



File Code: 1950/2230

Date: April 28, 2008

Dear Interested Party:

The Kemmerer Ranger District is proposing to continue sheep grazing in two project areas: the *Smiths Fork Area Grazing Allotments* and the *Lower Salt Creek Grazing Allotment*. The Smiths Fork Area analysis includes the following sheep allotments: Smiths Fork Creek, Buckskin Knoll and Lake Alice. The Lower Salt Creek sheep allotment will be analyzed separately. All of these allotments are located on the southwestern end of the Salt Range, centered in the area north of Lake Alice, approximately 18 miles south of Afton, WY and 25 miles north of Cokeville, WY. Please see the attached map. These four allotments lie within Desired Future Condition 10 and/or 12 of the 1990 Bridger-Teton Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan).

I am asking you to review the proposal and submit any comments or concerns you may have about these projects. Your comments will be used in our environmental analyses to help: (1) determine the scope of the issues to be addressed; (2) determine the significant issues relating to the proposed action; (3) assist in the development of alternatives to be analyzed; and (4) identify mitigation and restoration opportunities.

Please see the section titled "How to Comment" for further information on submitting your comments. If you would like to remain on the mailing list for this project please return the attached form or send an email to gdean@fs.fed.us confirming your interest. If I do not hear from you I will remove your name from the mailing list for further correspondence on this project.

Background and Existing Management

Smiths Fork Creek, Lake Alice, Buckskin Knoll. The Smiths Fork Grazing Analysis area is approximately 35,055 acres (Smiths Fork Creek-7,942 acres, Buckskin Knoll-13,059 acres, Lake Alice-13,560 acres). These allotments are part of a four allotment rest-rotation system (Porcupine Cr. is the fourth allotment) where three allotments are each grazed by a band of sheep every year and one allotment is rested. There are three pastures within each allotment. During the 1990's, there was an additional practice of providing and rotating rest on one of the pastures within each grazed allotment. However, the drier conditions during the last several years have prompted the allotments grazed each year to be managed for grazing the entire allotment once-over lightly. Due to limited access into these allotments the general pattern of grazing is to enter and exit at the same point, and graze in a clockwise or counter-clockwise pattern covering the entire allotment. The direction of the grazing pattern is varied between years. There are no structural improvements on these allotments.



Current permitted use is summarized below.

Allotment	Permitted Livestock Numbers	Season of Use	Permitted AUM's
Smiths Fork Creek	1200	July 16 – September 15	480
Buckskin Knoll	1200	July 16 – September 15	480
Lake Alice	1300	July 11 – September 10	520

Lower Salt Creek. This allotment is approximately 7,135 acres. The allotment is grazed by a band of sheep each year. The practice of rotating rest between pastures on this allotment has, for the last six grazing seasons, been suspended to relieve the impact from drought conditions. During this time of drought the practice of grazing the entire allotment once-over lightly has been applied. Like the allotments above, the entry/exit point is always the same but the pattern of grazing within the allotment varies between years. The only structural improvement is the Salt Flat corral. Several bands of sheep trail across this allotment into and out of the Salt Flat corral to other Forest Service allotments.

Current permitted use is summarized below.

Allotment	Permitted Livestock Numbers	Season of Use	Permitted AUM's
Lower Salt Creek S&G	1400	July 1 – October 10	925

Current management in all allotments includes ongoing administrative adjustments to facilitate the resources moving towards a functioning and desired condition, implement Forest Plan standards and guidelines relating to livestock management. Current management also includes ongoing adjustments to livestock grazing practices to protect soils, water and wildlife habitat through Best Management Practices.

The following table shows the acres and dominant rangeland vegetation of each allotment.

allotment name	total acres	dominant vegetation types
Smiths Fork	7942	24% sagebrush/shrublands 4% grasslands/dry meadow 4% aspen
Buckskin Knoll	13059	24% sagebrush/shrublands 4% grasslands/dry meadow 4% aspen
Lake Alice	13560	29% sagebrush/shrublands 7% grasslands/dry meadow 6% aspen
Lower Salt Creek	7135	33% aspen 18% sagebrush/shrublands

Each allotment also has 1-3% herblands and 1-3% riparian.

