

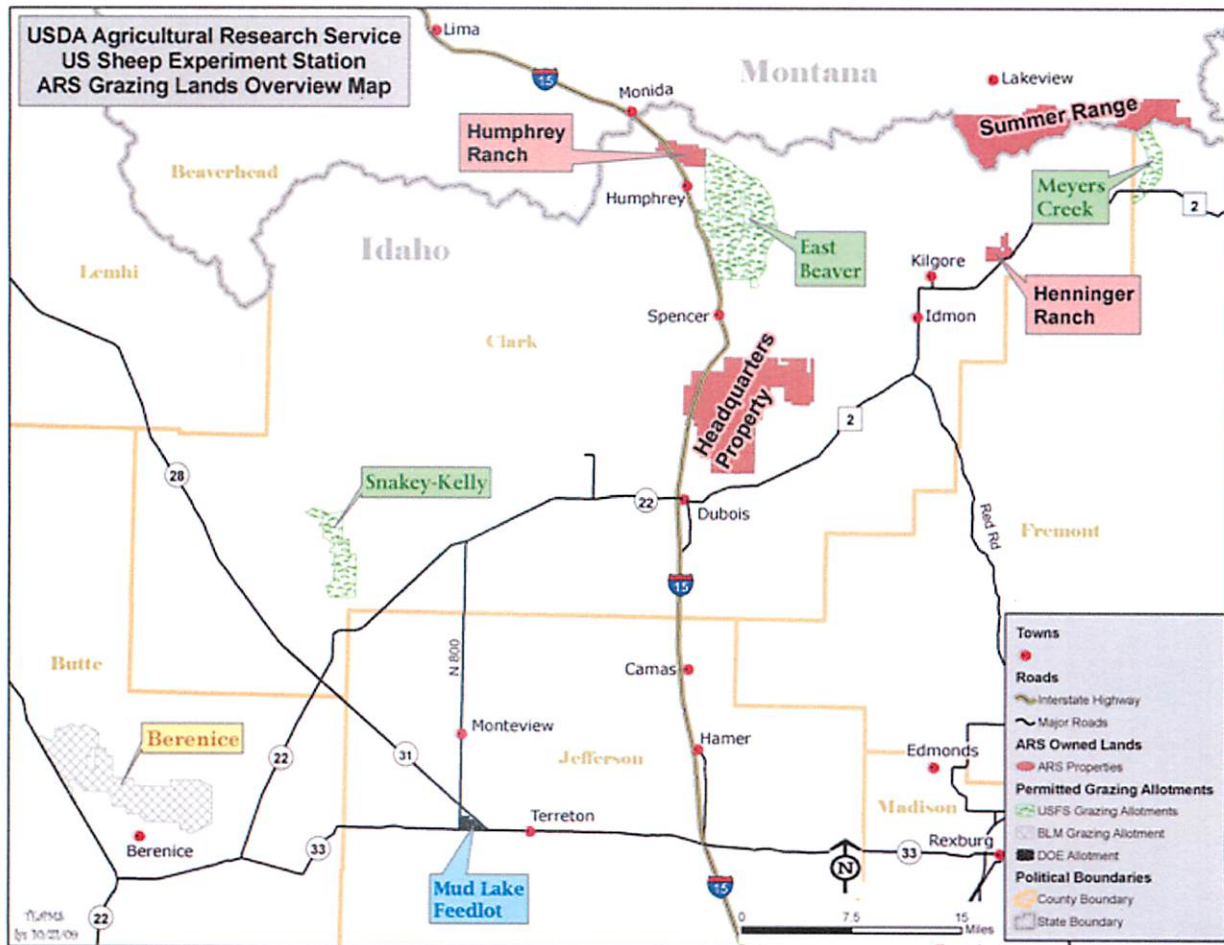
United States
 Department of
 Agriculture
 Agricultural Research
 Service
 Pacific West Area
 March 2010

