



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Santa Fe National Forest

Espanola Ranger District
P.O. Box 3307, Fairview Station
1710 N. Riverside Dr.
Espanola, New Mexico 87533
505-753-7331 FAX 505-753-9411

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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Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service



Santa Fe
National Forest,
Region 3

March 2008

SCOPING REPORT FOR THE OSO VALLECITOS 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 Oso Vallecitos allotment comprises approximately 44,860 acres of National Forest System lands (NFS) on the Santa Fe National Forest, located in T. 21 & 22 N., R. 5 - 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) and L (Semi-Primitive, Non-Motorized Recreation), K (Sensitive Soils and Species), E (Dispersed Recreation-Visual/Timber).

There are currently 12 permits issued on the allotment totaling 573 Cow/calf pairs yearlong. The grazing system is a three-herd, eight pasture rotational system. There are numerous existing range facilities within the allotment including four corrals, 14 earthen tanks, three miles of pipeline, three storage tanks and over 55 miles of fence.

The landscape has steeply sloping, sharp-crested mountains dissected by many narrow stream valleys; high plateaus with steep-walled canyons are common. 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. Soils formed about equally in areas of volcanic ash flows, lavas, sandstones, siltstones, shale, and carbonates (McNabb et al 2007). Vegetative community types consist largely of piñón - juniper (30%), mixed conifer (13 %), Ponderosa pine (20 %), Douglas-Fir (10 %), Aspen (5 %), and open grasslands (8 %).

The allotment falls within the Polvadero Creek, Abiquiu Creek, and Rio del Oso Subwatersheds (HUC 130201021004, 130201021202 & 130201021602, respectively). There is approximately 18 miles of perennial streams and 93 miles of intermittent drainages within the allotment. The main perennial streams are Abiquiu Creek, Vallecitos, Rito del Oso and Polvadera Creeks The majority of the allotment drains into the Rio Chama River which is 5 to 7 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 24 % 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). Approximately 4 % has potential capacity. 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 were conducted in 1949, 1973 and 1978. The range analysis indicated that the majority of the allotment was in poor to fair condition with a downward to static trend. Production – utilization studies conducted in several pasture in the early 1970's indicated majority of the full capacity range sites received moderate to heavy utilization.

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.

In 2007, cover/frequency inventories were conducted in the Corrales, Chamisos, Vallecitos, and Gallina Mesa pastures. The data 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 lower elevations of the allotment are exceeding production by over 15% what is identified as maximum forage potential for the sites, however forage production collected in capable areas in higher elevations suggest production is 25% below of maximum forage potential for the site. This information is being used to determine use patterns, species composition, ground cover, and species frequency. 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 Soils on the steeper slopes are generally shallow, moderate fine textured, and contain a high percentage of coarse fragments. Mesa tops, plateaus, and lava flows have soils that are shallow to moderately deep, and moderately coarse to medium textured. Soils productivity is relatively low at the lower elevations. Approximately 96 % of the soils are rated satisfactory, 3 % are impaired. 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 50 % having a severe erosion rating. Rills, 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.

The New Mexico Environmental Department has listed Polvadera and Abiquiu Creeks as impaired streams due to possible sedimentation, siltation or dissolved oxygen. Probable sources of impairment include livestock grazing, OHV use and loss of riparian habitat (<http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/swqb/303d-305b>).

In 2005, a landscape – scale assessment was conducted on the Rio del Oso and Rio Chama Watersheds. The purpose of the assessment was to describe the current conditions in relation to patterns in land use, identify management changes or practices of critical resources to protect and restore the watershed and to assist in changes for ecosystem restoration. Several issues and recommendation were identified in the assessment related to livestock grazing based on current and referenced conditions. Some of the recommendations include:

- Prevent erosion and the degradation of riparian areas resulting from livestock grazing using best management practices (BMP's).
- Address current and potential nonpoint sources of pollution in and near impaired waters using best BMP's.
- Prevent new infestations of non-native and invasive plant species, and reduce or eliminate infestation of tamarisk, Siberian elm, and Russian knapweed.
- Balance the livestock grazing requirements with the dietary needs of wild ungulate populations (i.e. Rock Mountain elk).