Livestock were trailed through the area as part of the Lander Trail Cutoff of the Oregon Trail during the 1850's. While the impact of this trail is still evident today, the trail itself and the many livestock that traveled it probably have little impact to the area outside the trail proper. Livestock began using the Salt Pass and Smiths Fork watersheds on a more permanent basis in the late 1870's as cattle and sheep were trailed up from the Salt Lake Valley north through Idaho and Wyoming. At this same time livestock began returning to the Green River Valley back over the Lander Cutoff Trail. During the late 1870's approximately 50,000 to over 100,000 head of cattle had returned across the greater Salt Pass and Smiths Fork areas of the Lander Cutoff Trail. At this same time over 40,000 head of sheep were herded through this area in the spring and in the fall. There were no Forest Reserves at that time, and subsequently no real control over livestock grazing on these soon to be public lands. In 1904 the Yellowstone Forest Reserve was created and later the Wyoming National Forest in 1908. Grazing allotments were established and the stock driveways became an increasing problem. Between the early 1900's and the 1940's, sheep and cattle numbers were at an all time high. However, in the 1950's livestock numbers began to be drastically reduced in an attempt to amend for past impact of livestock use. Between then and now, livestock numbers have been reduced to approximately 1/3 or more of what numbers had been at the high point of livestock grazing in the Smiths Fork area.

In addition to historic and current livestock grazing, other disturbances and some of their indicators within the project area are: spruce/fir encroachment into aspen stands, extended fire return intervals; overland flow and sheet erosion; transitional (spring and fall) and summer grazing by elk, mule deer and moose; dispersed recreation use; trailing of sheep permitted on other allotments and trespass cattle use from adjacent allotments.

The lack of disturbance has also increased the area of excessive mountain big sagebrush canopy in various locations across the area.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the proposed actions is to continue to authorize livestock grazing on four allotments in support of direction provided in the Forest Plan Objective 1.1 (h) – Provide forage for about 260,000 Animal Unit Months of livestock grazing annually.

The needs and objectives for these actions are:

- to comply with Public Law 104 of the 1995 Reclamation Act by completing National Environmental Policy Act analysis on these allotments.
- to update grazing management direction and to identify vegetation and watershed treatments that would improve unsatisfactory upland conditions and maintain good upland conditions where they occur.
- to increase the amount and diversity of vegetation within the current capability of soils and site conditions.
- to reduce sediment delivery to drainages supporting fisheries, and improving retention of precipitation on uplands, as evidenced by headcutting/gullies, sign of active erosion, and incorporation of litter in the surface soil.
- to increase the forage available for permitted livestock and wildlife, particularly in big game transition and summer range as evidenced by amount and diversity of herbaceous

vegetation and shrubs species in mountain big sagebrush communities.

- to perpetuate wildlife values within aspen stands across the landscape by a diversity of aspen age classes as well as herbaceous and shrub species in the understory.

Proposed Action

Smiths Fork Grazing Allotments. We are proposing to continue livestock grazing in all three allotments on a rotation system with the two adjacent allotments (Porcupine Creek and Corral Creek). In addition we propose to define the parameters that would be used to manage permitted livestock grazing to meet desired conditions, and to identify vegetation and watershed treatments aimed at improving range conditions such as prescribed fire, herbicides, seeding, mowing and erosion control structures.

The following table displays the proposed action and what is currently permitted for the Smiths Fork Grazing Allotments.

Allotment	Proposed Action	Currently Permitted
Smiths Fork SF	3 bands of 1100 and 1 band of 1200 yearlings rotating through 5 allotments.	3 bands of variable size: 1200 to 1300 rotating through 4 allotments.
Buckskin Knoll BSK		
Porcupine Crk PC		
Lake Alice LA		
Corral Crk CC		1200 yearlings ea. year
Grazing system	SF.BSK.PC. LA. and CC: rest 1 of the 5 allotments each year. Rotate yearling band through 5 allotments.	SF.BSK.PC. LA. and CC: rest 1 of the 5 allotments each year.
Animal #'s ¹	5600	6100
Sheep Months ²	9,930	13,092
Graze current permitted times	25% reduction in time on SF and BSK	Yes
Rotate yearlings	Yes	No

¹ All animal units are **ewe w/lamb** unless noted as yearlings

² All animal months are **ewe/lamb animal months**. The yearling animal months have been converted to ewe/lamb animal months at a ratio of 2:1

Lower Salt Creek Allotment. The proposed action for this allotment is to allow current grazing management within this allotment to continue as currently permitted. The consideration of options for the trailing from the Salt Flat corral through this allotment by seven bands of sheep permitted on other Forest Service allotments would be analyzed in an environmental analysis scheduled to occur next year. The proposed action would not include any changes to the permitted trailing at this time.

The Proposed Action (current permitted use) is summarized below.

Allotment	Permitted Livestock Numbers	Season of Use	Permitted AUM's	Grazing System
Lower Salt Creek S&G	1400	July 1 – October 10	925	Once over

For both projects grazing parameters to be determined would include:

- desired conditions of resources on sheep allotments taken from the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, other plans, and technical information.
- allowable use standards
- season of use
- Best Management Practices to be implemented as terms and conditions of the permit
- number of pastures and grazing systems
- structural improvements necessary to help improve/sustain resource conditions
- number of livestock

Vegetation Treatments. There are areas within both project areas that would benefit from vegetation treatments, in consort with grazing management, to meet the project objectives in large areas of excessive canopy of mountain big sagebrush, on elk transitory (spring and fall) ranges, and where conifer is encroaching into aspen stands.

