

SCOPING NOTICE
for
MEETING RANGELAND HEALTH STANDARDS ON PUBLIC LANDS
IN THE SWEETWATER RIVER WATERSHED

Bureau of Land Management
Lander Field Office

May 13, 2002

Background and Description

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Wyoming manages public lands to meet six Rangeland Health Standards which are compared to current conditions on a watershed or grazing allotment basis. These standards establish the acceptable conditions for the health, productivity, and sustainability of BLM-administered public rangelands and apply to all resource uses. An evaluation of the current condition of soils, riparian/wetland areas, uplands, native plant and animal populations/habitats, and water and air quality is conducted to determine if public rangelands are meeting the Rangeland Health Standards. If areas are not meeting the standards, then BLM develops and implements corrective actions to move rangelands toward the applicable conditions given in the standards.

Riparian health assessments and rangeland health evaluations indicate that most riparian habitats and some upland habitats in the Sweetwater River Watershed within BLM's Lander Field Office do not meet these standards. There are approximately 1.4 million acres of the Sweetwater River Watershed that lie within the boundary of the BLM's Lander Field Office. Of this acreage, over 1 million acres are BLM-administered public lands (see map). Much of the area is characterized as a semi-arid, high elevation, cold desert vegetated by sagebrush and mixed grasses. Other vegetative types that occur within the watershed in smaller percentages include wetland/riparian, timber, mountain shrub, greasewood and juniper communities.

In the Sweetwater River Watershed, the public lands are grazed by livestock authorized under 10 year permits in 110 grazing allotments of varying size. These allotments have anywhere from one to 20 permittees and are grazed predominantly by cattle. There are several large allotments (over 40,000 acres) that have multiple livestock operators who graze in-common with a combination of cattle, sheep, and horses. These large allotments make up more than one-half of the total acreage. The primary factor identified for uplands not meeting the health standards is livestock grazing which has resulted in a change in plant composition, increased bare ground, accelerated soil erosion, poor plant vigor and a lack of biological diversity in some areas. The primary factor identified for riparian areas not meeting the rangeland health standards is livestock grazing during the hot season, defined as the period from June thru September. Riparian/wetland habitats are those lands adjacent to creeks, streams and springs that are directly influenced by water. The presence of water and green vegetation makes riparian areas attractive and important to domestic livestock grazing the adjacent drier uplands. More than 80% of this riparian acreage on public land has been assessed as not

functioning properly, thus unable to meet the rangeland health standard. These areas have been damaged physically and biologically to a large extent by uncontrolled season-long grazing or hot season grazing use by livestock. Current degraded riparian area conditions require grazing management changes to ensure the long-term health and productivity of these important resources.

Because such a large percentage of riparian areas within the Sweetwater River Watershed in the Lander Field Office are not meeting the standards, the BLM is looking at ways to manage livestock grazing to allow for improvement of these important areas. Riparian areas comprise 1 - 2% of the watershed, but are the most productive and valuable of all lands. A healthy riparian area supports a diverse plant and animal community and offers forage, water, cover, shade and shelter for wildlife, livestock, and wild horses. These areas are the most important habitat for the majority of wildlife species. A healthy riparian area holds water and releases it over time to provide a sustained water supply for downstream water users, livestock and wildlife. Unhealthy areas, if not addressed, can degrade to the point where they lose all productivity and value for livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, wild horses, and recreation.

The three approaches presented here could be used to make grazing management changes needed to improve rangeland health. Approaches are identified based on past and present experience, university and government research, and comments over the years from permittees and various interested publics. The major focus of each approach would be improving the health of riparian/wetland areas with the secondary focus being improvement of upland areas.