Wildlife and Fisheries: Terrestrial wildlife habitat is in functioning condition throughout the allotment. The ponderosa pine and piñon-juniper ecosystem provides nesting and foraging habitat as well as hiding cover for a variety of wildlife such as; pinyon jay, elk 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 black bear, cottontail rabbit, red-tailed hawk, mountain bluebird, and Steller's jay.

The allotment has no threatened or endangered species. Forest Service sensitive species that occur or have habitat on or near the allotment are: Northern leopard frog, cinereus (masked shrew), dwarf shrew, water shrew, spotted bat, southern red-backed, western heather vole, long-tailed vole, and ermine. Management Indicator Species that occur are: Merriam's Turkey, Pinyon jay, Mourning dove, Hairy woodpecker, and elk.

The Oso fire of 1998 burned several hundred acres in the allotment that created forage and snags for wildlife. Prescribed burns during the mid-late 1990's in the lower elevation Blanco area west of Clara Peak improved elk winter range.

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 1986 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 Oso Vallecitos Allotment is located following Management Areas:

<u>Management Area</u>	<u>Acres</u>	<u>Emphasis</u>
MA G (Wildlife-Range-Firewood)	17,242	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)	4,119	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 E (Disperse Recreation – Visual – Timber)	16,743	Emphasis is on providing dispersed recreation opportunities, maintaining visual quality and timber and firewood production. Grazing activities vary in intensity over this area. Emphasis is on maintenance or enhancement of wildlife habitat diversity.
MA L (Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized Recreation)	6,466	Emphasis is on providing semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities. Wildlife, range, and fuels management may occur where consistent with this emphasis. Timber harvest and road building are not consistent with this emphasis, and none are scheduled within this planning period. These areas will receive priority in dispersed recreation management, trail and trailhead development, and trail maintenance.

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 Oso Vallecitos Grazing Allotment. The NFS lands within the allotment have been identified as suitable for domestic livestock grazing in the 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).

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 to:

- Improve range infrastructure to improve rotational grazing;
- Improve exiting water developments to enhance livestock distribution;
- 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 Oso Vallecitos Grazing Allotment under the following terms:

Permitted Livestock: Permitted livestock numbers would be authorized up to 4,601 AUMs¹ (573 AU's) under a one heard - deferred rotational grazing system from May 1st to October 31st. This is the number of AUMs that can be supported during times of favorable climate and 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, 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 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.

- 0.7 miles of new pasture fence
- 22 new earthen tanks
- Six existing earthen tanks to be enlarged and lined
- Reconstruction of two storage tanks with aprons

Adaptive Management: The Proposed Action is adaptive, allowing the Forest Service and the livestock permittee’s 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. 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 AOIs. 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 Caja del Rio 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. 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

