

## **Scope of the Decision to Be Made**

The scope of this analysis is limited to the effects associated with livestock grazing and associated activities on the Watkins and South Fork Allotments.

## **Purpose of and Need for Action**

Several laws direct how resources are to be managed on National Forests and these relate to the purpose of the proposal. The Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960 (MUSYA) authorized the Forest Service to manage National Forest System lands for multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services of the forests. The Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA) requires the Forest Service to periodically assess the renewable resources of the forests and to develop national-level plans to manage and develop these resources. Next the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) restated the direction of MUSYA and amended the RPA to require the Forest Service to develop forest management plans for each national forest.

The Gallatin National Forest Plan (Forest Plan) was developed and approved in 1987. The Forest Plan provides the current approved direction for management of the Gallatin National Forest and includes in general how livestock are managed and where they can be grazed. Overall goals of the Forest Plan are to maintain or improve the forage resource and provide for a small increase in livestock grazing (Forest Plan p. II-1).

The Forest Plan also sets forth standards and guidelines that contribute toward achieving these goals and assuring that favorable and sustainable rangeland conditions exist into the future. The Forest Plan divides the Forest into Management Areas and provides resource management direction for each of those areas.

All of the Forest Plan Management Areas in the area of these allotments allow the grazing of livestock. While the Management Areas all permit grazing, they do not recommend specific livestock numbers, types of livestock, grazing seasons, or the types of grazing-related management activities to occur on each allotment. It is therefore the purpose of this proposal to decide those questions while providing the opportunity to graze livestock under permit as directed in the Forest Plan.

This proposal is being considered at this time because of the need to improve the conditions of several resources on the allotments and address any disparities between the Forest Plan standards and existing management and environmental conditions (Public Law 104-19, Section 504(a) (1994)).

The objectives for this proposal are:

- Maintain all streams in proper functioning condition
- Maintain and improve upland vegetative conditions
- Provide for grazing opportunities as allowed for in the Gallatin National Forest Plan

## Proposed Action

We are proposing to revise the Allotment Management Plans to include the activities listed below (see the Proposed Watkins Creek Allotment map and the Proposed South Fork Allotment map at the end of this letter).

### Watkins Allotment

- 1.) Permit the same number of Animal Units Months (222) as historically permitted; 55 cow/calf pair, for the same season of use (July 1 to September 30), on a two pasture deferred rotation (example shown in Table-1). The table below shows the two pasture deferred rotation schedule for 55 cow/calf pairs, and the desired grazing intensity. The specific grazing dates are flexible based on seasonal fluctuations in precipitation and availability of forage.

Table-1. The two pasture deferred rotation system with utilization rates and estimated dates:

Pasture Name	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Watkins	Low 35% 7/1-8/3	High 55% 8/4-9/30	High 55% 8/4-9/30	Low 35% 7/1-8/3	Low 35% 7/1-8/3
Upper Watkins	High 55% 8/4-9/30	Low 35% 7/1-8/3	Low 35% 7/1-8/3	High 55% 8/4-9/30	High 55% 8/4-9/30

- 2.) Install a water tank (siphoned from Watkins Creek) to increase grazing along the western edge of Watkins pasture. The tank would sit on a flat bench, 50 feet from the stream, on shallow rocky soil. The water would drain back into the stream by flowing down an existing dried-up rocky channel. When the tank is not being used, the drain will be left open and the tank empty. Build a short extension in the existing fence (approximately 500 feet) to allow cattle access to the water tank on the flat bench but out of the stream.
- 3.) Install a new cattle guard on the Denny Creek Road #167 and move the northwest fence further to the north (install 2200 feet of new fence) to eliminate the problem of people failing to close the gate. The existing gate at the trailhead and the adjacent 1800 feet of fence would be removed. The new fence location would exclude an adjacent aspen stand so cattle grazing would not impact the aspen. Moving the fence further to the north would increase the size of the pasture (27 acres) and available forage, yet still remain within the allotment boundary.
- 4.) Build a fence to direct cattle through the water crossing and harden the western edge of shore with gravel (the eastern slope is already stable). The hardened cattle crossing would impact 15 feet along the shore line and 30 feet from the shore to more stable soil on the west side of the stream (total area approximately 450 square feet). The hardened water crossing would allow cattle to access the water while protecting the rest of the small meadow (100 feet long and 60 feet across, or roughly 6000 square feet). The rest of the Watkins Creek is not accessible to cattle crossing because the adjacent slopes are too steep or overgrown with vegetation and woody material.