One approach would change the time of year that livestock are present on public rangelands and allow time for rest and recovery for the forage plants. This approach would rest areas from livestock grazing from June thru September which is the critical growth period for plants and when animals tend to concentrate on riparian areas. Livestock use would be authorized during the months of October to May when riparian and upland plants are dormant or have adequate time to recover from grazing and go into the winter period with healthy root systems. A 3 to 5 year initial rest from livestock grazing may be necessary on selected riparian areas to begin the restoration process. The rest would build plant root systems, increase topsoil organic matter, decrease soil compaction from trampling, and increase water infiltration into the soil.

A second approach would emphasize the use of rangeland projects to improve riparian and upland health. Numerous water developments and fences would be constructed in grazing allotments in the watershed to implement grazing systems, improve livestock distribution and manage the timing and amount of utilization areas receive. Water developments (wells, reservoirs, pipelines, springs) would be constructed at the rate of approximately 1 per every 10-15 square miles and vegetation treatments (burning, mechanical, chemical) would be used to draw grazing use away from riparian areas during the hot season and into upland areas currently receiving little use. Fencing would be used to control livestock use on riparian areas and execute grazing management systems. All available monies would be used to develop these projects within a few years.

A third approach would continue the BLM's current management. Improvement methods identified in the other two approaches would be utilized over a longer period of time. Water developments,

fencing and implementation of grazing management systems would be used to improve rangeland health as would changes in the permitted season of use and kind of livestock authorized. Allotments would be addressed as time and money allow.

Relationship to Existing Plans and Documents

The Lander Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (June 6, 1987), provides direction for management of BLM-administered public lands within the analysis area. A planning maintenance action that incorporated the Rangeland Health Standards was completed for the RMP on December 12, 1997.

National Environmental Policy Act Compliance

Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Council on Environmental Quality regulations on implementing NEPA, the Lander Field Office will be preparing an environmental assessment(s) that will describe and evaluate the probable impacts of alternatives that encompass “appropriate actions” to the Rangeland Health Standards under the Grazing Regulations (43 CFR 4180.1). The purpose of an environmental assessment (EA) is to provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining whether to prepare a Finding of No Significant Impact or an environmental impact statement. The EA also provides the public and decision-makers with sufficient information to understand the environmental consequences of the various alternatives and to identify and develop appropriate mitigation measures to minimize environmental impacts.

As part of the NEPA process, BLM will collect additional data and information for the area. Soil surveys, vegetation descriptions and riparian area assessments are needed for parts of the watershed as is a socio-economic analysis. The economic analysis will be broken into two parts. The first part will be structured to examine the economic impact to the operators holding grazing leases in the area. By using the estimated direct impacts to the operators, regional impacts to the study area will be estimated. The second component will be designed to estimate the nonmarket impacts of the various management options being analyzed. Nonmarket values are the values associated with those resources not traded in the market place. For example, open space, healthy riparian areas, preservation of endangered species, unobstructed views along historical trails, wild horses, etc. All represent resources not traded in the market place, but have value that can be quantified. And in order to accomplish this component of the economic analysis, the BLM will be contacting people locally, regionally and nationally to obtain information for this analysis.

This scoping notice has been prepared to enable permittees, interested publics, government agencies, and the general public, to participate in and contribute to the analysis process. Public input is important in establishing the scope of analysis for any NEPA document, and the BLM encourages public participation. In addition, the Grazing Regulations provide for consultation, cooperation, and coordination with affected permittees/lessees, interested publics, and the State of Wyoming.

Identified Resource Management Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

The following issues and concerns have been identified using previous public input. It is not meant to be an all-inclusive list, but rather a starting point for further public input and a means of identifying the resource disciplines needed to conduct the analysis.

- Unhealthy riparian and upland habitats
- Sustained health and productivity of the public watersheds, rangelands, and habitats
- Economic impacts to grazing permittees and the local/state economy
- Water quality
- Maintenance of open space
- Public access to use public lands
- Protection of historic resources
- Impacts of rangeland projects to other resources

Timing Needs or Requirements

Public input is important to public land management. The public is encouraged to participate throughout the environmental analysis process to help in identifying the level of analysis needed, management alternatives, other issues or concerns that should be analyzed, and any other comments or ideas to help ensure the completeness of the analysis process.

