

Introduction

Congress passed Section 339 of the FY 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-447). This legislation provides that certain decisions to authorize livestock grazing on allotments can be categorically excluded from documentation in environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act if they meet three requirements. The text describing the requirements follows:

SEC. 339. For fiscal years 2005 through 2007, a decision made by the Secretary of Agriculture to authorize grazing on an allotment shall be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.) if: (1) the decision continues current grazing management; (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; and (3) the decision is consistent with agency policy concerning extraordinary circumstances.

The USDA Forest Service, Santa Fe National Forest Service (Forest Service) is considering using this authority on the Aspen and Quemado Allotments (map) on the Española Ranger District.

Preliminary analysis and on-the-ground monitoring conducted in the past five years by the Forest Service indicate that current grazing management on these allotments meets the three prongs listed in the legislation. Should significant issues arise during scoping or analysis, this authority will not be used and an EA or EIS will be prepared.

Purpose and Need

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 504 of the 1995 Rescissions Act, the purpose of this project is to authorize livestock grazing on the Aspen and Quemado Allotments located on the Española Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest (map) in a manner such that the landscape meets or moves towards objectives in the Santa Fe National Forest Plan (Forest Plan):

- Emphasize high quality range forage (Forest Plan, p. 19);
- Have the range's permitted use be in balance with its capacity (Forest Plan, p. 19);
- Maintain [riparian] areas that are currently in good condition (Forest Plan, p. 20);
- Manage Forest activities and programs within the capability of the land while recognizing the value of maintaining the traditional cultures of northern New Mexico (Forest Plan, p. 22); and
- Protect the productivity and diversity of riparian-dependent resources (Forest Plan, p. 79).

Description and Location

Aspen

The Aspen Allotment totals approximately 17,400 acres in size. Of this, about 4,800 acres (28%) are located in the Pecos Wilderness. Indian Trust Lands comprise about 2%

of the allotment and private lands another 3%; Forest Service permitted cattle do not graze on these lands. The permitted number of Animal Unit Months¹ (AUMs) is 352, which generally equates to 53 cow/calf pairs grazing from June 1 to October 31. This allotment does not have internal fences between the grazing areas; cattle are physically herded from pasture to pasture by the permittees as the forage production and range readiness standards are achieved.

Livestock use over the last five years has averaged 73% of permitted use due to voluntary reductions by livestock operators as a result of several years of drought. In 2002, livestock permittees on the Aspen Allotment voluntarily removed livestock two months prior to the exit date due to drought conditions.

Historically, the Aspen Allotment had a May 1st entry. Range readiness studies completed in 1964 recommended a later entry date with a shortened grazing season. Thus, the entry date over the last two decades has been June 1st. Recent inspections of the allotment indicate that range resources are in balance with permitted use. Within the last several years permittees have adopted progressive management practices. As an example, salting practices critical for proper livestock distribution have been altered to minimize impacts on riparian and heavily used recreational areas within the allotment.

Quemado

The Quemado Allotment totals approximately 24,400 acres in size. Of this, about 14,200 acres (58%) are located in the Pecos Wilderness. Private lands comprise about 2% of the allotment; Forest Service permitted cattle do not graze on these lands. The permitted number of AUMs is 567, which generally equates to 61 cow/calf pairs grazing from May 1 to November 30. Cattle, however, do not generally graze on the allotment past October due to snow.

Livestock use within the last five years has averaged 55% of permitted use due to the livestock operators voluntarily taking non-use as a result of several years of drought and the Borrego Wildfire. For instance, in 2002, the permittees voluntarily removed livestock four months early to allow recovery of range resources. The following year, permittees again voluntarily delayed entry by one month to ensure recovery of herbaceous grasses and forbs. Progressive adaptive livestock management has allowed herbaceous recovery within the wildfire area, which burned over 30% of the Quemado Allotment, and has also led to a significant upward trend of range condition, particularly in areas impacted by the Borrego Wildfire. Recent allotment compliance inspections indicate that the current range resources are in balance with permitted livestock numbers.

