



United States Department of the Interior
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Washington, D.C. 20240
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In Reply Refer To:
4110 (220) P

SEP 1 2016

Instruction Memorandum No. 2016-141
Expires: 09/30/2019

To: State Directors (California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana/Dakotas, Nevada, Oregon/Washington, Utah, and Wyoming), and Center Directors

From: Deputy Director *Steven A. Ellis*

Subject: Setting Priorities for Review and Processing of Grazing Authorizations in Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat
DD: February 1, 2017

Program Area: Rangeland Management, Wildlife

Purpose: This Instruction Memorandum (IM) provides guidance for prioritizing the review and processing of grazing permits and leases (permits) in Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) habitat as described in the Records of Decision for the Approved Resource Management Plan Amendments for the Great Basin and Rocky Mountain GRSG Regions and nine Approved Resource Management Plans in the Rocky Mountain GRSG Region (collectively referred to as the GRSG Plans). This IM also provides guidance on prioritizing monitoring for compliance with permit terms and conditions, and monitoring maintenance of, or progress toward meeting, land health standards (LHS) and GRSG habitat objectives.

Policy/Action: Consistent with the GRSG Plans, field offices will prioritize the review and processing of grazing permits for allotments in GRSG habitat, including monitoring compliance with terms and conditions in grazing permits, and monitoring conditions that indicate maintenance or progress toward meeting land health standards and GRSG habitat objectives. The purpose for setting priorities is to focus management activities in areas with the highest habitat value for GRSG, where allotments should be meeting or making progress towards achieving LHS and GRSG habitat objectives. The decision to prioritize in this way does not indicate that grazing is more of a management concern than other uses of the public lands, or that grazing is an incompatible use in any given area, but rather reflects a decision to prioritize limited resources to ensure grazing is properly managed in those areas most important to the Greater Sage-Grouse. If the BLM finds that relevant GRSG habitat objectives are not being met because of improper grazing, then the BLM will work with the permittees and other stakeholders to ensure progress toward meeting them.

Setting Priorities for Reviewing and Processing Grazing Permits

The GRSG Plans and the policy in this IM, supersedes previous permit processing priority setting policy in states with sage-grouse habitat.

Generally, the highest priority areas for completing permit processing work will be allotments that are in Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFA) or that substantially overlap with SFAs, followed by GRSG Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA) outside of the SFAs, Important Habitat Management Areas (IHMA, Idaho only), and General Habitat Management Areas (GHMA). Allotments within Other Habitat Management Areas (OHMA, Nevada and Northeast California only) are the last GRSG habitat areas in priority for completing permit review and processing. Priorities should be reassessed in allotments where adaptive management triggers provided in the applicable GRSG Plan have been exceeded and indicate areas of habitat associated with the triggers should be of greater concern.

Within each habitat management category (i.e., SFA, PHMA, IHMA, GHMA, OHMA), recently processed permits (e.g., within the last three to five years) meeting land health standards would not be as high a priority for review or processing as older processed permits (e.g., five to ten years ago), unless resource conditions change or the permittee requests a change in grazing management.

Several factors should be considered and will influence the priority ranking of any given allotment, particularly where land health status has not been evaluated or multiscale GRSG habitat assessments are incomplete. Allotments in SFA without a completed land health evaluation(s) are the highest priority, followed by allotments in SFAs with completed evaluations indicating a need for a change to grazing management. Allotments in SFAs and PHMAs with threatened or endangered (T&E) or BLM sensitive species, in addition to GRSG, will also be in the highest priority group for evaluating land health and processing grazing permits. Other allotments in PHMAs will be the next priority for processing grazing permits.

Grazing permits for allotments outside of GRSG habitat will generally be lower priority for review and processing. However, some exceptions may occur where areas outside of sage-grouse habitat have important resource concerns such as T&E species habitat, degraded resource conditions, or other legal obligations.

Priority status of an area may change based on any number of factors. For example, a small, isolated parcel of BLM land within an SFA surrounded by a large area over which BLM has no management control (e.g., private land) may initially be listed as high priority due to the SFA, but be placed in a lower priority category due to the limited BLM management control. On the other hand, areas outside of SFAs or PHMAs may be higher priority if there are important resource conflicts, T&E species habitat, degraded resource conditions, or if current livestock grazing management has been identified as a significant causal factor for not meeting land health standards.

To facilitate reviewing and processing grazing permits, BLM field offices will develop an allotment priority list based on this IM and considering the criteria listed below. The list will identify the grazing authorizations pertinent to those allotments in order to simplify identifying which grazing authorizations will be reviewed and in which order. The list will include all

allotments and lands administered for grazing by the field office, even if some land is located in another state. A spreadsheet template is provided as Attachment 1 *Priority List for Grazing Allotments and Permits* for field office use. The field office is responsible for updating the spreadsheet when allotment conditions or resource uses change, or when preference is transferred. The initial spreadsheet is due February 1, 2017 and is to be updated by March 1 annually thereafter.

