

USDI, Bureau of Land Management
Three Rivers Resource Area, Burns District

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FOR
CROW'S NEST ALLOTMENT MANAGEMENT PLAN/AGREEMENT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

OR-06-025-095

INTRODUCTION

This Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed to analyze the effects of implementing the Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for the Crow's Nest Allotment # 5305. The Crow's Nest Allotment is located approximately 31 miles south of Burns, Oregon. This area is characterized primarily by a crested wheatgrass vegetative community type with smaller portions of a basin big sagebrush/bottlebrush squirreltail-greasewood/bottlebrush squirreltail complex. The 1999 AMP allowed a season of use from April 1 through October 15. Grazing management was designed on a 3-year rotation. At the time the AMP was developed the allotment was unallocated and managed as a forage bank allotment. It was authorized for grazing on a temporary basis to permittees who were providing rest on their permitted allotments due to cooperative prescribed burning, drought, wildfires, etc. The allotment was to be grazed early on the first year, followed by a year of growing season use, and finally on the third year either a defer or early treatment. In 2000 the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act authorized a land exchange which allocated the Crow's Nest Allotment to the Rex Clemens Ranch, Inc. In 2001, Rex Clemens Ranch, Inc., transferred ownership of the base property to Roaring Springs Ranch, Inc., who then in 2002 transferred ownership of the base property to Home Ranch LLC. When the base property was transferred to Home Ranch LLC, the 1999 AMP was not listed as a term and condition of the grazing permit and the permitted season of use was authorized from April 15 through July 15. This season of use did not allow for an early or deferred grazing treatment. Therefore, since 2000 the grazing management recommended from the 1999 AMP has not been followed. The 2006 Allotment Evaluation analyzed the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management for Public Lands Administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the States of Oregon and Washington. All of the five Standards for Rangeland Health were either achieved or not applicable for this allotment (e.g., riparian areas and water quality). The evaluation found that current grazing management was not in conformance with the Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management because periodic rest from grazing for rangeland vegetation during the critical growth periods was not being provided.

The purpose of the proposed AMP is to change the grazing management to allow for periodic rest for rangeland vegetation during critical growth periods, to assist in achieving resource objectives and the standards for rangeland health, to conform to guidelines for grazing management, and to encourage an upward trend in range condition.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to implement the recommendations from the 2006 Crow's Nest Allotment Evaluation. There are two parts to the recommendations; Grazing Management actions and Resource Objectives. The proposed action is to extend the permitted season of use from April 1 through October 15, which would allow for greater flexibility in grazing management. The general season of use that would be followed within that permitted season of use would be from June 1 through July 31 allowing for deferment of one pasture within the allotment until after the critical growing season.

Although the pastures would generally be grazed from June 1 through July 31, the extended permitted season would also allow for grazing to be earlier or later in the season. The extended permitted season of use allows for changes in the timing of grazing while still allowing the objectives to be met.

The recommended resource objectives are as follows:

1. Objective: Maintain all seeded areas in excellent or good condition over the next 10 years to provide approximately 800 AUMs each year for livestock and wildlife. This will be measured by relative frequency of occurrence in crested wheatgrass as compared with total ground cover.
2. Objective: Provide rearing and nesting opportunity for long-billed curlew in either of the pastures from May 1 through June 30 each year, and provide breeding and forage habitat for ferruginous hawk each year.
3. Objective: Manage for stable to upward trend in condition in sagebrush/bottlebrush squirreltail and greasewood/bottlebrush squirreltail range sites over the next 10 years. Monitoring to assess and determine the health and condition of these native species will include visual observations and a permanent photo point with photos taken in 10-year intervals.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

This proposed action is in conformance with objectives and land use plan allocations in the 1992 Three Rivers Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS). It is in conformance with the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management for Public Lands Administered by the BLM in the States of Oregon and Washington (August 12, 1997.) Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the EA and all other information, it was determined that the proposed action and alternatives analyzed do not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an EIS is not necessary and will not be prepared.

