

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
for
Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment
Grazing Permit Modification
Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-MT-L070-2010-0008-EA**

INTRODUCTION:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the effects of a range of alternatives to change the current grazing use in the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment #05610 (Allotment).

The Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment is located in the northcentral portion of Montana in the southwest corner of Phillips County, north of the Missouri River and west of Highway 66. The size of the Allotment is 51,168 acres which includes 44,584 acres of public land, 3,287 acres of private land and 3,297 acres of state land.

Grazing management activities occurring on public land must meet the Standards of Rangeland Health (Standards) and conform to the Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management (Guidelines). In 2011, based on information provided in the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment #05610 Evaluation Report (Evaluation Report), it was determined that land health standards were not being met in the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment. The Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment #05610 Determination of Conformance with Land Health Standards and Livestock Grazing Guidelines (Determination Document), concluded Standard #1 (Upland Health) and Standard #5 (Wildlife Habitat) were not being met, that grazing is not in conformance with Guidelines 5, 8 and 11 and that current livestock grazing practices was a causal factor.

As a result of those findings, the BLM proposes to modify the current grazing practices on the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment by adjusting the timing and levels of livestock use so that progress can be made toward meeting the Standards and conform to the Guidelines.

The EA analyzes four alternatives from which I have selected Alternative C (Preferred Alternative). Alternative C is described starting on page 13 of the EA and would modify the terms and conditions for three grazing permits within the Allotment.

Alternative C addresses the need for the Proposed Action and meets the following objectives:

Objective 1. Improving and maintaining upland areas (plant composition, structure) through changes in livestock grazing management and structural improvements. Increase the canopy cover of cool season perennial grasses; improve infiltration; improve residual grass and litter cover; and, improve diversity of plant species.

Objective 2. Improving and maintaining upland areas within greater sage-grouse habitat (plant composition, structure) through changes in livestock grazing management and structural improvements.

Increase herbaceous cover of native perennial grasses and forbs and increase residual herbaceous cover for greater sage-grouse and other ground nesting birds in sagebrush/grassland plant communities.

Objective 3. Improving health and vigor of important big game winter browse species by reducing utilization through changes in livestock grazing management and structural improvements. Reduce utilization on key browse species and improve vigor, regeneration and availability for wildlife.

PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY:

The Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment is located within the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (Monument). The Record of Decision and Approved Plan for the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument became effective on December 4, 2008 (Monument Plan). All actions approved or authorized by the BLM must conform to the Monument Plan.

Livestock grazing will be managed through the implementation of Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management. Through the watershed and/or activity plan process, assessments of standards are prepared. If existing grazing management is responsible for not meeting standards, modifications to the grazing authorization are implemented to ensure standards will be met. These can include changes to allocated use, seasons of use, grazing rotations or other grazing management practices. Continued monitoring as it relates to Standards for Rangeland Health will be the basis of making adjustments to livestock grazing (Monument Plan, page 49).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION:

Based upon a review of the Antelope Creek EA and supporting documents (Evaluation Report, Determination Document), I have determined that Alternative C, the Preferred Alternative, is not a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. For this reason no environmental impact statement needs to be prepared. This finding is based on the following rationale and discussion of context and intensity of the action.

Context:

The Preferred Alternative, Alternative C, would occur within the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment, Lewistown Field Office, Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, and would have local impacts on the resources similar to and within the scope of those described and considered in the Record of Decision and Approved Plan for the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (2008). The project is an action directly involving 44,584 acres of public land. This action, by itself does not have international, national, regional or state-wide importance.

Intensity:

The following discussion is based on the ten significant criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and supplemental instruction memorandum, acts, regulation and executive orders. The following has been considered in evaluating this proposal:

1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

The Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment EA analyzed the impacts to affected resources in Chapter 4 beginning on page 29. Design features, starting on page 9, are listed to minimize or eliminate the impacts to resources likely to be affected by implementing Alternative C. None of the environmental effects

discussed in detail in the EA and associated appendices are considered significant, nor do the effects exceed those described in the Record of Decision and Approved Plan for the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument (2008). Implementing Alternative C would improve upland health conditions to meet the Standards of Rangeland Health, improve habitat for greater sage-grouse and reduce the conflicts between big game and livestock.

2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.

No concerns were identified or known instances where public health or safety has been affected. The Allotment is located within a rural setting. The amount of forage allocated to grazing and livestock stocking levels have been fairly stable over the last 30 to 40 years and has occurred in combination with other human activities (OHV, hunting, hiking, and natural gas development).

