



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Santa Fe National Forest

Espanola Ranger District
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File Code: 2210/1950-1
Date: March 27, 2008

Dear Interested Citizen:

This letter initiates public scoping for Caja del Rio, Oso/Vallecitos and El Invierno Grazing Allotments located on the Espanola Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest. The purpose of this project is to re-issue term grazing permits in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and Section 504 of the 1995 Rescissions Act in a manner such that the landscape meets or moves towards objectives in the Santa Fe National Forest Plan (Forest Plan). I am writing to you about this proposal because of your past interest in grazing management on the Santa Fe National Forest, or because you are a neighbor or user of the area encompassed by the allotments.

I encourage your participation in the planning process. At this time, our desire is to receive comments on the merits of the Proposed Action, as well as comments that address errors, misinformation, or information that has been omitted. To be most helpful, your comments should be within the scope of the proposal, have a direct relationship to the proposal, and include supporting reasons for the District Ranger's consideration. Accompanying this letter is a description of the proposed action and project maps.

Please submit your written comments to: Sanford Hurlocker, District Ranger
Española Ranger District,
P.O. Box 3307, Fairview Station
Española, NM 87533;

In addition you may send you comments electronically to: commentssouthwestern-santafe-espanola@fs.fed.us (.doc, .txt, .pdf, or .rtf only) or FAX to 505-757-2737. The name and address of the person submitting electronic comments must be included. Hand-delivered comments may be delivered to Espanola Ranger District 1710 N. Riverside Dr. Espanola, New Mexico between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 pm. If you would like to make your comments verbally, please call (505) 757-6121 to arrange an appointment. If you have questions about the technical aspects of the proposal, please contact Donald Serrano at (505) 753-7331. To be most helpful, please submit your comments by April 25, 2008.

Only those who submit comments during this public scoping period will remain on the mailing list for future information regarding the project. Individuals who do not have comments but who wish to remain on this mailing list should contact Brian Davidson at (505) 438-7801. Another opportunity to comment on this project will occur during the 30-Day Comment Period tentatively scheduled early this summer.

Sincerely,

SANFORD HURLOCKER
District Ranger

Enclosures: *Scoping Report for the Caja del Rio Grazing Allotment; Scoping Report for the Oso/Vallecitos; and Scoping Report for the El Invierno Grazing Allotment*





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Forest Service



Santa Fe
National Forest,
Region 3

March 2008

SCOPING REPORT FOR THE EL INVIERNO GRAZING ALLOTMENT

Project Number: 23631
Española Ranger Districts
Santa Fe National Forest
Rio Arriba County, New Mexico

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INTRODUCTION

This scoping document summarizes proposed livestock grazing management activities to occur on National Forest System lands, our intent is to inform interested and affected parties and to solicit comments. Scoping is an integral part of environmental analysis that is intended to refine the proposed action, identify preliminary issues, explore possible alternatives and probable environmental effects, and identify interested and affected persons. A final decision is tentatively scheduled for September 2008. Individuals and organizations that respond with comments during this scoping period or otherwise indicate an interest will be added to the project mailing list. Another opportunity to comment on this project will occur during the 30 – Day Comment Period tentatively scheduled for early summer 2008.

LOCATION, SETTING AND BACKGROUND

The El Invierno allotment comprises approximately 42,831 acres of National Forest System lands (NFS) on the Santa Fe National Forest, located in T. 21 - 23 N., R. 6 - 7 E, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico and is approximately 3.5 air miles south of Abiquiu, New Mexico. The allotment is administered by the Española Ranger District. The Forest Plan identifies the allotment as being in Management Areas: G (Wildlife-Range-Firewood), K (Sensitive Soils and Species), D (Recreation-Visual-Timber).

There are currently six permits issued on the allotment totaling 303 Cow/calf pairs from 11/1 to 5/23 (winter-long). A “querencia” grazing system is used in which permittee’s place their permitted livestock in separate pastures based on traditional and historical use. Existing range facilities include five spring developments, three wells, one earthen tanks, three tanks, three miles of pipeline and one corral.