Decision Notice

for

U.S. Sheep Experiment Station Grazing and Associated Activities Project 2009

United States Sheep Experiment
 Station
 Dubois, Clark County, Idaho



Decision Notice

Background

On November 28, 2008, Dr. Andrew C. Hammond, Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Pacific West Area Director, signed the *Decision Notice for the Interim U.S. Sheep Experiment Station Grazing and Associated Activities Project Environmental Assessment* (USDA, 2008). This decision allowed the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station (USSES), Dubois, Idaho, to continue historic and ongoing grazing operations through March 2010, the time estimated to prepare a longer term environmental assessment for the USSES grazing and associated activities project.

On September 21, 2009, the Federal District Court in Missoula issued an order enjoining and vacating the delisting of the Greater Yellowstone Area grizzly population. In compliance with this order, the Yellowstone grizzly population is once again a threatened population under the Endangered Species Act. At the time of the relisting of the grizzly, the USSES was in the process of preparing an environmental assessment on sheep grazing on ARS lands in Idaho and Montana. During informal discussions between the USSES and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Falls, (January 2010) it was determined that because of the changed legal status of the Greater Yellowstone Area grizzly population, the USSES would need to enter into formal consultation for the grizzly bear. As a result of this change, the USSES has halted its work on the draft environmental assessment and will instead prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to assess the effects of historic and ongoing grazing and associated activities at the USSES.

To maintain USSES compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act during the preparation of the EIS, the USSES is issuing a new interim decision on sheep grazing based on the *Interim U.S. Sheep Experiment Station Grazing and Associated Activities Project Environmental Assessment* (2008) and a *Supplemental Information Report* (March 2010). The *Supplemental Information Report* contains analysis and data gathered during the preparation of the *U.S. Sheep Experiment Station Grazing and Associated Activities Project 2009* draft environmental assessment which was issued for public comment December 14, 2009 – January 25, 2010. The new interim decision extends grazing activities with the exception of two parcels of greatest concern for interaction with grizzlies, until completion of the EIS.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to continue the ongoing grazing and research activities with the current herd levels but to cease grazing on the Meyers Creek Forest Service allotment, which is within the Primary Conservation Area for the Greater Yellowstone grizzly bear population, and the adjacent USSES summer East Range lands. The grazing which previously occurred on these two parcels will be moved to the USSES summer West Range lands without causing any significant impact to those lands from the alteration in grazing activities; accordingly, no herd reduction is required. The Proposed Action will allow the USSES to continue to achieve most of its research goals and objectives while also addressing the changed legal status of the grizzly bear. The Proposed Action serves to maintain future planning options concerning wildlife habitat for the grizzly and precludes any irretrievable commitment of resources until the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service consultation and EIS processes have been completed. The Proposed Action will not produce any significant, irreversible, or irretrievable effects.

Decision

Based on the changed legal status of the Greater Yellowstone Area grizzly bear population and the need for formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I have decided that it is appropriate for the USSES to prepare an EIS for its grazing and associated activities on ARS lands in Idaho and Montana. This process will begin shortly, and a Notice of Intent will be forthcoming. The work done by the USSES on the draft environmental assessment and the comments received on that document during the December 14, 2009 – January 25, 2010 comment period will be incorporated into the EIS process.

I have reviewed the *Interim U.S. Sheep Experiment Station Grazing and Associated Activities Project Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact (2008)* and the *Supplemental Information Report (March 2010)*. The latter concludes that continuing grazing activities, but with the exclusion of any grazing on the Meyers Creek Forest Service allotment and the adjacent USSES summer East Range lands until the EIS process is completed, will have no significant impacts. Based on these documents, I therefore decide to authorize continued grazing activities, with the exception of the Meyers Creek allotment and summer East Range lands, until completion of the EIS, which is expected by March 2012.



3/31/10

for DR. ANDREW C. HAMMOND
Agricultural Research Service (ARS)
Pacific West Area Director

Date