Treatment methods available are prescribed fire, cutting conifers out of aspen stands, mowing or brush hogging a sagebrush mosaic on less steep sites, a species specific application of herbicides to create a mosaic of sagebrush canopy classes; in combination with rest from grazing, if needed, until the treatment objectives are achieved. Treatments would be planned at a large enough scale to achieve restoration objectives and to reduce detrimental impacts from wildlife use during the rest period. These methods would be applied on site-specific areas that take into account the current capability of the soils and site and the potential for increasing the amount and diversity of vegetation to achieve the project objectives.

Within aspen stands across the landscape, treatments would be designed to achieve a diversity of aspen age classes and a diversity of herbaceous species in the understory. In addition, treatments would be planned to reduce the density and mono-age class within sagebrush sites.

The primary benefit from these treatments would be an increase in available subsurface water to more desirable aspen, shrubs and sagebrush, and grasses and forbs. A secondary improvement

would be to reduce competition for available nutrients and sunlight from overstory dominating trees and sagebrush that will provide for more site specific plant species diversity.

Watershed Improvements. Watershed improvements in the Smiths Fork area include site specific construction of erosion control structures from locally available materials (timber or stone), the addition of organic material and erosion control mats in more eroded sites within water flow channels, seeding of native grasses and forbs in those areas where existing soils or organic material levels will support new growth and the closure of undesignated trails that will impact seedling development and site improvement.

Scope of the Decision To Be Made

As the Kemmerer District Ranger and Responsible Official for the Smiths Fork Grazing Allotments and the Lower Salt Creek Grazing Allotment projects I will decide whether to authorize continued permitted livestock grazing and any vegetation and/or watershed treatments and, if livestock grazing is authorized, what parameters will be used to manage permitted livestock grazing. The analysis and the subsequent decision on the Lower Salt Creek allotment will not include consideration of the trailing of permitted sheep across a portion of the allotment onto other Forest Service allotments. Although it was considered, it made more sense to analyze the trailing operation as a part of the grazing allotments analysis scheduled for 2009.

In determining what level of analysis may be required for these decisions, consideration of complexity of the actions, the anticipated effects, and input gathered during scoping are used in determining whether a categorical exclusion, environmental assessment, or environmental impact statement would be necessary.

Our preliminary assessment is that the Lower Salt Creek allotment may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) as authorized in Section 339 of the 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act. Evaluation of monitoring data indicates no adverse impacts to other resources from the currently permitted grazing occurring on the allotment. However, a final determination as to the appropriate level of NEPA will be made following review of public input and analysis by an interdisciplinary team.

How to Comment and Timeframe

I want to hear from you about the Proposed Action I am considering. In making my decision, I will consider your comments and input on the expected environmental effects of the Proposed Action. I encourage you to provide specific rationale for your comments and opinions.

For your comments on this Proposed Action to be most helpful please provide them in written format, facsimile, hand-delivered, orally or electronically by **May 29, 2008**.

Submit comments to:

Tracy Hollingshead, District Ranger
Kemmerer Ranger District
308 Hwy 189 N.
Kemmerer, WY 83101

Phone: (307) 877-4415
Fax: (307) 828-5135

The office business hours for hand-delivered comments are 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., M-F, mountain time, excluding holidays.

Provide oral comments to me as the Responsible Official, at the Kemmerer Ranger District during business hours (see previous paragraph), via telephone or in person.

You may submit electronic comments in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to comments-intermtn-bridger-teton-kemmerer@fs.fed.us
Please put the project name in the ‘Subject’ line.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requestor of the agency’s decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requestor that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within 10 days.

Sincerely,

/s/ *Tracy Hollingshead*

TRACY M. HOLLINGSHEAD
Kemmerer District Ranger

PROJECT INTEREST CONFIRMATION FORM

Select the appropriate response and write in new information.

_____ Yes, I am interested in staying involved in the Smiths Fork Grazing Allotments and the Lower Salt Creek Grazing Allotment Management Plans. Please keep my name on the mailing list for future mailings. If my contact information needs to be corrected, I have filled the information below.

Name:

Address:

_____ Yes, I am interested but would prefer to receive future mailings via email.

Email Address:

_____ Not interested.

Please return this form to ATTN: Tracy Hollingshead, Kemmerer Ranger District, 308 Hwy 189 N., Kemmerer, WY 83101

You may also send an email to gdean@fs.fed.us to confirm your interest.

Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forest.