

Two Forest Service grazing plans dismissed

PHOENIX - In response to appeals filed by the Center for Biological Diversity last fall, the U.S. Forest Service today reversed two decisions that would have allowed livestock grazing across 33,000 acres of national forest lands in Arizona.

In both cases, the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests failed to account for the impacts of grazing on pronghorn, deer, elk and tassel-eared squirrel populations. The lands and species in question also include habitat and prey for the threatened Mexican spotted owl and critically endangered Mexican gray wolf.

“Cattle grazing destroys habitat that wildlife need for food and cover,” said Jay Lininger, a Center ecologist. “Our appeals have helped the Forest Service protect wildlife rather than sacrifice it to the livestock industry.”

In two decisions in October, the Forest Service approved grazing on the Cerro Trigo, Greens Peak, Hall and Molina Springs allotments outside Springerville. The Center’s appeals, as well as studies by the Forest Service, showed that already-degraded range conditions and drought could not support the approved levels of grazing.

The change in Forest Service plans for the four livestock grazing allotments comes as the agency revises an overall management plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests. The agency last year proposed a draft land and resource management plan, which would govern all land management on the national forest for up to 15 years. It would eliminate current requirements to maintain viable populations of wildlife and also eliminate forest-wide restrictions on livestock grazing and other industrial uses.

The Forest Service based its reversal of the four grazing allotments near Springerville on existing plan requirements to provide for wildlife and their habitats.

Background on Forest Planning

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the draft forest-management plan for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests would eliminate enforceable standards for wildlife and their habitats or replace them with unenforceable goals.

Specifically, the draft plan would:

- Eliminate the longstanding requirement to maintain viable populations of wildlife species.

- Propose no forest-wide standards for livestock grazing.
- Eliminate forest-wide protections for riparian areas.
- Propose no forest-wide standards relating to exotic and invasive plants.
- Mention “climate change” only once and ignore climate adaptation strategies
- Consist of aspirational guidance and include no contingency for failures.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires each national forest in the 193-million-acre national forest system to maintain and periodically update its land-management plan on a semi-decadal basis. This plan dictates the location and intensity of allowable uses of each national forest. The Act also requires that all management actions are compliant with the applicable plan. The plans themselves must be developed according to nationwide regulations implementing the National Forest Management Act that were created by the Reagan administration in 1982.