The landscape has steeply sloping, sharp-crested mountains dissected by many narrow stream valleys; high plateaus with steep-walled canyons are common. Soils formed about equally in areas of volcanic ash flows, lavas, sandstones, siltstones, shale, and carbonates (McNabb et al 2007). The allotment is located in the South Central Highlands Section of the Steppe - Open Woodland - Coniferous Forest - Alpine Meadow Province of the Southern Rock Mountain Ecoregion. Vegetative community types consist largely of juniper woodlands (49 %), pinyon-juniper woodlands (46 %), and open grasslands (3 %).

The allotment falls within the Rio Ojo Caliente and El Rito-Rio Chama Watersheds (HUC 1302010216, 1302010212, respectively) and contains five subwatersheds. There is approximately 3.9 miles of perennial streams and 143 miles of intermittent drainages within the allotment. The main perennial streams are Rio Quemado, Arroyo del Palacio, Arroyo del Toro and Cannon Mednea Creeks The majority of the allotment drains into the Rio Chama River which is 0.5 miles downstream.

EXISTING AND DESIRED CONDITIONS

An interdisciplinary team (IDT) has identified the existing and desired conditions for this allotment based on information contained in the Santa Fe National Forest Plan, historical and current range inventories and the Terrestrial Ecosystem Survey (TES) of the Santa Fe National Forest.

Rangeland inventory and analysis on the Santa Fe National Forest begins with identifying TES mapping units for the landscape. The TES map unit is the standard ecological unit that provides basic information for range management planning. TES provides the hierarchical framework of ecological units from which resource conditions (existing and natural conditions) can be assessed. Information on soils, climate, vegetation, geology, and landform is provided by TES.

In 2007, species composition, canopy cover and frequency data was collected on several areas within the allotment. This information is used to compare current vegetation against the Potential Natural Communities (PNC) for each TES map unit. PNC is the potential of a plant community as described in TES. It defines the range of variability for each TES map unit. PNC is used as a yardstick from which to determine the ecological status of existing vegetation, and as a baseline to establish the desired conditions for a landscape and/or allotment (Range Analysis and Management Guide 1997). The desired condition should represent full range of variation (seral stages) and biodiversity necessary for a sustainable ecosystem.

Existing Conditions

Vegetative Conditions: Approximately 22 % of the allotment is considered full capacity range. Full capacity range is a land area able to support livestock grazing on a sustainable yield basis (i.e. maintaining soil stability and productivity of plant cover). The rest of the allotment has no capacity to support livestock grazing due to physical constraints such as steep slope or is naturally unproductive. No grazing capacity is assigned to these areas.

Range analyses conducted in 1960 indicated that the majority of the allotment was in poor to fair condition with a downward to static trend. Utilization monitoring conducted between 2004 and 2007 showed conservative use levels (<40% of annual production) across the majority of the allotment. This monitoring also indicated some localized overuse within some key areas. This overuse was exacerbated by a lack of proper livestock water distribution throughout the pasture or the duration of livestock in these areas is too long.

Vegetation cover/frequency data collected in 2003 and 2007, in the North and Middle pastures shows a mid similar to mid seral stage for the ecological status of the inventoried plant communities within these pastures. Collected ground cover data suggests a high similar to late seral stage ecological status when comparing existing condition to the potential natural community. Forage production data collected in 2007 indicates capable sites in the middle pasture of the allotment are well within 10% of the maximum forage potential for the site which is 1200 pounds to the acre. Data collected in these pastures indicates that current species composition and ground cover is within its natural range of variability as compared to PNC. Additional information is being collected.

Soil and Water Conditions: Currently approximately 43% of the soil condition is rated satisfactory, 34 % rated impaired, and 23 % rated unsatisfactory. A satisfactory rating indicates that soil function is being sustained and soil is functioning properly and normally. Impaired soils have a reduced function or there exist an increase in vulnerability. Impairment may be inherent or a result of past land use. The majority of the soils within the allotment are inherently erosive with 40% having a severe erosion rating and 60% rated as moderate. Gullies and headcuts can be found on the allotment. The majority of the erosion is associated with old roads, incised drainage ditches or other past disturbances including unmanaged OHV use.