Proposed Action

The proposed action would continue the current grazing management as depicted in the table below. Monitoring of vegetation, soils and riparian resources by the Forest Service indicate that the current grazing management is meeting or moving towards the objectives in the Forest Plan.

¹ An Animal Unit Month (AUM) is the quantity of forage required by one mature cow and her calf for one month.

Current Grazing Management on the Aspen and Quemado Allotments.

Allotment	Season	AUMs	System	Utilization (current year's growth)
Aspen	Jun 1 - Oct 31	Up to 352 (53 head cow/calf)	Deferred rotation	Riparian: Up to 30% during the growing season; up to 60% during the dormant season. Uplands: Up to 40%.
	May 1 - Nov 30	Up to 567 (61 head cow/calf)	Deferred rotation	Riparian: Up to 30% during the growing season; up to 60% during the dormant season. Uplands: Up to 40%.
Quemado				

The proposed action is adaptive, allowing the Forest Service to adjust the timing, intensity, frequency and duration of grazing; the grazing management system, and livestock numbers according to resource conditions. AUMs, numbers, season of use, and utilization are given as maximums – the exact numbers authorized on an annual basis will depend upon the ecological condition of the allotment, available water and forage, and predicted forage production for the year. The expected maximums are meant to encompass the range of ecological conditions under most normal circumstances, including dry years and wet years, but are to be used as a guide.

The allotment's ecological condition will be determined through monitoring. If monitoring indicates that desired conditions are not being achieved, management will be modified in cooperation with the permittee.

Adjustments to the annual authorized livestock numbers (an increase or decrease) may occur during the grazing year, based on conditions and/or range inspections. An example of a situation that could call for adaptive management adjustments is drought conditions. If adjustments are needed, they are implemented through Annual Operating Instructions.

This proposal meets the Forestwide standards and guidelines as well as those specific to Management Areas D, E, G, H, and L in the Forest Plan.

Monitoring

Two types of monitoring would be used, implementation and effectiveness monitoring. Implementation monitoring would be conducted on an annual basis and could include: livestock actual use data, grazing intensity evaluations during the grazing season (within key areas), utilization at the end of the growing season (within key areas), and visual observation of vegetation and ground cover.

Effectiveness monitoring to evaluate the success of management in achieving the desired objectives would occur within key areas on permanent transects at an interval of 10 years or less. Effectiveness monitoring may also be conducted if data and observations from implementation monitoring (annual monitoring) indicate a need. Initial baseline monitoring would occur.

Both qualitative and quantitative monitoring methods will be used in accordance with the Interagency Technical References, Region 3 Rangeland Analysis and Management Training Guide, and the Region 3 Allotment Analysis Handbook.

Decision Framework

The District Ranger of the Española Ranger District is the Responsible Official making a decision on this project. The decision to be made is whether to authorize livestock grazing on the Aspen and Quemado Allotments, and whether an EA or EIS will be prepared. This proposed action may be categorically excluded from detailed analysis in an EIS or an EA if no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action exist and monitoring indicates that current management is meeting or satisfactorily moving toward Forest Plan objectives. If no extraordinary circumstances are identified, a decision memo will be signed authorizing livestock grazing under Section 339 of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriation Act (P.L. 1008-447).

How to Comment

Information and maps on the management activities described in this document are located on the internet at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/projects/projects>. We invite you to comment on this proposal before the analysis has been completed and a final decision has been made. Comments that are useful in helping us analyze this project are site-specific, within the scope of the proposed action, specific to the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and include supporting reasons why the comments should be considered.

Please submit your written comments to: Sandy Hurlocker, District Ranger, Española Ranger District, P.O. Box 3307, Española, NM 87532; 505-753-9411 (fax); comments-southwestern-santafe-Espanola@fs.fed.us (.doc, .txt, .pdf, or .rtf only). The name and address of the person submitting electronic comments must be included. Hand-delivered comments may be delivered to the Española Ranger Station (1710 Riverside Drive, Española) between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 pm. If you would like to make your comments verbally, please call (505) 753-7331 to arrange an appointment. If you have questions about the technical aspects of the proposal, please contact Donald Serrano at (505) 753-7331. Please submit your comments by **May 24, 2007**.