



United States Department of Agriculture

July Newsletter

BLUE MOUNTAINS FOREST PLAN REVISION - 2017

Malheur, Umatilla & Wallowa-Whitman
National Forests

Livestock Grazing and Grazing-land Vegetation

Hello from the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision Team. We are working to complete the Revised Forest Plans for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman (Blue Mountains) National Forests. These Plans will guide how the Forest Service manages approximately five million acres of public lands in eastern Oregon and Washington.



We have issued a series of newsletters to share information about the progress of the Forest Plans. Please visit our website, fs.usda.gov/goto/BlueMountainsPlanRevision, for past newsletters and additional information. In early 2016, in response to public input, we announced that we would analyze two Modified Alternatives in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS). Recent newsletters have described elements of these Modified Alternatives, called “Alternative E-Modified” and “Alternative E-Modified-Departure.” Once our analysis is complete, the Regional Forester will select an Alternative, or a combination of Alternatives, and we will publish the Revised Forest Plans.

After we publish the Final EIS and Revised Forest Plans, the Forest Service will



for the greatest good

initiate the objection process. Per regulation, 36 CFR 219.53, “Individuals and entities who have submitted formal comments related to a plan, plan amendment, or plan revision during the opportunities for public comment as provided in [36 CFR 219] subpart A during the planning process for that decision may file an objection.”

In this newsletter we provide insights into how the new Forest Plans may provide guidance for management of livestock grazing and grazing land vegetation. Topics include:

- Why and how does the Forest Service manage livestock grazing?
- Why do the Blue Mountains Forest Plans address livestock grazing?
- In the modified Alternatives, what changed? How many acres are proposed as suitable for livestock grazing, and what are the proposed Animal Unit Months?
- How will the Forest Plans incorporate the best-available science for livestock grazing and watershed condition?
- What are the proposed Standards and Guidelines for livestock grazing and grazing land vegetation in riparian areas?



Please note: As in previous newsletters, we are sharing examples of Forest Service analysis and staff recommendations that are informing the Revised Forest Plans and Final EIS. Although the Forest Supervisors and Regional Forester are considering staff recommendations, there are not any final decisions to announce at this time.

Why and how does the Forest Service manage livestock grazing?

Grazing has been a historic activity in the Blue Mountains since the 1860s, when settlers entered the region with their herds and bands. Today the ranching industry is still a foundation for local cultures and traditional rural western lifestyles. Grazing on National Forests is an important component of many overall ranch operations. Ranchers with a valid Forest Service permit (or “permittees”) are authorized to graze cattle or sheep on National Forests during late spring, summer, and early fall. Some permittees use National Forests simply to supplement private land forage for grazing, whereas others rely on National Forests for a large percentage of forage for their livestock.

Rangeland management on federal lands has undergone many changes. In the early 1800s, free forage on unclaimed public domain lands allowed many ranges across the nation to become overgrazed, overstocked, and overcrowded. Congress stepped forward in the early 1900s to designate the Forest Service as the pioneer grazing-management agency. By 1907, the Forest Service had

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established a system for range regulation, including permits, limits on herd size, grazing seasons, allotments, and fees. That system served as a model for other agencies to follow.

Many laws, policies, and regulations have been designed to guide livestock grazing on National Forests and Grasslands. These include the Organic Administration Act of 1897, Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, Granger-Thye Act of 1950, Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, Wilderness Act of 1964, Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resource Planning Act of 1974, Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, National Forest Management Act of 1976, Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978, Rescission Act of 1995, 36 CFR 222 (Code of Federal Regulations), Forest Service Manual 2200, and the Forest Service Handbook 2209.13.

Today, the Forest Service concentrates its efforts on managing the vegetation resources across the rangeland landscape to serve a multitude of resource needs. Rangeland management specialists work to manage resources such as habitat for a variety of plant and animal species, clean water, and sustainable foraging and browsing. Specialists inventory, classify, and monitor rangeland conditions to maintain or improve rangeland health. Site-specific analyses are reflected in Allotment Management Plans (AMPs). The AMPs use current information to determine areas suitable for grazing, site-specific Desired Conditions, a flexible strategy on how to meet the Desired Conditions, and a monitoring plan to record progress toward meeting the Desired Conditions. AMPs also describe stocking levels, needs for structural and non-structural range improvements, and coordination with other resources.

If, through the monitoring process, some rangelands are identified that do not meet Desired Conditions, Forest Service specialists begin planning to restore rangeland ecosystem functions. These efforts include working with a variety of partners, beginning with the permittee. Partners may also include other public and private entities (for example, university agricultural departments and county natural resource advisory councils). These individuals and organizations work together to move rangelands toward the Desired Conditions described in the Forest Plans, and the Standards and Guidelines in the Forest Plans help to ensure progress.

Why do the Forest Plans address livestock grazing?

