

West Fork Blacks Fork Allotment Management Plan

Final Environmental Impact Statement

Evanston Ranger District, Wasatch-Cache National Forest
Summit County, Utah

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Abstract: The Forest Service has prepared a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) on the potential effects of authorizing grazing on the West Fork Blacks Fork Allotment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), other relevant federal and state laws and regulations, and the Wasatch-Cache Forest Plan. The Allotment Management Plan developed from this analysis will emphasize management for healthy riparian, upland, and alpine ecosystems. Three alternatives were considered, Alternative A - Discontinue Grazing; Alternative B - Discontinue Grazing From Unit 4; and Alternative C – Proposed Action. Alternative C is the preferred alternative. The allotment is located approximately 26 miles southwest of Mountain View, Wyoming and is located on the Evanston Ranger District, Wasatch-Cache National Forest, in Utah. It includes 14,786 acres of National Forest System lands within the Blacks Fork drainage.

SUMMARY

The Wasatch-Cache National Forest proposes to authorize continued livestock grazing on approximately 14,786 acres of National Forest System lands in the upper reaches of the West Fork Blacks Fork drainage. Sheep grazing would continue during the period of July 6 through September 15 each year under a four pasture deferred grazing system and provide for periodic rest of the alpine unit while meeting the direction in the Wasatch-Cache Forest Plan. The purpose and need for this proposed action is to authorize livestock grazing on the West Fork Blacks Fork Allotment in a manner that will meet or move toward desired conditions identified in the Revised Forest Plan while meeting other resource objectives.

Sequence of Events Leading to this FEIS

1995 Members of the public expressed concerns about the conditions of the alpine benches of the West Fork Blacks Fork Allotment, of specific concern was the relative amount of bare ground vs. ground cover.

1997 The Forest Service visited the areas of concern with those members of the public and the grazing permit holder. New studies were established and existing studies (1965-67) were reviewed and updated. Monitoring results (tied to 1965 bench marks) showed one study site (17-6A) on Dead Horse Bench was not meeting the Wasatch-Cache National Forest 1996 Rangeland Health Amendment standard of 85% of potential (which was 97-100% for Uinta Alpine Grassland) for ground cover.

1998 Public scoping was conducted on a proposal to change management of the Allotment with the intent of improving ground cover, reducing salting, bedding, and herder camp impacts, determining the site-specific potential for ground cover, and examining effects of grazing on stream banks. Monitoring was continued.

1999 A Predecisional Environmental Assessment document was prepared and provided to interested parties. This document analyzed the environmental effects of three alternative grazing scenarios (including no grazing). At the same time, due to concerns about alpine ground cover, Dead Horse Bench area was rested from grazing (with an accompanying reduction in sheep months to compensate for the reduction in area available). This change was made through Annual Operating Instructions for the Allotment with the cooperation of the permit holder. Monitoring was continued during the summer of 1999.

2000 Early in the year, a Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team reviewed public comments on the Predecisional EA as well as the results of monitoring conducted in 1999. In response to the public comments and monitoring, a review of relevant literature was conducted as well. A new understanding of factors contributing to a high degree of variability in ground cover conditions inherent in the alpine benches was gained.

Based on the new understanding of site-potential for the various plant community types present, the 1999 monitoring indicated that the ground cover on the Dead Horse Bench (Study 17-6A) was meeting the Forest Plan standard of 85% of potential for ground cover. When compared with 1965-1967 monitoring, the ground cover trend for the site has been stable over the past 35 years (see Appendix D, Synopsis of Study 17-6A/B.M. No.4, Dead Horse Bench, West Fork-Blacks Fork).

In June a Hydrologist Specialist report (Wasniewski 2000) was prepared discussing new data collected in 1999 and conclusions about streambank, stream channel, and watershed conditions were revised. (See Non- Significant Issues in section 1.8.3.2 and 1.8.3.3 this FEIS Chapter 1).

In addition, monitoring results for the entire Allotment from 1997-1999 were compiled showing forage utilization of both uplands and riparian areas to be within standards set by the Rangeland Health Amendment. Still concerned about ground cover on Dead Horse Bench, in a January 2000 Memo (USDA Forest Service 2000), the Rangeland Specialist made a recommendation to the District Ranger to implement a system resting half of the alpine unit each grazing season for two consecutive years (the first year was 1999 as described above).

