

PROJECT SCOPING STATEMENT

Thunder Basin Grazing Association Conservation Projects

USDA Forest Service
Douglas Ranger District
Medicine Bow/Routt National Forests
And Thunder Basin National Grasslands
Converse County, Wyoming

INTRODUCTION

The United States Forest Service and the Thunder Basin Grazing Association entered into a Cooperative Grazing Agreement on August 23, 2002. This agreement is for a period of ten (10) years, and permits the grazing of livestock owned by members of the grazing association in allotments and pastures on federal lands on the Thunder Basin National Grassland.

The Gorsuch pasture in the Steinle allotment, which lies along the Steinle road north of Bill, WY is located in T. 39 N, R. 40 W Section 33. The pasture is 640 acres, all of which is National Grasslands. The type of livestock permitted is “cow/calf pairs.” Grazing usually occurs seasonally and annually from 10/1 to 11/7. The Gorsuch pasture is part of the Highlight-Bill Geographic Area and is placed in Management Area 6.1, Rangeland with Broad Resource Emphasis.

The Featherstone pasture in the Stoddard Allotment is also north and east of Bill, WY, and lies in T 38 N, R. 70 W. The allotment, which has both the Steinle and Dull Center roads pass through its acreage, is made up of 2720 National Grassland acres. “Cow/calf pairs” in a deferred grazing system has the Featherstone pasture used either in the late spring, summer, or fall. This pasture is also in the Highlight-Bill Geographic Area and Management Area 6.1, Rangeland with Broad Resource Emphasis

The M-Creek and Upper Antelope grazing pastures of the Fiddleback allotment are located along the Steckley Road northeast of Bill, WY. The pastures lie within T. 40 N, R. 70 W, and T. 40 N, R. 69 W. The M-Creek pasture includes 12,799 total acres of which 11,559 are National Grasslands. The type of livestock permitted in the pasture is “cow-calf pairs.” Grazing usually occurs seasonally and annually from 07/01 to 08/30. The pasture lies in Management Area 3.65 (rangelands with diverse natural-appearing landscapes), with approximately 6,000 acres in an inventoried roadless area. The Upper Antelope pasture consists of 3106 total acres, with 2782 grassland acres in the black-footed ferret reintroduction management area. Grazing usually occurs seasonally and annually with “cow-calf pairs” from 6/15 to 7/8, with a change in season every third year from 9/1 to 9/25.

The purpose of your receipt of this project scoping statement and the invitation to comment on the proposed action is to provide you with an opportunity for early and meaningful participation in the environmental analysis of the following proposal prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. Those persons who provide substantive comments now about this project will be eligible to appeal the decision if that decision is appealable under the regulations.

PROPOSED ACTION

The District Ranger has received a request from the Thunder Basin Grazing Association (TBGA) to drill livestock water wells on National Grassland administered by the USFS in T. 38 N, R. 70 W, Section 24 (Stoddard allotment), T. 39 N, R. 70 W, Section 33 (Steinle allotment), and T. 40 N, R. 70 W, Section 12 (Fiddleback allotment). The proposed improvements involve drilling three water wells and installing four (4) livestock water tanks. The Fiddleback well would also involve installing one (1) water storage tank and constructing less than 1/4 mile of water pipeline from a well site in the Upper Antelope pasture in order to provide an upland water source in the M Creek pasture (see attached map). These improvements will be installed using machinery for trenching pipeline, drilling, and hauling materials. The total land area that would be disturbed during the placement of improvements is estimated to be 1 acre. Improvements would be completed over the next two years depending on the amount of Association Conservation Practices monies that are available.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

There is a *need* within the Gorsuch, Featherstone, and Upper Antelope/M Creek pastures to establish more efficient and reliable livestock water sources. Better water sources could aid in domestic livestock grazing distribution in the allotments, which could help the structure of the vegetation better reflect the desired conditions described in the Thunder Basin National Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan (2-2 – 2-4; 2-21 – 2-23).

Objectives for the Highlight Bill Geographic Area, where the Gorsuch and Featherstone pastures lie, call for 45 to 55% moderate vegetation structure. *Objectives* for the Broken Hills Geographic Area, where the Upper Antelope and M Creek pastures lie, call for 40 to 50 % moderate vegetation structure. With additional water sources, the distribution of cattle away from existing water sources could be achieved, which may move some existing seral conditions to better meet structure objectives.