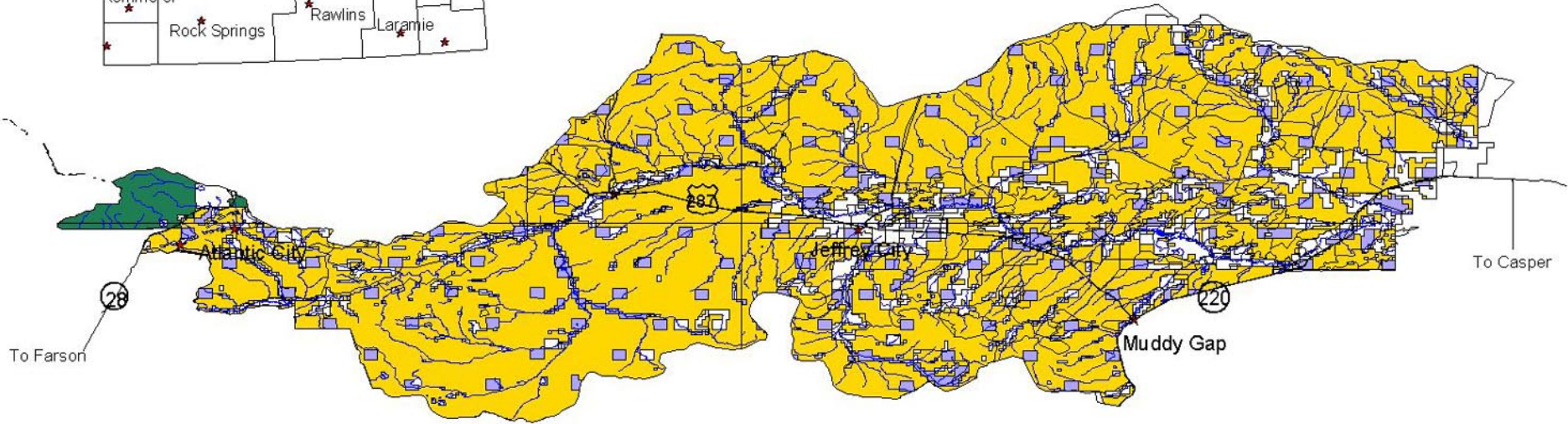
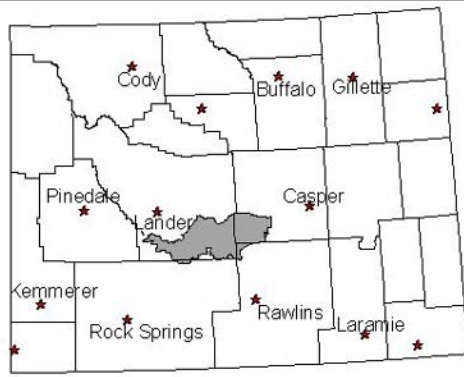
Your scoping comments are due by August 30, 2002. Please submit comments to:

Bureau of Land Management
Lander Field Office
P. O. Box 589
1335 Main Street
Lander, WY 82520

Comments may also be submitted via email to: lander_wymail@blm.gov. Scoping meetings will be announced and held this coming winter.

Please note that comments, including names, email addresses, and street addresses of the respondents, will be available for public review and disclosure at the above address during regular business hours (7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), Monday through Friday, except holidays. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name, email address, or street address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this plainly at the beginning of your comment. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

Lander Field Office Sweetwater River Watershed



- ★ Towns
- Major Highways
- Streams
- Grazing Allotments/Pastures
- Ownership
- USFS
- BLM
- State
- Private



Map Compiled by
Bureau of Land Management
Lander Field Office
Lander, Wyoming
May 9, 2002