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

A discussion of characteristics unique to the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment was described in Chapter 3 beginning on page 18 of the EA. The project area contains cultural resources, two wilderness study areas, a wild and scenic river, riparian-wetland areas and greater sage-grouse habitat. These were analyzed in detail in Chapter 4 of the EA. Based on the EA I have determined that the selected alternative will not have a significant impact on the unique characteristics within the affected area for the following reasons:

Cultural resources are present within the Allotment. Based on site conditions as observed in the 2010 and 2011 seasons, selecting Alternative C would have no effect on cultural resources. No site degradation associated with livestock grazing, trailing or loafing was observed. Since supplemental feeding has the expressed purpose of attracting animals to a single point there is the potential for trailing and trampling impacts to lithic sites.

The Antelope Creek WSA (12,350 acres) and portions of the Cow Creek WSA (12,620 acres) lie within the Allotment. Three of the existing reservoirs scheduled for maintenance are located within the Cow Creek WSA. These structures were constructed prior to October 21, 1976 and are therefore "grandfathered" livestock developments. All scheduled repairs to the reservoirs located within the WSA would be limited to the extent of their development that existed on October 21, 1976.

Stogie Spring is located within the Cow Creek WSA, was constructed prior to October 21, 1976 and is therefore considered a "grandfathered" livestock development. Adding a wooden post and pole fence (exclosure) to eliminate trampling by livestock, would allow vegetation to become established and improve water quality and was determined to benefit wilderness values.

The proposed stock water pipeline and six stocks are not located within the Cow Creek or Antelope Creek WSA.

There were no impacts identified to wild and scenic rivers.

Riparian-wetland areas were considered a relevant non-affected resource. The streams and riparian habitat in the Antelope Creek Grazing Allotment are meeting BLM riparian and water quality standards and were not identified as a concern or resource issue requiring any management changes.

The Allotment contains 8,784 acres of BLM, 1,277 acres of private land and 850 acres of state land designated as Core Habitat and Preliminary Priority Habitat for greater sage-grouse. The proposed changes in grazing management described in Alternative C would improve herbaceous and residual cover. Implementing allowable use levels would ensure there is adequate herbaceous cover and standing material remaining at the end of the grazing season improving nesting and escape cover for ground nesting birds, including greater sage-grouse.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Issues raised during the analysis were identified during public scoping with interested publics and the grazing permittees. Prior to the scoping process, comments were received from the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). A scoping letter was mailed to state agencies, interested publics and others potentially affected by the proposed management changes. Several meetings were held with the affected grazing permittees. Issues were also raised through internal (BLM) review and interdisciplinary processes. After review of the comments and issues identified from the scoping process and those analyzed in the EA, I have determined that the effects described in the EA are not highly controversial and Alternative C conforms to current BLM land use plan guidance.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

Livestock grazing within the Monument is not unique or unusual and is a widespread action authorized by the BLM. The effects to the human environment were thoroughly analyzed in the EA. The predicted effects from implementing Alternative C are not considered to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The actions presented in Alternative C were developed and analyzed by an Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team). Modifying a BLM grazing permit to comply with the Standards of Rangeland Health is cited in BLM's grazing regulations under Title 43, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 4100. "When monitoring or field observations show grazing use or patterns of use are not consistent with the provisions of subpart 4180, or grazing use is otherwise causing an unacceptable level or pattern of utilization, or when use exceeds the livestock carrying capacity as determined through monitoring, ecological site inventory or other acceptable methods, the authorized officer shall reduce permitted grazing use or otherwise modify management practices. A complete disclosure of the effects of Alternative C is contained in Chapter 4 beginning on page 29 of the EA.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.

An ID Team evaluated the proposed actions in Alternative C in context of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. A cumulative effects analysis was conducted as part of the EA, and it determined that there were no cumulatively significant effects identified or predicted with implementation of Alternative C.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Based on previous cultural surveys and through mitigation by avoidance, no adverse impacts to cultural resources were identified or anticipated. There are no known features within the Allotment, listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places that would be adversely affected by Alternative C. The following design feature will be included as a term and condition of the grazing permit to avoid impacting known cultural sites.

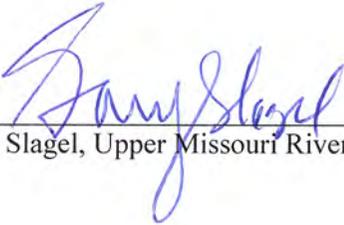
Supplemental feeding would not be authorized within the Bean Place due to the high concentration of cultural sites in the Bell Ridge area (T23N, R24E sections 5, 6, 7, 8 and 18).

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

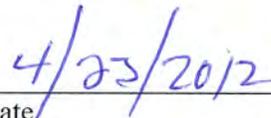
There are no threatened or endangered species present and no designated critical habitat for any listed species within the Allotment. Pallid sturgeon (endangered) are present in the Missouri River adjacent to the Allotment, but would not be affected by Alternative C.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where nonfederal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.

Alternative C does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.



Gary Slagel, Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Manager



Date