The current pasture improvements do not lend themselves to enhancing the vegetation structure described in the Grassland Plan. The Gorsuch pasture has a well that has caved in and not functional, and the Featherstone pasture relies on reservoirs in the northern half of the pasture for its water. The current distribution of forage utilization and the location of water sources leave some areas of the pastures under utilized, while sites around current water sources are over utilized.

National Grassland water sources in the Upper Antelope pasture consist of two stock reservoirs and Antelope Creek. Areas close to Antelope Creek receive heavy use, since the most reliable water sources are located on the north side of the pasture. On National Grassland, the M Creek pasture has nine stock reservoirs, and four wells, of which two are artesian. Forage utilization is not well distributed since few of the reservoirs are reliable water sources. Cattle also congregate on the M Creek drainage, where the two artesian wells are located. Currently, no upland water sources exist on upland sites in the east part of the pasture to hold livestock in these areas.

These well projects could establish reliable water sources in parts of the pastures that have been dependent on reservoirs in the past. Upland water sources in the Fiddleback pastures could also be a management tool for improving cottonwood regeneration in riparian and woody draw areas of concern. Implementing the proposal to create three new water sources for livestock, can serve the *purpose* of better distributing grazing use and forage utilization which may move key vegetation areas in the pastures toward the desired condition as described in the Grassland Plan.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Both the Gorsuch and Featherstone pastures are located on fairly level plains. The vegetation type is typically a mix of sagebrush and grassland. All federal lands in the allotments and pastures are permitted for livestock grazing and are also used by hunters, and other recreational users.

The Land and Resource Management Plan for the Thunder Basin National Grassland (2002) describes this area as being located in Management Area 6.1, which aims to manage for a variety of ecological conditions and human resource needs. All 3360 grassland acres in the pastures fall within this Management Area.

The Grassland Plan also places this area in the Highlight Bill Geographic Area. Desired conditions for this Geographic Area allow for more facility development in the form of range improvements and mineral exploration.

The M Creek pasture is located on the rolling to steep topography of the Red Hills. The Upper Antelope pasture has the Red Hills on the south side of the pasture with level plains sloping into the Antelope Creek drainage. Vegetation type for both pastures consists of sagebrush and grassland, with cottonwoods being the dominant woody vegetation along perennial and ephemeral streams. All federal lands in the Fiddleback allotment and pastures are permitted for livestock grazing and are used by hunters and other recreational users.

The Fiddleback project area lies on the border of two management areas as described in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Thunder Basin National Grassland (2002). Part of this area is located in Management Area 3.63, which aims at managing black-tailed prairie dog colony complexes to create or maintain suitable reintroduction

habitat for black-footed ferrets. All 2782 acres of National Grassland in the Upper Antelope pasture fall within this T & E species Management Area.

The M Creek pasture contains the other part of the project area and consists of 11,559 National Grassland acres in Management Area 3.65. The focus of this management area is to maintain or restore a diversity of desired plants, animals, and ecological processes in a natural appearing environment.

The Fiddleback project areas lies in the Broken Hills Geographic Area as described in the Grassland Plan. Desired conditions for the Geographic Area emphasize “primitive conditions with minimal facility development. Pipelines will be present but visually subordinate in the mid and background.” The Upper Antelope well would be constructed with the preservation of visual integrity in mind. The proposed storage tank would be buried and the pipeline from the Upper Antelope well would be a gravity flow system placed along lower areas of the terrain, therefore, minimizing disturbance and facility development in the most visible locations.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

The decision to be made is whether or not the proposed improvements would be constructed in the Gorsuch, Featherstone, and Upper Antelope/M Creek pastures. It will consider the grassland plan vegetation objectives for the Highlight-Bill and the Broken Hills Geographic Areas, and that the pastures are in the Rangelands with Broad Resource Emphasis (6.1), Rangelands with Diverse Natural-Appearing Landscapes (3.65), and the Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction Habitat (3.63) management areas. None of the planned project work will take place in inventoried roadless areas.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER LAWS AND DOCUMENTS

As a part of the effort to develop and describe the proposed action, the District Ranger and ID team reviewed and discussed all available information and data about the possible effects and or impacts that this action could have on the physical and biological environments in the analysis area, and the relationship between the proposal and laws, regulations, and agency policy that must be complied with if the proposal would be implemented.