In addition to being located in SFAs, PHMAs, IHMAs (Idaho only), GHMAs, or OHMA (Nevada and Northeast California only), the following criteria are to be considered when identifying priority areas for evaluation, permit processing and monitoring. These criteria are not listed in order of importance and should be considered where applicable. It should be noted that the list below is not exclusive, additional local issues may also be considered when setting priorities. Identify and document additional criteria considered by your office on the *Priority List for Grazing Allotments and Permits* (Attachment 1).

In GRSG habitat the prioritization process should also consider:

- Allotments containing large, contiguous areas of sagebrush cover.
- Allotments where GRSG Plan adaptive management triggers have been exceeded.
- Value or importance of the area to provide connectivity between seasonal habitats or PHMA.
- Areas where modifications to grazing management will facilitate implementation of vegetation treatments to make progress towards meeting habitat objectives.
- Any additional relevant criteria identified in the pertinent GRSG Plan.
- Consideration of other resources present, such as T&E or special status species, as well as other resources such as habitat management areas, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, and other designated lands (e.g., National Conservation Lands, wild horse herd management area, etc.).
- Areas where there is preliminary information to indicate resource issues (e.g., riparian condition) or likelihood of areas not meeting standards, but that have not been evaluated.
- Existing land health assessments and Habitat Assessment Summary Reports in GRSG habitat to the extent they help identify whether or not GRSG habitat objectives from the applicable GRSG Plan are being met.
- Areas with declining sage-grouse populations.
- Areas where known threats are impacting sage-grouse habitat availability (e.g., cheatgrass invasion).
- Areas not meeting Land Health Standards
- Condition of riparian areas, including wet meadows.
- Areas that have never been assessed for meeting habitat objectives, and land health standards.
- The need to respond to urgent concerns (e.g., fire).
- Areas identified as important through application of the Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool (FIAT) or Sagebrush Management Resilience and Resistance Tool (SMRRT).
- Potential for partnerships:
 - Cooperative or coordinated management with adjacent land owners/permittees may offer opportunities for broader landscape habitat management

- Permittees have already entered into Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCA's) or Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA's)
- Areas identified as potential mitigation sites.
- Applicable legal requirements (e.g., court orders or statutory requirements).

Preparing for Permit Review and Processing

Following identification of priority areas for processing permits, the BLM should ensure there are complete land health assessments to be included in the review and processing of grazing permits. In addition to local information, use landscape scale information (e.g., FIAT, the BLM Rapid Eco-regional Assessment (REA), Habitat Assessment Summary Reports) where available to inform your priority setting process. The information in these tools can best be used to identify general conditions and other program priorities, as well as risks and potential opportunities for integrated management at the landscape scale.

Grazing permit review and processing will include ensuring that land health assessments and evaluations are completed and up-to-date. This may require updating older evaluations as needed to include recent monitoring or GRSG habitat assessment information or by completing a new land health assessment. An update may be particularly relevant if an event such as a fire or change in management has occurred since the last evaluation report.

Consultation and Coordination

As required in Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 4110.3-1(c); 4110.3-3(a); 4110.3-3(b); 4120.2(c) and (e); 4130.2(b) and 4130.6-2¹, field offices will consult and coordinate with grazing permit holders, interested public, state agencies, tribes and other appropriate federal agencies when gathering data to compare current conditions to land health standards and objectives; developing alternatives for NEPA analysis, particularly when considering adjustments in authorized use; and developing a monitoring plan, particularly if other parties will be collecting data to determine the effectiveness of any changes in management. In addition to the consultation and coordination with the entities required by regulation, field offices will also include relevant federal and state agencies (e.g., FWS and state fish and wildlife agency) and local government in the process.

Setting Priorities for Effectiveness Monitoring

Field offices will be responsible for allotment monitoring to determine whether management is meeting or making progress towards meeting habitat objectives, land health standards, and other land use plan objectives. Frequency of monitoring will be influenced by field office capacity and should be based upon the level of resource concerns and uncertainties associated with each allotment or grazing permit/lease. For example, after issuing a new fully processed grazing permit, it may be appropriate to monitor an allotment more frequently in the first 2 to 3 years of implementing a new grazing management system, while less frequent monitoring would be needed where a satisfactory management system has been in place for several years.

¹ All citations using 43 CFR Part 4100 refer to the version of the grazing regulations published in the October 1, 2005, edition of the Code of Federal Regulations.

Setting Priorities for Compliance Monitoring

Monitoring compliance with terms and conditions of grazing permits (use supervision) is based primarily on any recent history of non-compliance, local knowledge of existing resource use conflicts, and random selection by the Rangeland Administration System (RAS)². Monitoring compliance with terms and conditions of grazing permits in allotments within SFAs, particularly those with lotic and lentic riparian areas will be a high priority. Monitoring priority should be placed on allotments where management thresholds and responses have been incorporated into grazing permits/leases. Within each habitat category, monitoring of grazing use and compliance with permits and management plans should be prioritized in areas where livestock use has the potential to negatively affect seasonal sage-grouse habitats. For instance, summer grazing in areas with unprotected lotic and lentic riparian areas, including wet meadows, should be prioritized to ensure that unacceptable impacts to these important sage-grouse brood rearing areas are not occurring. Similarly, monitoring spring grazing in breeding and nesting habitat should be prioritized to ensure that adequate residual herbaceous vegetation is left to provide for concealment throughout the nesting period, as defined by seasonal habitat objectives listed in each GRSG Plan.

