

Willow Creek Cattle Allotment Proposed Action Report

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1 Introduction

The Willow Creek Cattle Allotment is scheduled for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis to comply with direction contained in the Rescission Act of 1995. The act requires the Forest Service to complete NEPA analyses on all allotments where needed to authorize permitted grazing activity. No prior NEPA analysis and decision on livestock grazing within this allotment has been completed and thus this action is needed to meet Rescission Act requirements.

While most proposed actions undergoing NEPA analysis involve new land management activities or substantial changes to ongoing activities, there is no known need for the Willow Creek proposed action to include any changes to the existing grazing management. Over the years, the grazing permit and annual operating instructions have incorporated numerous incremental changes in management direction to improve livestock management and protect resources. Because the grazing management on the Willow Creek Allotment has been continuously revised to reflect direction contained in the Inland Native Fish Strategy (INFISH), the Boise National Forest bull trout biological opinion and the revised Boise National Forest Plan, there are no known urgent problems necessitating specific management changes.

2 Location

The Willow Creek Allotment is located on the Mountain Home Ranger District, Boise National Forest within Elmore County approximately 15 miles east of Boise, Idaho. The allotment is within the drainage tributaries of Arrowrock Reservoir and South Fork of the Boise River. The allotment encompasses approximately 31,270 acres of National Forest System land. There are inholdings within the allotment boundary consisting of approximately 4,540 acres of State of Idaho land and approximately 2,700 acres of private property. These non-National Forest System lands are not included in this action.

The principal access route is from the south via the Danskin Lookout Road (Forest Road 167). Access is available from the north by way of the Black Creek Road (Forest Road 115). The legal description of the allotment is T2N, R6E, Sections 2-36 and T2N, R5E, Sections 1, 2, 10-16, 20-29, 36 and T1N, R6E, Sections 1-11, 14, 15, 22, 23, Boise Meridian, Elmore County, Idaho.

3 Background Information

The Willow Creek Allotment along with the rest of the area known as the Danskin Mountains, or simply the Danskins, has been used for grazing since the time of the westward migration along the Oregon Trail. The area received unrestricted use by cattle, sheep, and horses prior to 1930.

In 1929, the Willow Creek drainage (the heart of the current Willow Creek Allotment) was included in the Arrowrock Reclamation withdrawal and was added to the Boise National Forest in 1934. In 1961, the first rest-rotation type system was implemented, but common use (grazing sheep and cattle together) continued until 1967. The original five-pasture rest-rotation grazing system was revised into a four-pasture system in 1969. Because one of the pastures was more than two-thirds privately owned and that permittee was taking non-use, the four-pasture system was managed as a three-pasture system. In 1976, the four-pasture system was changed to the three-pasture rest rotation system. The existing Allotment Management Plan was last updated in March of 1989 and also called for a three-pasture rest-rotation system. This system was changed to a three-pasture deferred rotation system in 1996 due in part to a land exchange with the State Department of Lands, which removed a large portion of one pasture from federal ownership.

Since the early 1970s this allotment has had permanent site analysis and monitoring transects to:

- 1) Evaluate the rest rotation system of grazing and determine if the system is accomplishing the desired objectives;
- 2) Solidify tentative grazing capacity estimates; and
- 3) Determine if the grazing system is satisfying the multiple use coordination requirements of grazing with other resource uses.

The 640-acre Raspberry Gulch Research Natural Area (RNA) is located within the Willow Creek allotment boundary and was established to provide high quality representation of mid-seral old growth Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine forest, big sagebrush shrubland and bluebunch wheatgrass grassland. The RNA is closed to livestock grazing, though it is recognized that some incidental grazing use does occur within its boundary. The establishment record for the RNA directs that existing fencing, natural barriers and active permittee riding should effectively eliminate or prevent livestock grazing at any detrimental level to RNA objectives.

Most of the Willow Creek allotment burned in the 1992 Foothills wildfire. This was a hot, intense fire that burned off virtually all vegetation within the allotment boundary. The area was seeded with sagebrush and grasses in the winter of 1992 and no livestock were grazed on the allotment for two years following the fire. Grazing was reintroduced gradually and reached the current level five years after the fire.

4 Purpose and Need

The need for this action is to comply with the Rescission Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-19) which directed the Forest Service to complete NEPA analysis and decisions on all allotments where needed and to incorporate relevant management direction to meet agency objectives. Livestock grazing on this allotment has no prior NEPA analysis. While relevant management direction has been incorporated into the grazing permit and annual operating instructions over the years, a site-specific analysis and decision on the allotment and grazing activities have never been completed.

