilization studies and knowledge of actual sustainable stocking over the past several years. Within this range, annual permitted livestock numbers will be specified in annual operating instructions. Initial stocking rates will be set based on existing resource and infrastructure conditions. Increases in stocking would be based on successful infrastructure development and documented improvement in resource conditions. Herd movements would be determined by utilization levels, forage conditions and water availability and will be specified in annual operating instructions. Allotment-specific proposed actions are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Monitoring of forage availability and utilization, range readiness and resource conditions will be used to determine whether management is being properly implemented and whether the actions are effective at achieving or moving toward desired conditions. The plans will also include mitigation measures and Best Management Practices to avoid or minimize effects to wildlife, soil and water quality.

Table 2. Proposed Grazing Management.

Allotment	Grazing System	Animal Unit Months	Cattle Yearlong (cow/calf)	Change from Current Permit
Alisos	7 pasture deferred rotation	2550-3421	161-216	Reduced from 5,575 AUM (352 head). Change to a range of numbers.
Oak Bar	4 pasture deferred rest rotation	2028-2186	128-138	Reduced from 3485 AUM (220 head). Change to a range of numbers.
Santa Cruz	7 pasture deferred rest rotation	2550-3580	161-226	Reduced from 6020 AUM (380 head). Change to a range of numbers.

Table 3. Description, purpose and need for proposed improvements.

Allotment	Proposed Improvement	Purpose and Need
Alisos Oak Bar Santa Cruz	Issue new term permits with changes in authorized use shown in Table 2.	Balance permitted use with capacity.
Alisos	Divide Piedragosa pasture	Increase pasture rest and management flexibility by creating an additional pasture.
Alisos	Install a new drinker on existing pipeline on new Piedragosa pasture division fence. Install storage tank at Benches Spring and 1.5 miles of pipeline to provide 3 new waters in Lower	Improve livestock distribution and improve riparian condition by providing upland waters and reducing use in bottoms.

¹ An AUM is the amount of *forage* required by one animal unit for a period of 30 days. One animal unit is considered to be a mature cow of approximately 1000 pounds. A cow with a calf is 1.32 AUM.

Allotment	Proposed Improvement	Purpose and Need
	Alisos and Sierra Tordilla pastures. Develop a spring on the Duquesne Allotment and extend a pipeline and drinker into the upper Alisos pasture. Install new water storage at Granger Corral and extend pipeline into the southwest part of Holding pasture. Fence Piedragosa Tank and Piedragosa Tank #2.	Control livestock access to water and improve distribution.
Oak Bar	Divide 3R pasture (2 miles of new fence) and Paja Verde pasture (1.75 miles of new fence).	Increase pasture rest and management flexibility by creating an additional pasture.
Oak Bar	2 miles of pipeline from Tres de Mayo well and 2 drinkers in Paja Verde pastures. 2 miles of pipeline from Lucky Find well (private) to 2 drinkers in Paja Verde pastures. 2 miles of pipeline from Lucky Find well to drinkers in upper 3R pasture. 0.75 miles of pipeline from Horse Pasture well (private) to lower 3R pasture.	Improve livestock distribution and improve riparian condition by providing upland waters and reducing use in bottoms.
Santa Cruz	Divide Shamrock pasture (1.5 miles of new fence)	Increase pasture rest and management flexibility by creating a new pasture.
Santa Cruz	Using existing pipeline, install a storage tank and drinkers in Shamrock and Guajolote pastures. Develop and equip a well in Providencia canyon with storage and drinker. Extend a pipeline from Javelina well to move water out of canyon. Extend a pipeline in Soldier Basin to a drinker at Basin well. Clean out Lower Paloma dam and construct silt trap. Replace storage at lower Paloma well. Reconstruct Soldier Basin and North Soldier Basin Tanks.	Improve livestock distribution and improve riparian condition by providing upland waters and reducing use in bottoms.

Preliminary Alternative Development.

In addition to the proposed action, the Interdisciplinary Team for the project has identified the following alternatives for analysis. Further alternatives may be identified, or alternatives may be revised if scoping results in the identification of significant issues related to the proposed action that cannot be mitigated, or if additional management practices are identified that achieve the desired condition.