Floodplains, wetlands, prime lands, threatened and endangered plant and animal species, global warming, minerals, cultural resources, consumers, civil rights, women, minority groups, and other environmental factors, and the possible beneficial effects and/or adverse impacts of this proposal on those resources will be considered.

The requirements of the Bankhead Jones Farm Tenant Act apply to this proposed project. The Bankhead Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 (7 USC 1010) provides that the Secretary of Agriculture is authorized and directed to develop a program of land conservation and utilization in order to correct maladjustments in land use, and thus assist in controlling

soil erosion, conducting reforestation, preserving natural resources, protecting fish and wildlife, developing and protecting recreational facilities, mitigating floods, preventing impairment of dams and reservoirs, conserving surface and subsurface moisture, protecting the watersheds of navigable streams, and protecting the public land, health safety, and welfare, but not to build industrial parks or establish private industrial or commercial enterprises.

Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-514, 92 Stat. 1806; 43 U.S.C. 1901-1908) “Manage, maintain and improve the condition of the public rangelands so that they become as feasible for all rangeland values in accordance with management objectives in land use planning process established pursuant to section 202 of the Federal Land and Policy Management Act (43 U.S.C. 1712).” The proposed action can improve public rangeland condition.

Endangered Species Act of December 28, 1973 (87 Stat. 884) P.L. 93-205, as amended. A Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation document will be written for the project area and mitigation measures put into place for any threatened or endangered plants or animals that are found in the project area.

Executive Order 11990 – Protection of Wetland 42 FR 26961 (signed May 25, 1977), and Executive Order 11988 – Floodplain Management 42 FR 26951 (signed May 25, 1977). The Forest Service will consider the proposed action in accordance with the Executive Orders.

National Historic Preservation Act of October 15, 1966 (80 Stat. 915) P.L. 89-665, as amended, & Archeological Resources Protection Act of October 31, 1979 (93 Stat. 721) P.L. 96-95, as amended. A Heritage resource inventory and report will be completed for the Federal lands in the project area.

Clean Water Act (Federal Water Pollution Control Act) of June 30, 1948, (62 Stat. II 55) P.L. 80-845, as amended by the Water Quality Act of 1987 (Act of February 4, 1987, P.L. 100-4) and other laws. This proposed project is not expected to violate any provisions of this act.

The proposed action is expected to comply with the standards, guidelines, and stipulations for grazing of livestock on NFS lands as described in the Thunder Basin National Grassland Land and Resource Management Plan of 2002.

PUBLIC COMMENTS REQUESTED

Scoping to identify issues and concerns is an important part of the environmental analysis process (40 CFR 1501.7). You are encouraged to take the time to consider the proposed improvements for the Gorsuch, Featherstone, M Creek and Upper Antelope pastures that are described elsewhere in this scoping document and submit your comments on this proposal to the Douglas District Ranger. The formal public comment period about this proposed action will end 30 days from the day after the Legal Notice about the action and

this period of opportunity to comment is published in the Casper Star Tribune. No other formal public comment period regarding this action or the environmental analysis that will occur is planned.

Written comments may be submitted to the District Ranger, Douglas Ranger District, 2250 E. Richards, Douglas Wyoming 82633, Attention: Kyle Schmitt, Rangeland Management Specialist. Written comments must be postmarked by the Postal Service, e-mailed, faxed or otherwise submitted by 11:59 p.m. on the 30th calendar day following publication of the Legal Notice of this proposed action. E-mail comments should be sent to : comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt-douglas-thunder-basin@fs.fed.us. If comments are electronically mailed the sender should receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive such confirmation it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Comments may be hand delivered to the Douglas Ranger District office between the hours of 7:30a.m. and 4:30p.m. Monday through Friday.

During this 30 day public comment period only those persons who submit timely and substantive comments (36 CFR 215.2) with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision will be accepted as appellants. In order to secure appeal eligibility, and individual or representative of an organization submitting comments must either sign the comments, document or verify their identity upon request. For more multiple names or multiple organizations, a signature must be provided by the individual authorized to represent the organization, or by each individual that wishes to have appeal eligibility. Individual members of an organization must submit their own substantive comments in order to meet the requirements of appeal eligibility as an individual. Comments received on behalf of an organization shall be considered as those of the organization only.