The objectives of the action are to do the following:

1. Comply with Public Law 104-19, Section 504(a), which requires the Forest Service to complete NEPA analyses on all allotments where needed to authorize permitted grazing activity.
2. Authorize continued livestock use within the project area under updated management direction to achieve management objectives and move existing resource conditions towards desired conditions.

5 Proposed Action

The proposed action is to issue a term grazing permit to continue to authorize livestock grazing consistent with Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, Management Prescriptions, and Monitoring Requirements.

The grazing permit and annual operating instructions would continue to authorize 449 cow/calf pairs for a grazing season of use from June 1 through October 31, with some flexibility allowed for weather conditions, range readiness, and livestock needs. If the forage is fully utilized or the Forest Service determines that further grazing will damage the resources, the permittee may be required to remove livestock early. A three-pasture grazing system, in which the first pasture is managed under a three-unit deferred-rotation system in conjunction with state lands contained within the allotment boundary, would continue to be used. The pastures associated with the Willow Creek allotment are shown on the attached map.

The proposed action would continue to allow forage utilization at the level allowed under the Boise National Forest Plan as follows. Maximum forage utilization of representative areas within each pasture would not exceed the values shown at the end of growing season.

- Riparian Areas: Maximum 45 percent use or retain a minimum 4-inch stubble height of hydric greenline species, whichever occurs first.

- Upland Vegetative Cover Types: Early season or season long pastures – 40 percent use. Vegetative slow growth, after seed ripe conditions, or late season pastures – 50 percent use.

The proposed action includes continued monitoring of the allotment through grazing permit administration, which includes forage utilization monitoring and inspections of range improvements (water developments, fences, corrals, etc.) as needed.

6 Forest Plan Direction

The Boise National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) determined the National Forest System lands within the Willow Creek Allotment are both suitable and capable for livestock grazing. The Forest Plan also contains direction for proper management of livestock grazing within the area of the Willow Creek Allotment. That direction provides for a sustainable level of forage, consistent with other resource management direction, and forage is available for use through the Forest Service grazing permit system. The Forest Plan directs that in areas where vegetation management projects and range management actions occur, rangeland forage quality is maintained or improved. This direction makes riparian areas the focal point for providing vegetative diversity; landscape capability, soil productivity, wildlife habitat, and proper stream channel function and water quality important to sustaining beneficial uses. The direction also insures that riparian areas are functioning properly and/or have improving trends in vegetative composition, age class structure, and vigor. Upland range vegetation is contributing to proper hydrologic function. The composition and densities of shrubs, grasses and forbs are variable and dynamic across the landscape.

The Willow Creek Allotment is located in Management Area 1, Lower South Fork Boise River.

Most of the allotment is in the 4.1c Management Prescription Category (Undeveloped Recreation: Maintain Unroaded Character with Allowance for Restoration Activities). This prescription applies to lands where dispersed recreation uses are the primary emphasis. Providing dispersed recreation opportunities in an unroaded landscape is the predominant objective. Both motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities may be provided. Other resource uses are allowed to the extent that they do not compromise recreation opportunity settings. The area has a predominantly natural-appearing environment, with slight evidence of the sights and sounds of people.

The remainder of the allotment is in the 6.1 Management Prescription Category (Restoration and Maintenance Emphasis within Shrubland and Grassland Landscapes). This prescription applies to lands that are predominantly (> 50 percent) shrubland and grassland. Emphasis is on restoring and maintaining vegetation within desired conditions in order to provide a diversity of habitats, reduced risk from disturbance events, and sustainable resources for human use. The full range of treatment activities may be used. Restoration occurs through management activities and succession. Combinations of mechanical and fire treatments are used to restore shrubland and grassland areas while maintaining or improving resources such as soils, water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreation settings. The risk of temporary and short-term degrading effects

to the environment are minimized, but impacts may occur within acceptable limits as resources are managed to achieve long-term goals and objectives.

7 Further Information

For further information on the proposal and how to submit comments, please contact Tina Ruffing, Project Leader, or Jane Beaulieu, District Planner, Mountain Home District Ranger at 208-587-7961 or email truffing@fs.fed.us or jbeaulieu@fs.fed.us.

Willow Creek Cattle and Horse Allotment Vicinity Map