Wildlife and Fisheries: Terrestrial wildlife habitat is in functioning condition throughout the allotment. The piñon-juniper ecosystem provides nesting and foraging habitat as well as hiding cover for a variety of wildlife such as; piñon jay, mourning dove and mule deer. Areas having more use such as water tanks/water gaps show small patches of reduced ground cover and forage for ground nesting birds and small rodents. Other species observed in the area are cottontail rabbit, bobcat, coyote, bushtit, and red-tailed hawk. The allotment has neither threatened nor endangered species nor any Forest Service sensitive species. Management Indicator Species that found on the allotment include: Piñón jay, Mourning dove, and Hairy woodpecker.

There is approximately 900 acres of riparian habitat within the allotment. The riparian habitat along the Rio del Oso is in a functioning condition but becomes ephemeral in segments in the allotment during summer months. This portion of the Rio del Oso does not support fish populations.

There are approximately 2.5 miles of Rio Grande cutthroat trout habitat within the Rio del Oso and 5.5 miles of Rio Grande Cutthroat trout habitat within Polvadera Creek. These two creeks fall within the Oso Vallecitos Allotment. The population in Polvadera is managed as a “Core Conservation population” by the State of New

Mexico. Riparian habitat is fully functioning condition within the Rio del Oso and is below optimal condition within Polvadera Creek. However, much of the impacts are outside of this allotment.

Role of the Forest Plan

The 1987 Santa Fe Forest Plan, as amended (Forest Plan) sets the goals and objectives for the management of the Santa Fe National Forest. Goals describe the desired resource condition sometime in the future and are the bases for project-level planning. The standards, guidelines, and management direction contained in the 1987 Forest Plan set parameters with which the project must take place. Approval of any management activity, such as livestock grazing, must be consistent with these parameters (16 U.S.C. 160(i)). The Forest Plan can be found at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/projects/plansReports/index.html>

Grazing activities will be authorized in a manner such that the landscape meets or moves towards goals and objectives in the Forest Plan.

Forest-wide Goals related to this project:

- Emphasize high quality range forage (Forest Plan, p. 19);
- Have the 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).

Forest Plan Standard and Guidelines are permissions or limitations that apply to on-the-ground implementation of management activities. Forest-wide Standard and Guidelines related to grazing can be found on pages 66 – 68 and Appendix D of the Forest Plan. Additional Standards and Guidelines are also applied to specific Management Areas.

Management prescriptions are applied to geographical units on the ground, which are called Management Areas (MA). Each MA has a specific management direction that highlights some of the most important direction. The El Invierno Allotment is located following Management Areas:

<u>Management Area</u>	<u>Acres</u>	<u>Emphasis</u>
MA G (Wildlife-Range-Firewood)	256	Emphasis in this area is on key wildlife habitat protection, habitat improvement, and forage and firewood production. Dispersed recreational opportunities consist of firewood and pinyon nut gathering, hunting, and recreational driving.
MA K (Sensitive Soils and Species)	38,160	The primary emphasis in this area is on protection of sensitive species, ecosystems, and fragile soils. Consistent with this theme, ORV travel will be prohibited, and recreation, grazing, and firewood activities will occur only when compatible with the primary emphasis.
MA D (Recreation – Visual – Timber)	256	Emphasis is on enhancement of visual quality and developed recreation opportunity. Grazing and timber activities occur where consistent with the primary emphasis of this area.

Desired Conditions

Desired conditions are desired characteristics and conditions expected because of prescribed management. They provide a snapshot of what the resource would look like when goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines are met. Desired conditions can apply to the present or future. As previously discussed, an interdisciplinary team identified the desired resource conditions based on the PNC as described in TES.