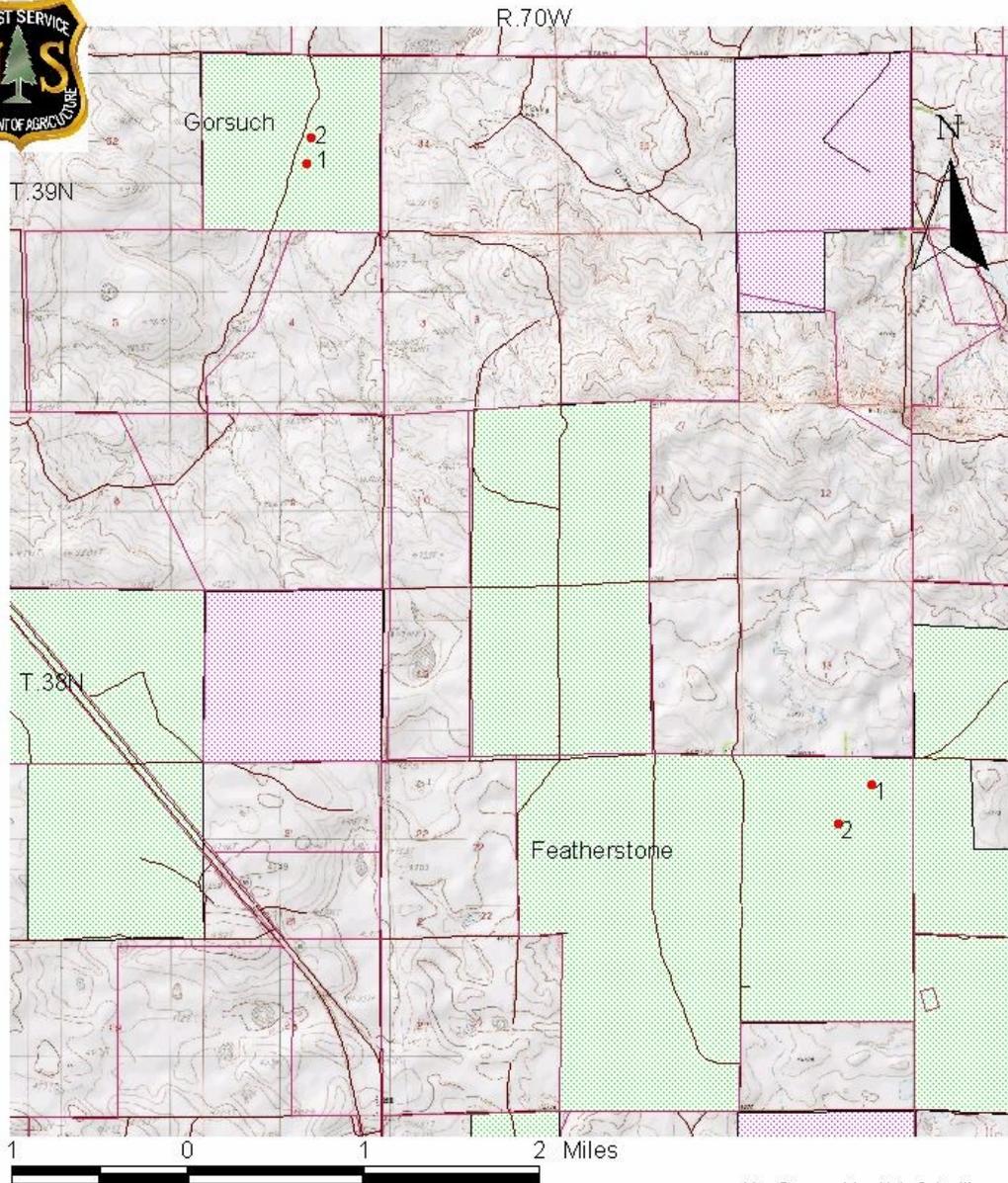
This letter and request for comments has also been mailed to other Federal, State, and local agencies, adjacent landowners, and individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by this project.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 10 days. For additional information, contact Kyle Schmitt, Rangeland Management Specialist, at (307) 358-1631.