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires the Forest Service to periodically revise Forest Plans to address changing needs on the landscape, and also to incorporate the best-available science where appropriate and feasible. Additionally, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to consider environmental effects that include, among others, impacts on social, cultural, and economic resources, as well as natural resources.





The Final EIS for the Blue Mountains Forest Plans analyzes a range of Alternatives related to grazing, and the Regional Forester will consider these Alternatives in the final decision for each Forest Plan. Currently, each of the Alternatives in the Final EIS includes a grazing-related Desired Condition stating that grazing allotments should yield a “supply of livestock forage that contributes to local ranching operation sustainability and local community growth while maintaining or achieving ecological Desired Conditions.” Regardless of which Alternative may be selected, the Blue Mountains Forest Plans will continue to recognize grazing for cattle and sheep as an important and suitable use on these National Forests.

In the two modified Alternatives, what changed? How many acres are proposed as suitable for livestock grazing? What are the proposed Animal Unit Months?

The Forest Service received public comments asking why vacant grazing allotments were not included in the 2014 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) analysis of acres suitable for grazing under Alternative E. We verified that not all vacant allotments were included in the analysis. Forest Service staff recommend that vacant allotments be included in acres suitable for grazing, because a decision has not been made to close the vacant allotments through allotment-level NEPA analysis. Including vacant allotments in the analysis more accurately estimates suitable acres for livestock grazing, and this change would increase the suitable acres in the Modified Alternatives compared to Alternative E. It would also increase the Animal Unit Months (AUMs) analyzed based on the historic use of vacant allotments. Additional AUMs would potentially result in additional revenues and other economic benefits if the vacant allotments are to be grazed in the future.

Compared to Alternative E, including vacant allotments in the analysis of suitable acres and AUMs in the Modified Alternatives (E-Modified and E-Modified-Departure) would:

- Increase suitable acres to 1,318,000 on the Malheur National Forest (an increase of 122,000 acres). Increase the potential AUMs on the Malheur National Forest to 133,000 AUMs (an increase of 9,700 AUMs).
- Increase suitable acres to 527,000 on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (an increase of 119,000 acres). Increase the potential AUMs to 112,000 (an increase of 30,500 AUMs).

These numbers are based on the Draft EIS data and additional analysis completed up to the time of this newsletter publication. The Umatilla National Forest currently has no vacant allotments. However, its suitable acres and AUMs have been affected by recent decisions made during the planning period (although independent of the Forest Plan Revision process).

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For instance, a recent NEPA decision decreased suitable acres on a sheep allotment by 18,000 acres, yielding 326,000 acres suitable for livestock grazing on the Umatilla National Forest. Additionally, a vacant allotment became active during the planning period, which increased AUMs by 11,400 for a total of 49,000 AUMs on the Umatilla National Forest. These changes will be reflected in the Revised Forest Plans.

How will the Revised Forest Plans incorporate the best-available science for livestock grazing and watershed conditions?

In formal public comments on the Draft EIS, individuals and organizations asked the Forest Service to ensure that it refers to the best-available science regarding livestock grazing. Staff confirmed that, in some cases, references to the best-available science were not included in the Draft EIS as published in February 2014. To address this need, the Regional Forester and Director of Natural Resources of the Pacific Northwest Region convened an interdisciplinary team to assess the best-available science regarding grazing and other activities that may affect aquatic and riparian resources.

The Forest Service updated its 2008 Regional Aquatic and Riparian Conservation Strategy (ARCS) and refined it for the Blue Mountains. The result is the Blue Mountains ARCS. It is based on:

- The best-available science, including Regional and Forest-level monitoring;
- Updated guidance (2014) from the Interagency Interior Columbia Basin Strategy, which includes interagency goals for the recovery of ESA (Endangered Species Act)-listed species;
- Ongoing ESA consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service; and
- Public input provided on the 2014 Draft EIS and Draft Forest Plan.

Further, the Regional Forester and Director of Natural Resources asked the interdisciplinary team to propose management direction in the Blue Mountains ARCS to complement existing Standards and Guidelines from the 1990s Forest Plans, which were amended by the 1995 interim strategies known as PACFISH (Pacific Anadromous Fish) and INFISH (Inland Fish). The interdisciplinary team proposed Standards and Guidelines in the Blue Mountains ARCS based on the following principles:

- Facilitate the protection and recovery of aquatic and riparian resources – including water quality, ESA-listed fish, and critical habitats.
- Support continued livestock grazing on the three National Forests, consistent with the best-available science as well as law and policy.
- Include objective and numeric values for monitoring livestock use (for example, inches of stubble height for herbaceous key species, percent of vegetation utilization for herbaceous key species, percent of woody browse utilization, and percent of streambank



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alteration).

- Ensure that Standards and Guidelines are implementable – achieving desired outcomes while providing flexibility to local managers and staff.