2001 Monitoring to improve the environmental analysis in response to public comments on the predecisional environmental assessment was continued. There continued to be discussion and debate among specialists regarding conditions and possible causative factors on the Allotment (e.g., stream stability, ground cover, detrimentally disturbed soils).

2002 The Forest Service discussed the merits of completing an environmental impact statement rather than supplementing the predecisional environmental assessment document because of controversy and disagreement over environmental effects and the relevant science. A public meeting with a narrated slide presentation was conducted in Coalville, Utah in July to update interested parties on monitoring results and literature search findings regarding stream channel conditions and alpine ground cover.

2003 Given significant changes in conclusions about ground cover conditions along with continued disagreements about whether or not conditions were meeting standards and about the degree to which sheep grazing was contributing to this, in March of 2003 a new Scoping document was mailed to the public requesting comments and a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the West Fork Blacks Fork Allotment was published in the Federal Register on March 26, 2003.

In May, a Revised Forest Plan (RFP) for the Wasatch-Cache National Forest (RFP 2003) was completed. With regard to rangeland management, it incorporated decisions made earlier in the Rangeland Health Amendment as well as adding a utilization guideline for areas in unsatisfactory condition.

In August, monitoring of Soil Health Conditions in the Red Knob and Dead Horse bench areas was conducted. A summary of results is presented in Chapter 3 of this FEIS.

2004 The Rangeland Management Specialist provided an update to the District Ranger on monitoring results and recommendations since the 2000 Memo with a February 5, 2004 Memo (USDA Forest Service 2004). This Memo highlighted the new understanding of inherent site potential associated with snow beds in the alpine areas of the Allotment and suggested that continuation of the rest periods for these areas should improve ground cover conditions where the potential exists. Soil monitoring of the alpine benches was conducted (Soils Specialist Report, Appendix B, 2005).

2005 In August of 2005 a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was released for public comment. Numerous comments were received and incorporated into this document.

2006 In July of 2006, the Forest Supervisor, Deputy Forest Supervisor, District Ranger and some members of the interdisciplinary team traveled to the allotment to review and discuss some of the effects and study sites (Condrat 2006; Flood 2006)

Issues

Using the comments from the public and other agencies, as well as comments on the Predecisional EA, the interdisciplinary team identified the following significant issues:

Issue 1: Vegetation and Soil Conditions

There are concerns about the condition and trend of alpine vegetation and soils within the Allotment.

Issue 2: Native Wildlife and Fish Habitats

There are concerns about the impacts of livestock grazing on native wildlife and fish populations and whether their habitats are being damaged by grazing.

Issue 3: Wilderness

There are concerns that damage caused by domestic sheep grazing (specifically to watershed and wildlife habitat) is not in keeping with wilderness qualities (wild, natural) envisioned by the Wilderness Act and Congress when the area was designated.

Issue 4: Recreation

There is concern that the sights, sounds, and effects of domestic sheep grazing are affecting the recreation experiences available within the Allotment area, including recreation opportunities associated with wilderness attributes.

Issue 5: Economic and Social Values

There is concern that the benefits of grazing this allotment are limited to a small number of people and that “Rangelands on today’s national forest lands have a much broader value than pasture land.”

Alternatives

The issues led the agency to develop the following alternatives:

Alternative A: Discontinue Grazing

Alternative A responds to concerns about the effects of grazing on vegetation, soil, native wildlife and fish habitats, recreation, and wilderness values by discontinuing livestock grazing within the allotment area with the exception of the sheep trailing to allotments in the Ashley National Forest.

Alternative B: Discontinue Grazing of Unit 4

Alternative B responds to concerns about the effects of grazing on the vegetation and soils of the alpine benches as well as conflicts with recreation within this area by discontinuing permitted grazing within Unit 4.

Alternative C: Proposed Action

Alternative C responds to concerns about the effects of grazing on the vegetation and soils of the alpine benches as well as conflicts with recreation in the area of Dead Horse Lake by providing for periodic rest of the alpine unit and closing the area around the lake to sheep grazing.

Decision to be Made

Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible official will decide if livestock grazing is to continue on the West Fork Blacks Fork Allotment, and if so, under what conditions.

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