Recommendations for Management of the BLM's ACEC from the Resource Advisory Council's Grazing Sub-committee

The Management Goal for the ACEC is to protect the biological qualities of the ACEC, with emphasis on the preservation of the shinnery oak-dune community to enhance the biodiversity of the ecosystem, particularly habitats for the lesser prairie-chicken and the Dunes Sagebrush Lizard. The Resource Advisory Council's (RAC) grazing sub-committee for the BLM's Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) (Fig. 1) is comprised of biologists, land managers, and ranchers who are knowledgeable in the biology, and habitat needs of the lesser prairie chicken. The intention of this subcommittee is to provide recommendations to the RAC regarding the use of grazing and fire as management tools to provide quality habitat on the ACEC.

Recommendations

Active management of the ACEC to produce quality LPC habitat conditions through disturbance in the form of prescribed fire and/or grazing. For nesting habitat, grazing utilization rates should provide for the recommended cover and height of grasses and leave substantial residual herbaceous vegetation for the next spring. The utilization rate recommended by this committee is 33% annual growth. This rate is consistent with recommendations from the Lesser Prairie Chicken Range Wide Conservation Plan (Van Pelt et al. 2013). Brood habitat should be interspersed among nesting habitat and created by the use of prescribed burning and/or grazing to maintain a high level of plant diversity. In order to achieve the desired habitat results, it may be necessary to divide the ACEC into 3 or more units and have more than one grazing participant. Below are the goal parameters for LPC nesting and brood rearing habitat in sand shinnery oak habitat (Van Pelt et al. 2013).

LPC habitat in plant communities with a substantial sand shinnery oak component

• Nesting habitat

☐ Canopy cover of sand shinnery oak: >20% but <50%

☐ Canopy cover of preferred grasses (native bluestems, switchgrass, indiangrass, and sideoats grama): >20%

☐ Canopy cover of a mix of native forb species: : >10%

☐ Variable grass heights that average: >15"

• Brood habitat

☐ Canopy cover of sand shinnery oak: 10-25%

☐ Canopy cover of preferred native grasses: >15%

☐ Canopy cover of a mix of native forbs: >20%

☐ Variable grass heights that average: >15"

☐ Shrub, grass and forb understory open enough to allow movements of chicks

Strategy 1: Fire

- Prescribed burns should be planned yearly, and should rotate locations using patch burning techniques which will create a habitat mosaic.
- No more than 10% of the entire area of the ranch should be burned in any one year.
- Burned areas should be allowed to recover for 3-7 years prior to another planned burn in the same area. This will simulate the presumed historical fire return interval.
- Timing of prescribed burns will be left to the discretion of the BLM.
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Strategy 2: Prescribed Fire plus Grazing Management

- Prescribed burns should be planned yearly, and should rotate locations using patch burning techniques which will create a habitat mosaic.
- No more than 10% of the entire area of the ranch should be burned in any one year.
- Burned areas should be allowed to rest 1 growing season prior to the burn and 1 or more years after the burn prior to being grazed. Full recovery will be determined by the BLM and the grazing participant.
- Timing of prescribed burns will be left to the discretion of the BLM.
- If a wildfire burns the majority of a grazing only unit, the habitat should be allowed to properly recover (1-2 years) following the fire prior to grazing being reintroduced on the unit.
- Average utilization rate for the entire property should not exceed 33% annual growth.
- A flexible grazing plan will be written by the grazing participant and approved by the BLM.

Strategy 3: Grazing

- Grazing should initially concentrate on the southern end of the property.
- In order to get the proper level of disturbance that is needed in larger pastures, we recommend evaluating pasture size and potentially sub-dividing these larger pastures into smaller units using wildlife friendly fencing.
- If a wildfire burns the majority of a grazing only unit, the habitat should be allowed to properly recover (1-2 years) following the fire prior to grazing being reintroduced on the unit.
- Average utilization rate for the entire property should not exceed 33% annual growth.
- Rotational, managed grazing should be implemented to allow for adequate recovery of vegetation.
- Grazed units should be allowed to fully recover at least one growing season (May 1 – Oct. 31) prior to being grazed again.
- Specifics of the number of AUM's, timing, etc. can be left to the discretion of the contracted rancher as long as the above parameters are followed.
- A flexible grazing plan will be written by the grazing participant and approved by the BLM.

Application Process

The RAC/ACEC sub-committee will create a competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) in March of 2015. Interested ranchers with an active cattle operation will be eligible to apply. Applicants will be ranked based on the attached ranking criteria (Table 1). Applicants must attend an informational meeting and tour of the ACEC. Applicants must submit a written grazing management plan for the ACEC. The selected applicant will sign a 5 year cooperative agreement with the BLM that outlines the grazing stipulations they must follow. A 30 day non-compliance clause should be written into the agreement. A grazing fee (amount determined by the BLM) will be paid and the proceeds held by a non-profit organization. This money may be used for the hiring of range specialists, or for the maintenance of infrastructure on the property.