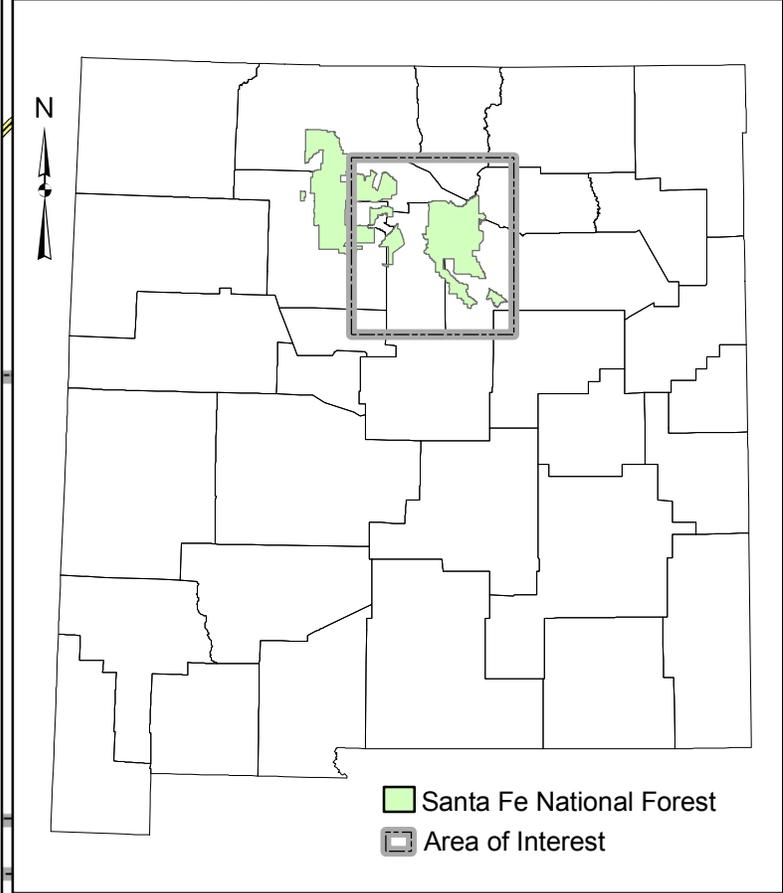
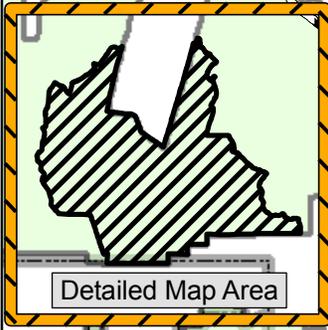
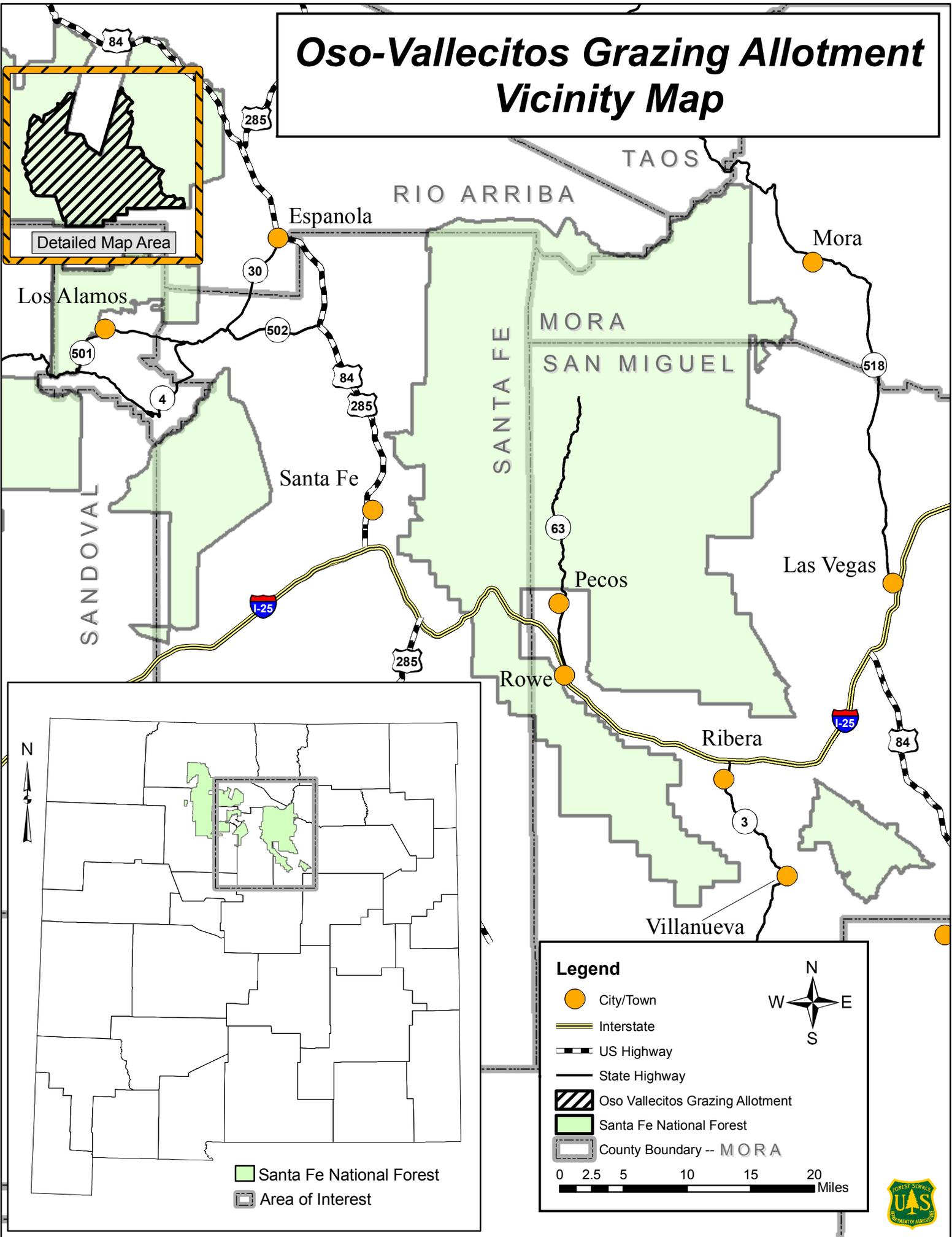
This information along with is located on the Santa Fe National Forest Internet at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/projects/index.html> . We invite you to comment on this proposal before the analysis has been completed and a final decision has been made. Please provide site-specific comments that are useful 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.