- Full capacity range sites should be within its range of natural variability, exhibit the biodiversity necessary for a sustainable ecosystem, and be in fully functioning range condition.
- Maintain or move herbaceous species composition and surface components, such as litter and basal vegetative percentages toward site potential.
- Forage species composition should exhibit a suite of species that are appropriate for the site based on the PNC description.
- Satisfactory range conditions with a mid to high similarity to PNC with an upward or static trend.
- Improve livestock distribution and follow rotation schedule to minimize overuse in certain areas. Do not exceed 40% utilization on forage species.
- Control or eliminate non-native and invasive plant populations within the allotment.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and 1995 Rescissions Act, the purpose of this project is to authorize livestock grazing on the El Invierno Grazing Allotment. The NFS lands with the allotment have been identified as suitable for domestic livestock grazing in the Santa Fe Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). It is Forest Service policy to make forage available to qualified livestock operators from lands suitable for grazing consistent with land management plans (FSM 2203.1). Grazing activities will be authorized in a manner such that the landscape meets or moves towards objectives in the Forest Plan:

- Emphasize high quality range forage (Forest Plan, p. 19);
- Have the 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).

Under the current grazing management, the allotments are not fully meeting or moving towards these objectives in a desired timeframe. In order to achieve these objectives, there is a need for:

- Improve range infrastructure to improve rotational grazing;
- Improve existing water developments to enhance livestock distribution; and
- Improve upland range condition within existing key grazing areas.

THE PROPOSED ACTION

The following Proposed Action has been developed to meet the project's purpose and need. The Proposed Action consists of four components: Permitted Livestock, Range Improvements, Adaptive Management, and Monitoring. The proposed action follows current guidance from Forest Service Handbook 2209.13, Chapter 90 (Grazing Permit Administration; Rangeland Management Decisionmaking). The Proposed Action includes the authorization of livestock grazing as a management practice and the required management practices necessary to maintain or achieve desired resource conditions.

The Española Ranger District, Santa Fe National Forest proposes to continue to authorize livestock grazing on the El Invierno Grazing Allotment under the following terms:

Permitted Livestock: Permitted livestock numbers would be authorized up to 2,385 AUM's¹ (303 AU's) under a one herd, rotational grazing system from November 1st to May 23rd. This is the number of AUM's that can be supported during times of favorable climate and resource conditions. The exact number of AUM's authorized to graze on an annual basis would depend upon such things as the ecological condition of the allotment, available water, and forage, condition of structural facilities, range readiness, and predicted forage production for the year. A utilization guideline of conservative use (40% forage utilization as measured at the end of the growing season) would be employed to maintain or improve rangeland vegetation and long term soil productivity.

Range Facilities: In consultation with the grazing permittee's, several range facilities have been identified (Refer to Map) that will further enhance livestock management on the allotment. These range facilities are intended to improve livestock distribution and improve upland rangeland conditions. The following new range facilities have been identified for construction:

- 1.4 miles of new pipeline with water troughs
- Reconstruction of trick tank with new apron and drinker

Adaptive Management: 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. The exact number of AUMs authorized to graze on an annual basis would depend upon such things as the ecological condition of the allotment, available water, and forage production, condition of structural facilities, range readiness, and predicted forage production for the year. Anything less than the full permitted livestock numbers represents a condition in which capable acres and other integral components of the range management (such as water) are producing less than normal.

Monitoring: Monitoring would determine whether the project-level decision is being implemented as planned (implementation monitoring) and, if so, whether the objectives identified in the Forest Plan, Annual Operating Instructions (AOI) and Allotment Management Plan (AMP) are being achieved in a timely manner (effectiveness monitoring). Allotment monitoring would be open, cooperative, and inclusive process with the permittee's. Implementation and effectiveness monitoring are critical to determine when or if adaptive management changes should be made and to guide the direction that those changes take.

If monitoring indicates that desired conditions are not being achieved, management would be modified in consultation with the permittee's. 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 the AOI. This proposal meets the Forestwide standards and guidelines as well as those specific to the Management Areas in the Forest Plan. Monitoring protocols would follow the Interagency Monitoring Technical References (FSM 2206).

DECISION FRAMEWORK

The District Ranger of the Española Ranger District is the deciding official for selecting an alternative for the El Invierno Grazing Allotment. Based on the environmental analysis, Forest Plan direction, and results of public involvement, the Deciding Official must decide whether to proceed with a specific action. If an action alternative is selected, the decision may include mitigation measures in addition to the Forest Plan Standard and Guidelines.

There is a two-part decision to be made for authorizing livestock grazing.