Monitoring

BLM should continue with their lek and vegetation monitoring. Vegetation monitoring should include 1) total vegetation canopy cover, 2) percentage of preferred grasses and shrubs present (little bluestem, sand bluestem, indian grass, switchgrass, sideoats grama, shinnery oak, and sand sagebrush), 3) percentage of trees less than 3' in height, 4) grass height, 5) height-density measurement using a Roble pole or other method providing the same information, and 6) forage production/utilization. Utilization data should be collected as soon as possible after cattle are removed from any particular area. Rain gauges should also be established at random points and monitored immediately following precipitation events. BLM range conservationists and wildlife biologists, along with external range and LPC biologists should re-evaluate the ACEC's established monitoring program and determine if the sites and frequency of monitoring is adequate or if additional monitoring sites are required.

Meetings

The RAC/ACEC grazing subcommittee shall meet at least twice a year, once in the spring (May) and again in the fall (November) in order to evaluate the grazing and fire plan, and make changes and additional recommendations if necessary. The subcommittee may call additional meetings if the need arises.

Literature Cited

Van Pelt, W.E., S. Kyle, J. Pitman, D. Klute, G. Beauprez, D. Schoeling, A. Janus, J. Haufler, 2013. The Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-wide Conservation Plan. Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Cheyenne, Wyoming, pp.367

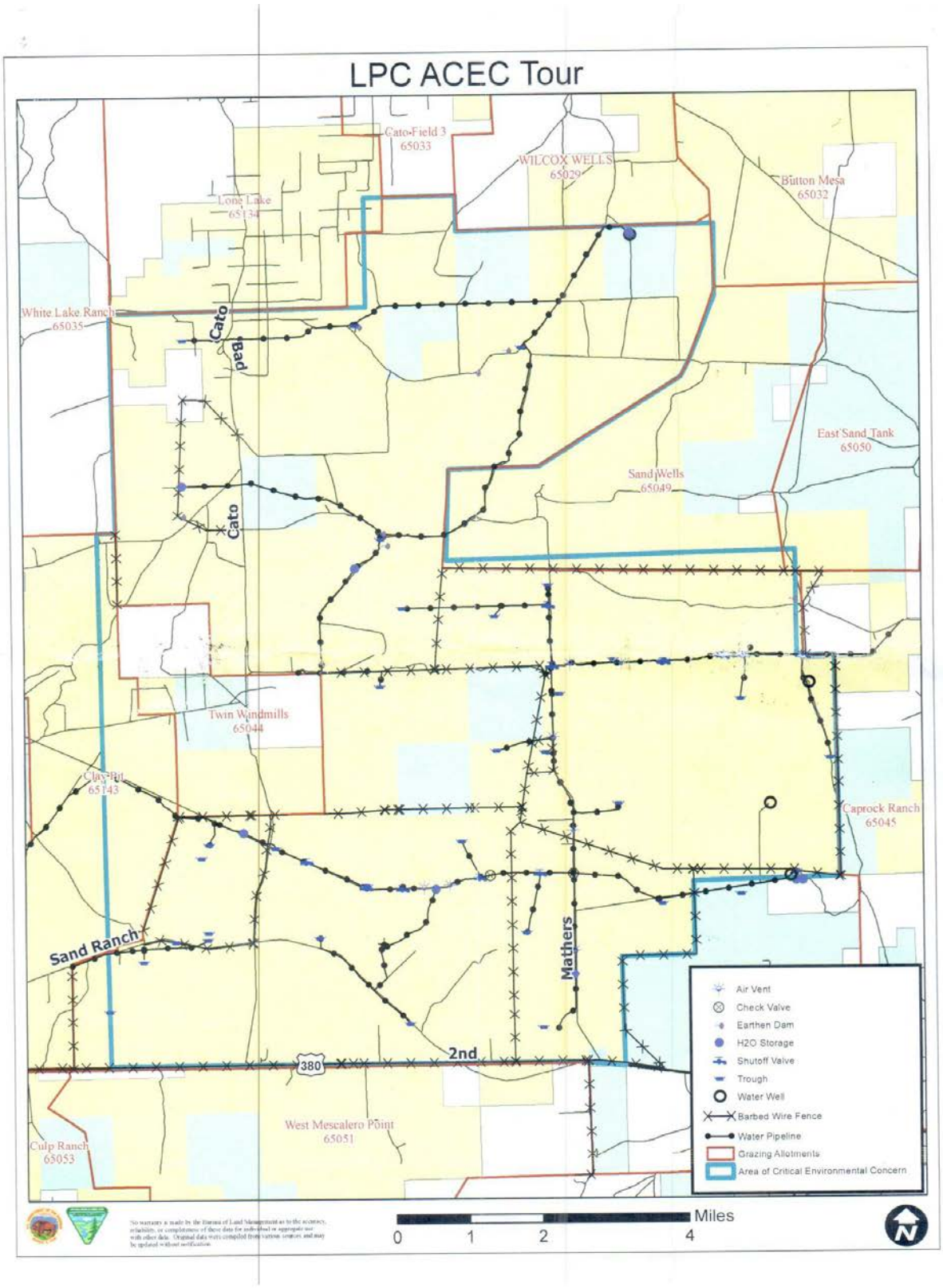

Fig. 1. ACEC map.