No Action/No Grazing

Forest Service Policy (Forest Service Handbook 2209.13) requires the Forest Service to identify no grazing as the No Action alternative. Under this alternative, grazing would not be authorized and use of the allotments by domestic livestock would be discontinued. Existing structural improvements would remain in place but would not be maintained. Improvements contributing to resource protection or enhancement, such as water developments important for wildlife, would be maintained where feasible using other program funds. Periodic inspection of structural improvements would be used to determine whether maintenance or removal is needed. Removal or maintenance of improvements would be authorized by a separate decision. Where necessary, maintenance of allotment boundary fences would be reassigned to adjacent permittees with the understanding that livestock are to be kept off of the allotments.

Continue Current Management

Livestock grazing would continue on all allotments as currently permitted. New permits would be issued for the classes and numbers of livestock currently allowed. New allotment management plans would be developed and authorized use would continue to be controlled through annual operating instructions. The plans would include mitigation measures and Best Management Practices to avoid or minimize effects to wildlife, soil and water quality. Existing fences, water developments and other range improvements would be maintained, but no new infrastructure would be proposed or developed.

Preliminary Issues and Concerns

The proposed action is intended to reduce effects compared to past management as a result in changes in the intensity and duration of grazing and the construction of new improvements. To date, the Forest has not identified unresolvable issues related to the proposed action. Several concerns related to the general effects of livestock grazing have been identified and are described below. These concerns will be used to evaluate the effects of the proposed action and alternatives and to develop mitigation for the alternatives. These will be refined or expanded as a result of comments received from the public and other interested parties. Significant issues identified as a result of scoping will be used to formulate additional alternatives if necessary.

- 1. Grazing effects on wildlife and plants.** The timing and intensity of grazing in the project area could affect wildlife and plants, including threatened, endangered, proposed, sensitive species, management-indicator species, and their respective habitats. Utilization in canyon bottoms could impair the achievement of Forest Plan standards for Mearns' quail cover. Issues will be evaluated through narratives and tables describing effects, by alternative, as identified through a Wildlife Specialist's Reports, Biological Assessment and Evaluation and consultation with appropriate wildlife resource agencies.
- 2. Soil and watershed condition:** Management practices on the allotments, in combination with natural features, may affect soil condition and erosion either positively or negatively. Effects will be evaluated through narrative and tabular descriptions, by alternative, as identified through a range and soil condition and trend analysis.
- 3. Upland vegetation condition.** Livestock distribution and utilization levels may impair achievement of Forest Plan standards for restoring rangelands. Condition will be described and compared in narrative and tabular form, by alternative, as identified by range condition and trend analysis data.

The potential for the proposal to affect to air quality, water quality, riparian, heritage (cultural) resources and socioeconomics will also be assessed. Effects on these resources will be evaluated through specialist's reports and consultation with appropriate tribes and regulatory agencies. Effects will be disclosed in narrative and tabular form.

Because of the proximity of the project area to the Mexican border, the area sustains high levels of traffic by undocumented aliens and Border Patrol enforcement activities. In addition, the area along Forest Road 61 has been heavily used for dispersed recreational use, including off-highway vehicle use. While these activities do not directly affect the proposed grazing program, they likely contribute cumulative effects to vegetation and soils, and make management more difficult to implement as a result of vandalism, leaving gates open, etc. To the extent possible, the effects of these activities will be considered as part of the analysis.

Decision Framework

The Sierra Vista District Ranger is the official responsible for decisions regarding management of the Allotments. Based on the results of the NEPA analysis, the Ranger would decide whether the proposed action would proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all. If it proceeds, the Ranger would determine which mitigation measures and monitoring requirements would be prescribed in each AMP, including permitted number of animals and season of use, range facilities to be constructed, allowable utilization standards and the term of the permits. Separate decisions may be made for each allotment or for all three allotments, combined.

Public Input Needed

We are requesting your comments on the proposed action, preliminary issues, evaluation methodology, and alternatives. Suggestions for additional actions that may be undertaken to facilitate achievement of desired conditions are encouraged. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received within 30 days of receipt of this correspondence; however, comments will be accepted throughout the analysis process. Comments should be directly relevant to the proposal and project area. Issues that are outside of the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this level of planning. In accordance with 36 CFR 215.5, additional opportunities for public and agency review of the project will occur as the NEPA review progresses. The expected date of completion of the analysis is September 2005.

Please provide comments to Richard Gerhart, Analysis Team Leader, Coronado National Forest, 300 West Congress Street, Tucson, Arizona 85701, telephone (520) 388-8374. You may email comments to comments-southwestern-coronado@fs.fed.us (.doc, .rtf or .txt only), or fax: (520) 378-8305. To obtain details about the technical aspects of the proposal, please contact Tom Lorenz, Range Management Staff, Sierra Vista Ranger District, telephone (520) 378-0311.