

**Statement of
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**Before the
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
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Hearing on the Forest Service Grazing Program

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to present the subcommittee with an overview of grazing management in the Forest Service. The Forest Service has been managing rangelands for nearly 100 years, and has a long history of partnerships with livestock producers who rely upon National Forest System (NFS) lands. Livestock grazing on National Forests reserved from the public domain is administered under a number of statutes, including the Granger-Thye Act of 1950, the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, among others. These laws augment the authority in the Organic Act of 1897, which established the National Forests and directed the agency to regulate the use and occupancy of the forests to protect them from destruction.

Today, there are grazing allotments on nearly half of all National Forest System lands, approximately 90 million acres of land in 34 states. The Forest Service administers approximately 8800 allotments, with over 9000 livestock permits, and about 9.7 million animal unit months of grazing by cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. Nearly all this permitted grazing is located in the Western states (99%), with only about one percent occurring in the Eastern forests.

Grazing Permit Administration

On June 25, 2003, before this Subcommittee, the Administration testified about the Forest Service's progress to implement Section 504 of Public Law 104-19 (the "Rescissions Act"). Section 504 directed the Chief to identify grazing allotments that needed NEPA analysis and to "establish and adhere to" a schedule for the completion of that analysis. The end date established in the schedule was 2010. The Rescissions Act was needed because the Forest Service faced a daunting challenge in 1995 to complete the NEPA process on 6,886 allotments, with approximately ½ of these Forest Service grazing permits due to expire.

The 2003 Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, Public Law 108-7 (as amended by the 2003 Emergency Wartime Supplemental Appropriations Act) directed the Secretary of Agriculture to renew grazing permits for those permittees whose permits expired prior to or during fiscal year 2003, as the Forest Service was behind the schedule established for the Rescissions Act and was dealing with pending lawsuits. NEPA analyses will still have to be completed on these allotments and the terms and conditions of the renewed grazing permit will remain in effect until such time as the analysis is completed.

The 2004 Interior Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-108) further directed the Secretary to renew grazing permits that expired are transferred or waived between 2004 and 2008, and directed the Secretary to report to Congress beginning in November 2004, and every two years thereafter, the extent to which analysis required under applicable laws is being completed prior to the expiration of grazing permits.

As the years have progressed, the Forest Service has continued to complete NEPA analyses on those grazing allotments that are listed on the schedule. As of February 2004, approximately 2300 allotments have NEPA analysis completed. An additional 368 allotments are scheduled for completion of NEPA analysis this fiscal year. The Forest Service remains committed to completing the environmental analysis on the remaining allotments by the 2010 deadline without disrupting permitted livestock grazing activities. In May 2004, I submitted a letter to Regional Foresters outlining this commitment and we are on track to report to Congress in November on our progress.

Grazing Permit Efficiencies

The Department has testified previously before this Subcommittee that the current decision-making procedures to authorize livestock grazing or other activities on rangelands administered by the Forest Service are inflexible, unwieldy, time-consuming, and expensive. For several years, the Forest Service has evaluated alternative procedures that would satisfy our legal obligations, provide the agency with management flexibility, shorten the decision-making time, and reduce the cost to the taxpayer associated with rangeland management decisions. The agency is continuing dialogue with our colleagues at the Bureau of Land Management and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to discuss the challenges of complying with NEPA in a timely and effective manner. In addition, the agency is working on methods of prioritization through the development and use of qualitative tools that assess rangeland health and sustainability through the use of indicators that are linked to existing monitoring data.

Efficient and Effective NEPA Analysis and Rangeland Decisions

This year the Forest Service updated and clarified direction in the Forest Service Handbook dealing with rangeland management decision-making and how NEPA is implemented. The direction clarifies existing policies on how to develop efficient and effective range NEPA and apply adaptive management on a given allotment and highlights successful practices currently in use that can serve to extend the life of the NEPA document. This new directive will help the agency move forward in completing environmental analysis in an expedited manner on those allotments still remaining on the 1996 Rescission Act schedule.

With this updated process adaptive management is built into the proposed action by defining the maximum limits of what will be allowed on the grazing allotment in terms of the appropriate timing, intensity, frequency, and duration of livestock grazing. Standards are set that can be checked with implementation monitoring to determine if prescribed actions have been followed or if management changes are needed. Carefully focused monitoring will allow for adjustments.

Monitoring

The ecological conditions of rangelands often affect the social and economic stability of many rural communities. To assure these lands are capable of providing sustainable products for

future generations, the ecological conditions of these lands are monitored against specific standards. Implementation and effectiveness monitoring are the two types of monitoring that the Agency uses. Implementation monitoring is an annual measurement of rangeland resources, such as vegetation use, to assure permit compliance with written instructions. Effectiveness monitoring is long-term (5-6 years) where rangeland resources are monitored to assess whether prescriptions and objectives set forth in Forest Plans, allotment management plans or other relevant documents are being met.

Some National Forests and National Grasslands have established programs that encourage the grazing permittee to conduct much of the implementation monitoring. In some instances the permittee, working in conjunction with the Forest Service, other Federal agencies, universities and rangeland consultants, has developed a successful, collaborative monitoring program.