Close up view of crossing



Wide angle view of the same crossing

- 5.) Use riparian monitoring protocols (the most currently accepted protocol that measures impacts to stream bank trampling, stubble height and woody material) and the Gallatin National Forest Riparian Framework to determine when livestock need to be moved from the lower section of Wally McClure Stream (only the lower section of Wally McClure Stream is accessible to cattle, the rest of the stream is too steep and wooded), and over time to guide changes in management such as change in the duration of grazing, excluding the stream with an electric fence, or a reduction in the number of livestock. Wally McClure stream condition is considered to be acceptable at the current time, and the riparian monitoring will ensure the present stream condition is maintained.

### South Fork Allotment

- 1.) Permit the same number of Animal Units Months (61) as historically permitted; 15 cow calf pair, for the same season of use (July 1 to September 30). See Table-2 for example of the three pasture deferred rotation system. The table below shows the rotation schedule, desired utilization rates, and timing of grazing. The specific dates are flexible based on seasonal fluctuations in precipitation and availability of forage.

Table-2. The three pasture deferred rotation system for 15 cow calf pair, with utilization rates and estimated dates.

Pasture Name	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
North	45% (7/29-8/28)	55% (8/29-9/30)	35% (7/1-7/28)	45% (7/29-8/28)	55% (8/29-9/30)
Middle	35% (7/1-7/28)	45% (7/29-8/28)	55% (8/29-9/30)	35% (7/1-7/28)	45% (7/29-8/28)
South	55% (8/29-9/30)	35% (7/1-7/28)	45% (7/29-8/28)	55% (8/29-9/30)	35% (7/1-7/28)

- 2.) Install water gaps in the Middle Pasture to allow more access to the South Fork River.
- 3.) Use riparian monitoring protocols (the most currently accepted protocol that measures impacts to stream bank trampling, stubble height and woody material) and the Gallatin National Forest Riparian Framework to determine when livestock need to be moved from Basin Cabin Spring, and over time to guide changes in management such as change in the duration of grazing, excluding the stream with an electric fence, or a reduction in the number of livestock. Basin Cabin Spring condition is acceptable at the current time, and the riparian monitoring will ensure the present stream condition is maintained.

## **Background Information:**

### Watkins Creek Allotment

From 1939 to 1972, grazing in the Watkins drainage was managed as two separate allotments; one was called Upper Watkins Creek S&G Allotment and the other Watkins Creek C&H Allotment. The Upper Watkins Creek S&G Allotment was originally a sheep allotment (1000 to 1500 head) that incorporated large open meadows in the Lionhead area and in the upper Watkins drainage. In 1972, due to deteriorating range conditions, the high elevation pasture was closed to sheep grazing, and the lower elevation pasture was allocated to cattle grazing. From 1974 to 1982, fifty cow/calf pairs grazed from July 1 to August 30<sup>th</sup> in the upper Watkins drainage (101 animal head months).

The other allotment, known as Watkins Creek C&H Allotment incorporated large meadows adjacent to Hebgen Lake and private land (Watkins Creek Ranch Company) from 1942 to 1981. The amount of use varied considerably, ranging from 19 to 111 animal months on Forest land. Also the class and kind of livestock has varied; from cattle and horses, to yearlings and cow/calf pairs.