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Featherstone and Gorsuch Water Wells



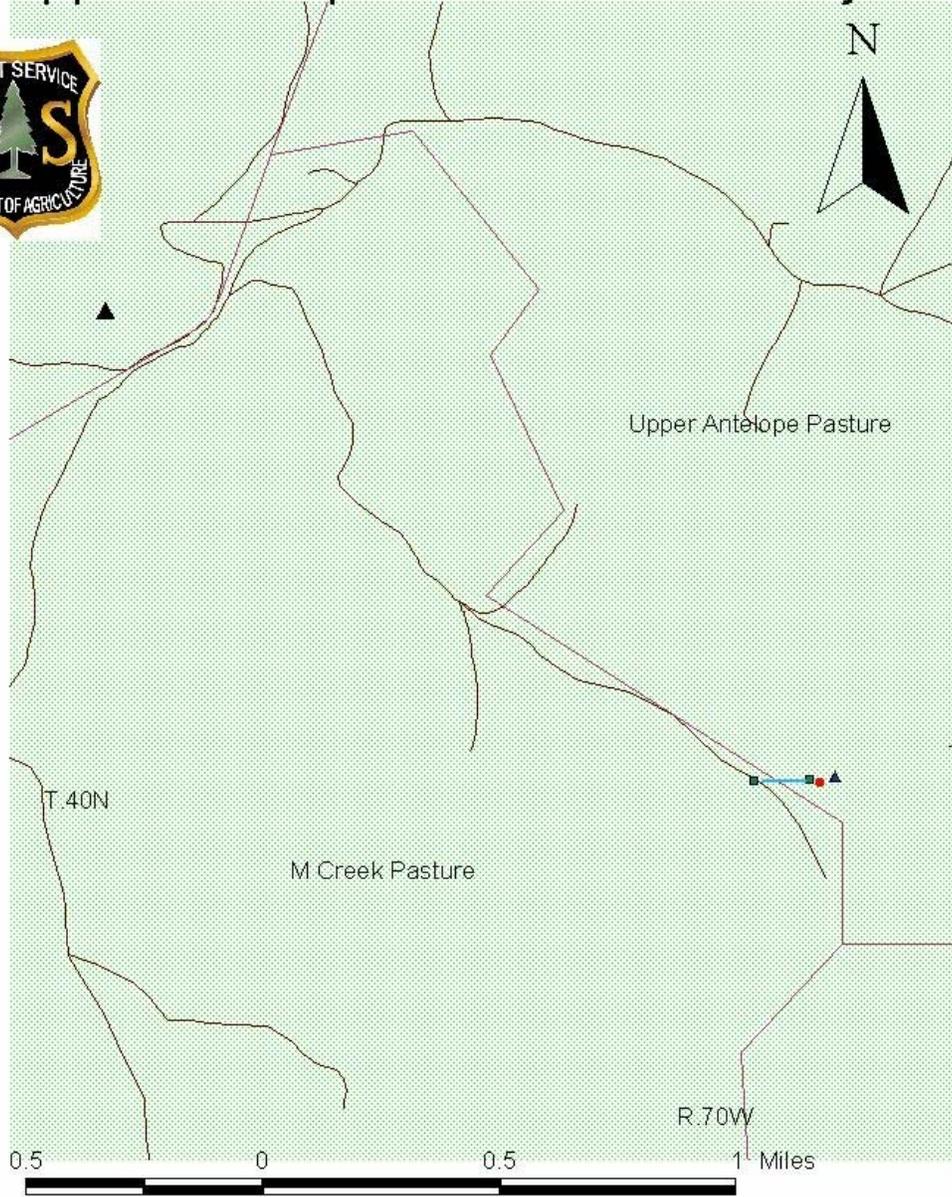
- Proposed pipeline
- Proposed water tanks
- Proposed storage tank
- Proposed well site
- Fence
- Roads
- Status
- MFS
- PVT
- SITE

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Map Prepared by: Kyle Schmitt
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Upper Antelope/M Creek Well Project



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Map Prepared by: Kyle Solmitt
 Map Created: 06/23/2004
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- Proposed pipeline
- Proposed water tanks
- Proposed storage tank
- Proposed well site
- Fence
- Roads
- NPS
- RVT
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