An example of this type of effort is in the Southwestern Region where the Forest Service is developing cooperative agreements with New Mexico State University and the University of Arizona focused on collaborative monitoring. The goal of the agreements is to utilize expertise at State institutions to help the agency develop monitoring strategies for rangelands. For example, the agreement with the University of Arizona will focus on improving monitoring data collection and analysis related to natural resource management; developing collaborative opportunities between the Forest Service and non-governmental entities and organizations to monitor the ecological trends of national forest rangelands in Arizona; establishing uniform monitoring protocols that everyone understands; enhancing data collection processes, training, and reporting methods; and increasing the number of national forest allotments being monitored.

The Forest Service has worked with industry representatives over the years regarding implementation and effectiveness monitoring. This year we signed a national Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Public Lands Council of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) for the implementation of a cooperative rangeland monitoring program. This program establishes a framework for voluntary, collaborative work between grazing permittees and the Forest Service to improve the quality and quantity of short- and long-term allotment level monitoring on National Forest System rangelands.

Also, the Forest Service and NCBA in April 2004 signed a joint letter that was delivered to Forest Service personnel and permittees requesting volunteers to establish pilots for cooperative monitoring under this MOU to facilitate the process and lead the way for others to follow. This is a great opportunity for both entities to collaborate on long-term goals and objectives for rangeland resources.

The House report accompanying the Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2002 directed the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture to prepare a report on how the Departments would address the long-term monitoring, ecological classification of vegetation and soil survey work which is needed to efficiently address rangeland conditions. This report is still being drafted.

Drought

For the past 6 to 8 years drought has persisted over much of the Western United States. Predictions for this year call for more dry weather throughout most of the West. Although there has been some winter and spring precipitation over wide areas, in particular in New Mexico, Arizona, and the Southern Rockies, much of the West continues to have a significant water deficit. It will take a number of years of higher than average rainfall to recover from the drought. In 2002 and 2003, significant reductions in grazing use on National Forest System lands occurred throughout the West and the Western Great Plains. Although it is still too early to know the full effects of the drought, reductions in grazing use for 2004 could still occur.

The Forest Service has actively coordinated drought management with Federal, State, and local government agencies and officials. The agency is actively participating on national, State, and local drought task forces coordinating drought relief to our permittees. We are working closely with industry representatives to provide up-front information about what we are doing and seeking input from them.

Locally, the Forest Service is managing drought impacts on a case-by-case basis. Local officials are communicating early to ensure the permittee is informed and has enough time to implement temporary

changes or a long-term strategy. The Agency is coordinating with universities and user groups to best address the concerns at the local level.

Collaboration Efforts

The Forest Service has been working with our partners in the livestock industry to improve coordination and communication, in particular since the drought has affected rangelands in the Interior West and Southwest. The agency recognizes that ranching is an important component of the economies of many western rural communities as well as the contribution of livestock production.

Recently, a unit in the Forest Service implemented a different process to work with the ranching community to incorporate the values and economic needs of the ranching industry consistent with sound range administration. Over the years, as the drought and other range management issues have increased, reductions in the number of livestock that could be sustained on Federal lands has been seriously reduced due to very little forage or water. On the Tonto National Forest in Arizona, this has meant up to an 80% reduction of annual grazing use has occurred. As livestock were removed, the agency recognized that a process needed to be developed to ensure all parties interested in grazing management were involved in coordinating the restocking of allotments when conditions allowed livestock to return.

Through a collaborative effort between the Forest Service (the Tonto National Forest and the Southwestern Region), the Arizona Cattle Growers Association, and the Gila County Cattle Growers Association, the Tonto Restocking Process was developed to allow the return of livestock as drought conditions improved. Implementation of this process reaffirms the Forest Service's commitment to multiple-use management. The process offers an opportunity to rebuild trust between the agency and the ranching industry and provides a broader perspective for the agency to administer National Forest lands collaboratively with important forest stakeholders.

Invasive Species

Rangelands are an important component of ecosystem diversity at a national scale. Key factors to rangeland health are sustainable use and proper management. The Forest Service works with other land managers to ensure rangelands are productive for current and future use.

Invasive species has been identified by the Chief of the Forest Service as one of the four significant threats to our Nation's forest and rangeland ecosystems. Invasive species have been characterized as a "catastrophic wildfire in slow motion." Thousands of invasive plants, insects, and other species have infested hundreds of million of acres of land and water across the Nation, causing massive disruption to ecosystem function, reducing biodiversity, and degrading ecosystem health. Invasive organisms not only affect the health of America's forests and rangelands but also the health of wildlife, livestock, fish, and humans.

To address its role in this issue the Forest Service recently assessed its capacity in forest research and forest and rangeland health. The agency has found the best opportunity for contributing to success is managing the agency's invasive species efforts will come from working strategically using all of our scientific, management, and partnership resources. Soon, the Forest Service will release a National Strategy and Implementation Plan for Invasive Species which will outline short and long term goals for their management and control. The agency is working collaboratively with our partners to improve the capacity for handling invasive species across landscapes and streamline procedures so actions can be taken quickly before the invasion spreads rapidly.

As the agency implements this national strategy, our actions will be proactive rather than reactive, holistic across multiple jurisdictions and ownerships, and collaborative in nature. Invasive species management is more than just a forest or rangeland issue, it is an ecosystem and biodiversity issue, and therefore the Forest Service will work with all who are interested to help promote the eradication or control of invasives wherever they occur.

This concludes my statement. I want to thank the Committee for their interest in rangeland management in the Forest Service. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.