Rationale:

This determination is based on the following: These critical elements of the human environment have been analyzed in the Three Rivers RMP/Final EIS, and are not known to be present in the project area or affected by enacting either alternative: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Air Quality, American Indian Traditional Practices, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Flood Plains, Hazardous Materials, Paleontology, Special Status Species – Flora, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas, Wetlands, Riparian Zones, and Water Quality. The following critical element is not discussed in the Three Rivers RMP/EIS, but is either not known to be present or affected: Environmental Justice. All potentially affected resources were analyzed in the EA specific to the proposed action. The following critical elements were analyzed in the EA: Special Status Species – Fauna; Cultural Heritage; Noxious Weeds; and Migratory Birds. Noncritical elements analyzed follow. Effects to these resources are considered nonsignificant (based on the definition of significance in 40 CFR 1508.27) for the following reasons:

CRITICAL ELEMENTS

1. Special Status Species - Fauna

Long-billed curlew (*Numenius americanus*) can generally be found using the allotment in the spring for breeding, nesting, and rearing habitat. Ferruginous hawks (*Buteo regalis*) use the allotment frequently during the spring and summer seasons. The Crow's Nest Allotment and the adjacent landscape provide ideal breeding and foraging habitat for ferruginous hawks.

The proposed action would improve and/or maintain the good range condition present in the allotment for the foreseeable future, thereby improving conditions for long-billed curlew and ferruginous hawk within this allotment.

2. Cultural Heritage

The allotment has potential to contain three types of important cultural heritage sites. It is not certain at this time whether or not cultural heritage would be affected by the proposed action due to the lack of allotmentwide cultural surveys and site assessments. Trampling damage could be occurring currently and could continue under the proposed alternative if sites do exist on this allotment. However, these potential effects will remain unknown until additional surveys are conducted in the allotment.

3. Noxious Weeds

There are currently no recorded noxious weeds in the Crow's Nest Allotment. There are a number of small, roadside Canada thistle sites in close proximity to the allotment.

The allotment borders the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and its canal system due west of the allotment, which contains perennial pepperweed sites. The proposed action would promote a healthy, noxious weed resistant plant community and would therefore be beneficial for noxious weed management.

4. Migratory Birds

While no formal monitoring for migratory birds has been conducted on this allotment, it is known that migratory birds use the allotment for nesting, rearing of young, and foraging. The proposed action would reduce impacts to migratory bird species that use habitat in the allotment. Many species of migratory birds produce two broods per year. Migratory birds that begin producing a second brood in the deferred pasture may be impacted by livestock but it would have less effect with the proposed grazing management than with the current management.

NONCRITICAL ELEMENTS

1. Grazing Management

The current permittee has a season of use from April 15 to July 15 making it difficult to provide grazing management which meets the Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management and achieve resource objectives. The proposed action would allow for periodic rest during the critical growth periods for rangeland vegetation and would allow for more flexibility in management to accomplish proper management of multiple resources.

2. Vegetation

The vegetative community type of this allotment is crested wheatgrass and a basin big sagebrush/bottlebrush squirreltail–greasewood/bottlebrush squirreltail complex. The proposed action that conforms to guidelines for grazing management has taken into consideration the health and life cycle requirements of rangeland vegetation. The proposed action would result in increased vigor, reproduction, and productivity of most plant species.

3. Wildlife

No formal wildlife monitoring has been conducted; however, antelope and deer are seen regularly within the Crow's Nest Allotment. Other wildlife species known to occur, or suspected to use the allotment, include coyote, badger, jackrabbit, numerous small mammals and songbirds associated with grassland and sagebrush habitats. Under the proposed action the deferred pasture would provide suitable cover for nesting curlews and migratory birds, as well as suitable cover in surrounding areas. Curlew chicks would most likely be mobile when cows enter the deferred pasture. The proposed action would result in maintained or improved habitat for most wildlife species.

4. Recreation

No formal recreation monitoring has occurred. Recreation in the area includes big game hunting for mule deer and antelope, and some for upland game birds. Allowing pastures to grow to seed-set and reducing the impacts of growing season use under current management would improve game habitat and allow for improved big game hunting.

5. Social and Economic Values

Those engaged in ranching and forage production make up a strong component of the fabric of local society. Applying the proposed action would result in meeting the objectives of this AMP, helping to meet the Standards for Rangeland Health, and conforming to the Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management. This would result in a continued and viable ranching livelihood for the livestock operators and enhancement of the economy of Harney County.

6. Soils

The 1992 Ecological Site Inventory data, found the major soils in this area to be Raz-Brace Anawalt and Pujade-Ausmus-Swalesilver. The proposed grazing management allows a growing season of rest from grazing which should keep the perennial forage species vigorous and healthy. A healthy perennial grass cover would prevent or limit the loss of soil by wind or water erosion.

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Date