¹ An AUM is the amount of oven-dry forage required by one animal unit for a standardized period of 30 animal unit days. An animal unit is considered one mature cow approximately 1,000 pounds, either dry or with calf up to six months of age, or their equivalent. The average value for animal month is 780 pounds of oven dry forage.

1. Whether livestock grazing should be authorized on all, part, or none of the allotment.
2. If the decision is to authorize some level of livestock grazing, then what management prescriptions will be applied (including standards, guidelines, grazing management, and monitoring) to ensure that desired condition objectives are met or that movement occurs toward those objectives in an acceptable timeframe.

HOW TO COMMENT

This information along with is located on the Santa Fe National Forest Internet at:

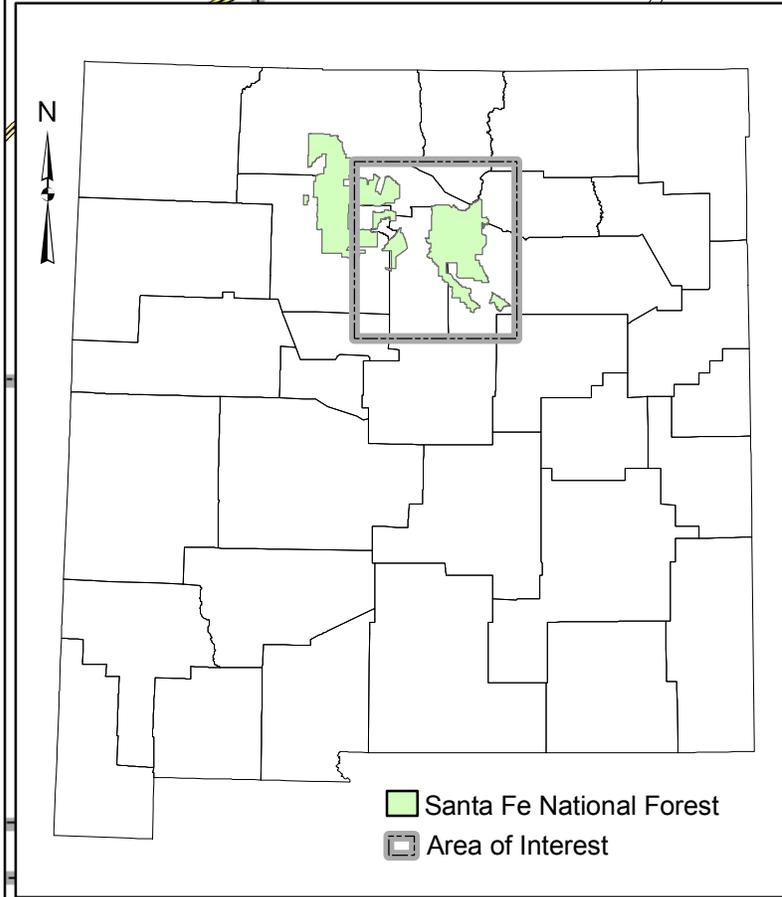
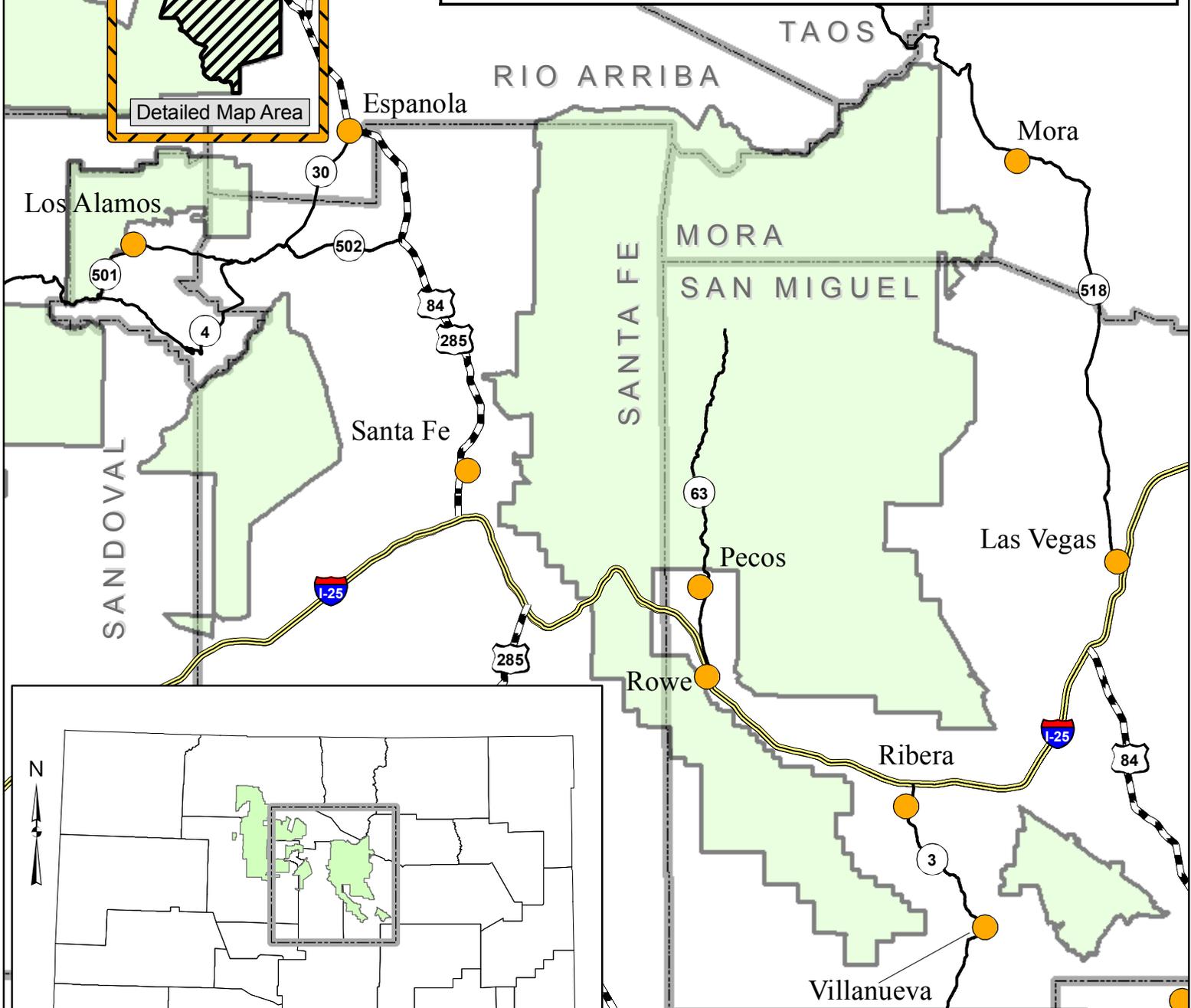
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/projects/index.html> . We invite you to comment on this proposal before the analysis has been completed and a final decision has been made. Please provide site-specific comments that are useful in helping us analyze this proposed project. Comments should be within the scope of the proposed action, specific to the proposed action, have direct relationship to the proposed action, and include supporting reasons why the comments should be considered. Individual and organizations desiring eligibility to appeal must provide the following information.