An environmental analysis and decision notice completed in 1981 combined the Upper Watkins Creek C&H Allotment, and the Watkins Creek C&H Allotment, into one allotment with 2 pastures, using a deferred rotation grazing system. Between 1982 and 1991, 86 cow/calf pairs grazed from July 1 to September 30. In 1992 until present there has been an average of 55 cow/calf pairs, using the same deferred rotation system, for the same dates. In 1991, a fence was constructed parallel to the lower section of Watkins Creek, which keeps cattle out of the stream. Also, the fence along the northwestern edge of Upper Watkins pasture was moved to its present location to consolidate the pasture.

A forage production analysis estimated that 55 cow/calf pairs could graze this allotment for 98 days at 25% utilization by dry weight (currently there are 92 permitted days). Utilization monitoring in 2007, 2008 and 2009 indicates the forage resource is adequate for the season of use and the stocking rate. Average utilization was 35%. Based on monitoring of riparian conditions, the upper stream crossing on Watkins Creek has improved considerably since the reduction from 86 to 55 cow/calf pairs in 1992. No departures from Forest Plan standards for grazing utilization, stream channel stability, or sediment filtration levels were noted.

## South Fork Allotment

Grazing has occurred on both private and public lands adjacent to the South Fork of the Madison River from the 1950s to the present. The Allotment Management Plan from 1963 implemented a two pasture deferred rotation grazing system, then in 1982 a revised management plan implemented a three pasture deferred rotation system. Between 1982 and the present, there has been an average of 15 cow/calf pairs, from July 1 to September 30. A forage production analysis estimated that 15 cow/calf pairs could graze this allotment for 127 days at 25% utilization by dry weight (currently there are 92 permitted days). Utilization monitoring in 2007, 2008 and 2009 indicates that the forage resource is adequate for the season of use and the stocking rate. Average utilization was 18%. Riparian monitoring in 2007 found no departures from the Forest Plan standards for grazing utilization, stream channel stability, or sediment filtration levels.

### **Preliminary Issues**

Numerous environmental analyses have recently been conducted on grazing allotments on the Forest. Issues identified by the public in those analyses include:

- 1) Grazing effects on stream form and function:** The proposed action may cause unsatisfactory water quality, stream channel stability, and riparian area conditions within the area (both on and off the allotments).
- 2) Grazing effects on soils:** The proposed action may have adverse effects on soil condition, productivity, and stability.
- 3) Grazing effects on range and vegetative condition:** The proposed action may have adverse effects on range condition including riparian and upland vegetation, and the potential establishment or spread of invasive weeds.
- 4) Grazing effects on aquatic wildlife:** The proposed action may negatively impact sensitive fish and amphibian populations, aquatic Management Indicator Species (MIS) populations, and other portions of aquatic communities.
- 5) Grazing effects on terrestrial wildlife:** The proposed action may have adverse effects on wildlife including threatened, endangered, and sensitive or management indicator wildlife species.
- 6) Grazing effects on recreational activities:** There may be conflicts between grazing and recreational activities in the area.

Your comments will help confirm if these are relevant issues and to identify other issues that should be addressed. **Please submit your comments by January 4, 2010.**

## PROJECT INTEREST CONFIRMATION FORM

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Select the appropriate response and write in new information.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I am interested in staying involved in the Watkins Creek and South Fork Allotment Management Plan. Please keep my name on the mailing list for future mailings. If my contact information needs to be corrected. I am sending the corrected information.

Name:

Address:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I am interested but would prefer to receive future mailings over the computer.

My email address is \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ Not interested.

Please return this form to ATTN: Susan LaMont, Hebgen Lake Ranger District, PO Box 520, West Yellowstone, MT 59758

You may also send an email to [hebgen\\_lake@fs.fed.us](mailto:hebgen_lake@fs.fed.us) to confirm your interest. Please include Watkins and South Fork AMP Update on the subject line.

Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forest.