

Grazing approved in Bridger-Teton

- By Holly Dabb Sublette Examiner Via Wyoming News Exchange
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- PINEDALE – More than 17 years in the making, the Pinedale Ranger District of the Bridger-Teton National Forest has signed the final record of decision for the Upper Green River Area Rangeland Project. The project allows for continued cattle and horse grazing on 170,643 acres in the Upper Green River watershed.

District Ranger Rob Hoelscher selected alternative three, in the final environmental impact statement, with some modifications. The decision allows livestock grazing on all six allotments and uses livestock management strategies designed to sustain rangeland and riparian health, while improving resource conditions where needed.

In making the final decision, Hoelscher considered the environmental analysis, public comment, consultation with co-operators and federal agencies, as well as discussions from administrative review and objection processes, according to a press release issued by the U.S. Forest Service.

“Grazing is an appropriate use of the National Forest and is important to the community economically and socially,” he said.

In creating his decision, Hoelscher took the needs and concerns of a diverse group of interested parties into account to achieve balance among diverse positions, the press release states.

“Crafting this decision was not easy. On the one hand, some want hard and fast direction and consequences. Permittees on the other hand desire flexibility for their operations,” Hoelscher said. “I believe this decision does a bit of both while meeting the requirements of our land management plan.”

One example of the modification in the final decision is to invite all interested parties to attend pre-grazing season annual meetings.

“This will ensure that future monitoring results, discussion of issues and development of solutions can be considered in a collaborative way,” Hoelscher said.

During the Oct. 14 Sublette County Commissioners’ meeting, commissioner Joel Bousman cited the 17 years of delays in getting the decision as a problem. He said Region 4 is held up in making decisions more than surrounding regions.

In a joint meeting between foresters in Region 2 – located east of the Continental Divide – and Region 4 – located west of the Continental Divide, Bousman asked if there could be a combined effort so Region 2 staff could help staff in Region 4. He said typically the National Environmental Policy Act process is twice as long in Region 4. During the meeting, he requested help to review a potential timber sale on the Upper Green and using the good-neighbor authority to facilitate the process.

“Region 4 doesn’t appear to have the capacity to make it happen and more work needs to be done on the ground,” Bousman said.

Only one day after releasing the decision, conservation groups blasted the decision saying it is “likely to adversely affect” grizzly bears protected under the Endangered Species Act.

“The Upper Green River area has historically been a hotspot for grizzly bear activity as well as killings of the great bear resulting from negligent livestock management,” said John Persell, staff attorney for Western Watersheds Project. “Instead of requiring grazing permittees to use non-lethal methods only, the Forest Service is approving a business-as-usual approach that allows livestock operations to do little to prevent grizzly bear predation on livestock, then turn around and seek the killing of bears when they do what comes naturally, which is to kill and eat the easiest and most vulnerable prey.”

"The Upper Green is a hot spot for grizzly bear conflicts with livestock, but the Forest Service decided to just keep waving cows in front of hungry bears," said Andrea Santarsiere, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. "This disappointing decision will get more livestock eaten and more bears shot. Yellowstone's treasured grizzly bears deserve better."

The groups are currently studying the legal options for a challenge to the decision.

https://www.gillette news record.com/news/wyoming/article_90b542e8-3fae-555c-99df-0f5fefe35ad4.html