Oso-Vallecitos Grazing Allotment Vicinity Map



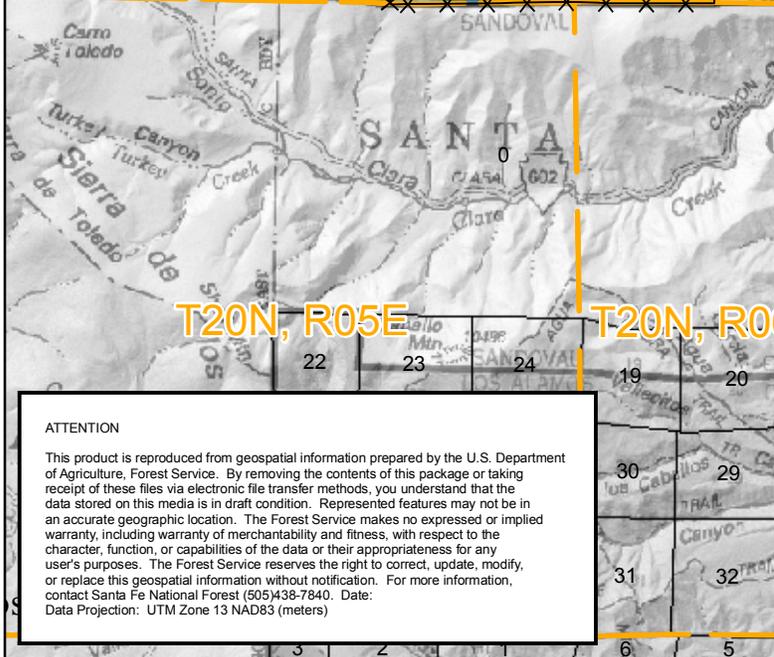
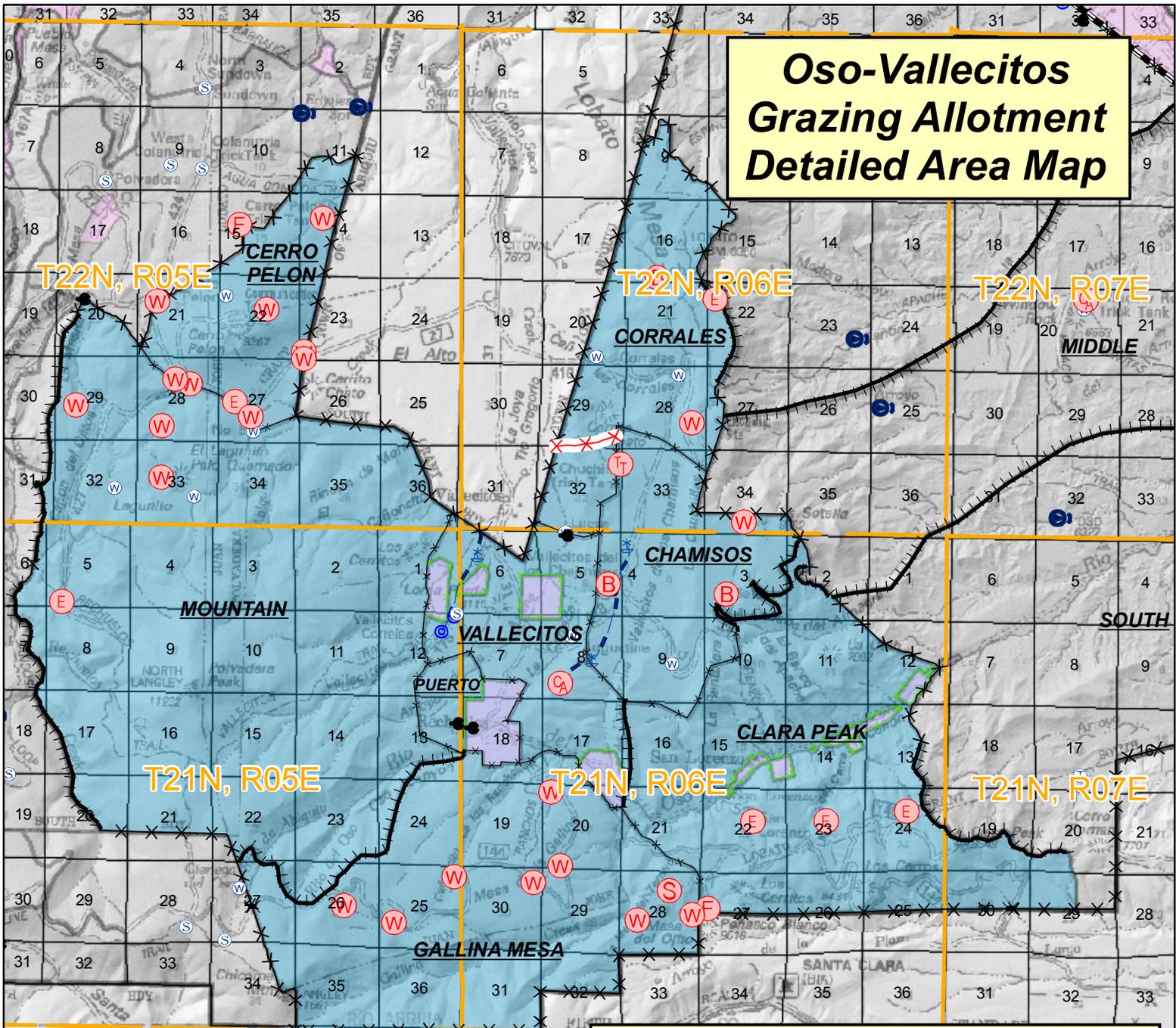
Legend

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

0 2.5 5 10 15 20 Miles



Oso-Vallecitos Grazing Allotment Detailed Area Map



ATTENTION

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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
Pasture -- MOUNTAIN	Fence, Range, Allotment Boundary
	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