1. Name and address
2. Title of this project
3. Comments on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that should be considered in reaching a decision; and
4. Signature or other verification of identity upon request

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public records for this proposed action, and will be available for public inspection.

Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decisions pursuant 36 CFR Parts 215

El Invierno Grazing Allotment Vicinity Map



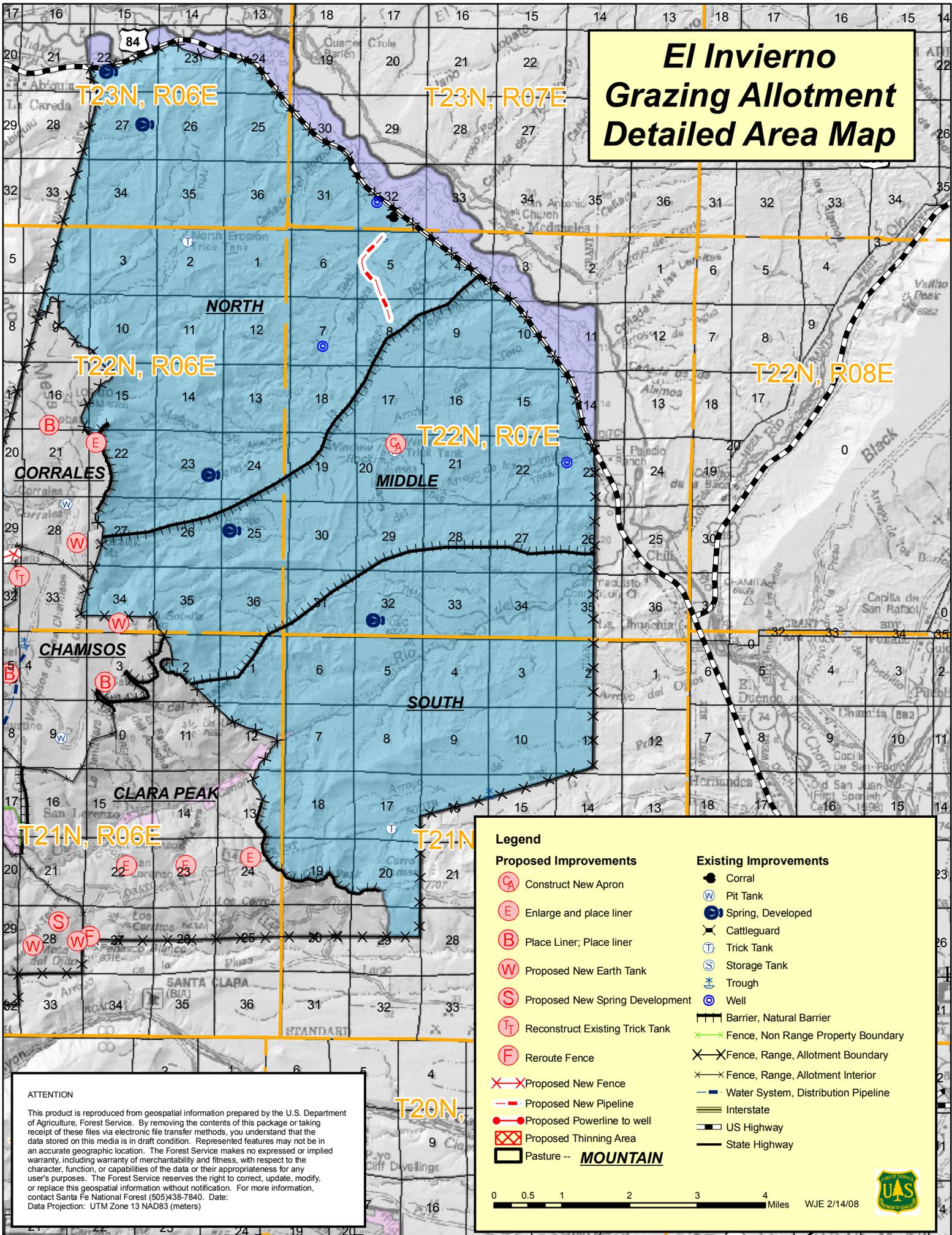
Legend

- City/Town
- Interstate
- US Highway
- State Highway
- El Invierno Grazing Allotment
- Santa Fe National Forest
- County Boundary -- MORA

0 2.5 5 10 15 20 Miles



El Invierno Grazing Allotment Detailed Area Map



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Legend

Proposed Improvements		Existing Improvements	
	Construct New Apron		Corral
	Enlarge and place liner		Pit Tank
	Place Liner; Place liner		Spring, Developed
	Proposed New Earth Tank		Cattleguard
	Proposed New Spring Development		Trick Tank
	Reconstruct Existing Trick Tank		Storage Tank
	Reroute Fence		Trough
	Proposed New Fence		Well
	Proposed New Pipeline		Barrier, Natural Barrier
	Proposed Powerline to well		Fence, Non Range Property Boundary
	Proposed Thinning Area		Fence, Range, Allotment Boundary
	Pasture -- MOUNTAIN		Fence, Range, Allotment Interior
			Water System, Distribution Pipeline
			Interstate
			US Highway
			State Highway

0 0.5 1 2 3 4 Miles WJE 2/14/08