Timeframe: This policy is effective immediately.

Budget Impact: There is substantial new work involved with completing multiscale GRSG habitat assessments, increased consultation and coordination with permittees and interested parties during NEPA alternative development, increased monitoring of compliance with new terms and conditions in permits, and monitoring effectiveness of grazing management in sage-grouse habitat. The emphasis on completing GRSG habitat assessments and focusing on gathering data and processing permits in GRSG habitat will affect the BLM's ability to process and issue permits in lower priority areas. Training is likely to be an additional expense to gather monitoring data. Contracting to meet the additional workload also has the potential to substantially impact the budget.

Background: The BLM initiated the National Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy in response to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) March 2010 "warranted, but precluded" Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing petition decision. The BLM, in coordination with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, developed a targeted, multi-tiered, coordinated, collaborative landscape-level management strategy, based on the best available science, which offers the highest level of protection for GRSG in the most important habitat areas. The Rocky Mountain Region Greater Sage-Grouse Record of Decision (ROD) approved a total of eight Resource Management Plan (RMP) revisions and four RMP amendments. The Great Basin Region Greater Sage-Grouse ROD approved four RMP amendments. These RODs and Approved Resource Management Plans and Amendments were signed on September 21, 2015. The targeted protections afforded in these plans not only protect the GRSG and its habitat, but

² The Rangeland Administration System (RAS) maintains electronic files about allotments, authorizations, and grazing bill history and serves as an electronic calendar for issuance of approximately 18,000 applications and 2,400 grazing authorizations per year.

also over 350 wildlife species associated with the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem, which is widely recognized as one of the most imperiled of its kind in North America

Manual/Handbook Sections Affected: Manual Section 4100 Grazing Administration (Rel. 4-109) in regards to setting priorities; Handbook 4130-1 Authorizing Grazing Use (Rel. 4-75) in regards to setting priorities, completing environmental assessments, reviewing and modifying grazing authorizations; and Handbook 4180-1 Rangeland Health Standards (Rel. 4-107) in regards to criteria for selecting assessment and evaluation areas, and prioritizing assessment and evaluation areas.

Coordination: This IM was prepared in coordination with the BLM Division of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, and the Solicitor's Office.

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Attachment

1- Priority List for Grazing Allotments and Permits (1p)

ATTACHMENT 1

PRIORITY LIST FOR GRAZING ALLOTMENTS AND PERMITS

Field Office	Allotment Number	Allotment Name	Priority Group (First, Second, Third, Fourth)	Factors for Priority Group Assignment	Date Assigned to Priority Group	Year of last Land Health Assessment	Standards Met/Not Met	Acres of Public land in Allotment	Acres SFA	Acres PHMA	Acres GHMA	HMA/HA	Special Management Designations (WSA, ACEC, etc)	Other T&E, Special status species	Grazing Authorization Number(s)	Current Permit status (Processed) (Appropriations Act) (FLPMA Section 402(c)(2))	Grazing Authorization Expiration Date(s)	Operator Name(s)

All references to Acres above is strictly referring to BLM acres.

Some factors for assigning priority or grouping for NEPA include, but are not limited to the following:

- Meets criteria for use of a CX to renew a permit/lease
- Contains Sage-grouse habitat-
 - Sagebrush Focal Area
 - Priority Habitat
 - Idaho Habitat Management Area
 - General Habitat
 - Other Habitat Management Area
- Areas that have never been assessed for meeting land health standards
- Is meeting land health standards
- Is not meeting land health standards
 - current livestock grazing is a significant causal factor (take action before beginning of next grazing seasons)
- Can be part of a multiple allotment NEPA document
- Changes in grazing management have the potential to be particularly effective over large areas, or in improving significant resources concerns.
- Potential for partnerships-
 - Cooperative or coordinated management with adjacent land owners/permittees may offer opportunities for broader landscape habitat management
 - Isolated Public land parcels may have critical resources, or may be lower priority for investing resources
- Riparian Area presence and condition
- Allotments containing large, contiguous areas of sagebrush cover
- Allotments where GRSB Plan adaptive management thresholds have been exceeded
- Value or importance of area to provide connectivity between seasonal habitats
- Consideration of other resources present, such as T&E or special status species
- Areas where there is preliminary information to indicate resource issues, but that have not been evaluated
- Areas with declining sage-grouse population
- Areas where known threats are impacting sage-grouse habitat availability
- Applicable legal requirements
- Status of Conditions as reported in Rapid Eco-regional Assessments (REAs), Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool (FIAT), Habitat Assessment Summary Report, etc.

Additional factors for consideration are listed in the Instruction Memorandum