The Blue Mountains ARCS compiles plan components that are now included in the Modified Alternatives for the Forest Plans. In addition to Standards and Guidelines for grazing in riparian areas, the Blue Mountains ARCS compiles direction for other management activities that may affect aquatic and riparian resources, such as timber, roads, and recreation management. To read the *Draft* Blue Mountains ARCS, please visit: www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd548453.pdf.

What are the proposed Standards and Guidelines for grazing and grazing land vegetation in Riparian Management Areas under the Modified Alternatives?

The Forest Service interdisciplinary team recommends the following Standards and Guidelines (pages 50-53 in the [Draft Blue Mountains ARCS](#)) for livestock grazing management in Riparian Management Areas under the Modified Alternatives. These Standards and Guidelines are very similar to the existing Blue Mountains Forest Plans, as amended by PACFISH and INFISH in the 1990s.

- **Standard GM-1S.** Manage livestock grazing to attain aquatic and riparian desired conditions. Where livestock grazing is found to prevent or retard attaining aquatic and riparian desired conditions, modify grazing practices (such as number of livestock, timing, and physical structures). If adjusting practices is not effective, remove livestock from that area using appropriate administrative authorities and procedures.
- **Standard GM-2S.** New livestock handling and/or management facilities shall be located outside riparian management areas unless they do not prevent or retard attaining aquatic and riparian desired conditions.
- **Guideline GM-4G.** During allotment management planning, existing livestock handling or management facilities that prevent or retard attaining aquatic and riparian desired conditions should be removed, as appropriate.
- **Guideline GM-5G.** Livestock trailing, watering, loading, and other handling in riparian management areas should be avoided or minimized.

The following Standard regarding “redds” (fish spawning nests) would be somewhat new, in that it is not included in the existing 1990 Forest Plans. However, it is consistent with the requirements of recent ESA consultations on Blue Mountains grazing activities:



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- **Standard GM-6S.** Livestock grazing shall be managed and implemented to avoid trampling federally listed threatened or endangered fish redds.

Implementation: The proposed Standards and Guidelines described **above** would be implemented within 12 months of the Final Record of Decision (ROD) for the Revised Forest Plans, although not until the next full grazing season following the Final ROD. The intent is to avoid implementing new Forest Plan direction in the middle of a grazing season.

Additionally, **Guideline GM-3G** (pages 50-52 in the [Draft Blue Mountains ARCS](#)) would update existing Recommended Livestock Grazing Guidelines that were issued as “implementation guidance” for PACFISH (Enclosure B). This Guideline would provide direction for applying indicators of seasonal livestock use and disturbance – stubble height, herbaceous utilization, woody browse, and stream-bank alteration – to achieve desired conditions for aquatic and riparian areas.

Flexibility is one of the key features of this Guideline, which includes:

- A menu of indicators and default ranges of indicator values that are to be applied only when/where appropriate;
- Direction that indicators and values should be prescribed based on site-specific conditions to achieve longer-term goals and objectives;
- Clarification that the indicators and values should be adjusted over time based on long-term monitoring;
- A management framework for applying the indicators and values based on local resource conditions, as determined by the Forest Service's 2011 Watershed Condition Framework (WCF: www.fs.fed.us/biology/watershed/condition_framework.html) and local data and information;
- A purpose statement and specific language that allows the use of alternate indicators and values, provided the purpose of the guideline is met and best-available science is used.

GM-3G Implementation: As part of the implementation process, for each allotment, the Forest Service would re-evaluate WCF subwatershed condition class ratings based on attributes that are affected by current livestock grazing. Re-evaluations would be completed within five years for non-ESA allotments. Additionally, re-evaluations would be completed within three years for ESA allotments where threatened, endangered, or priority sensitive aquatic species and/or their habitats are present and affected by current livestock grazing. While these re-evaluations are occurring, existing grazing standards from ESA consultation, recent NEPA, current permit stipulations, or other decisions for stubble height, herbaceous utilization, woody browse, and streambank alteration would remain in place until each re-evaluation is complete.



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If a re-evaluation is not completed within three years or five years (as described above), then the existing WCF condition class ratings for that subwatershed and associated default annual use indicators and values outlined in GM-3G would apply to the allotment until the re-evaluation is complete.

Re-evaluations would be based on the physical and biological attributes of subwatershed condition (water quality, aquatic habitat, and riparian/wetland vegetation) that are influenced by current livestock grazing. Interdisciplinary teams including, at a minimum, personnel specializing in range, watershed, and fisheries would review the ratings and incorporate any new data collected since the 2011 Watershed Condition Framework effort. Beginning with the subwatershed condition class rating, these teams would determine the appropriate indicators and indicator values for monitoring livestock use: for example, inches of stubble height for herbaceous key species, percent of vegetation utilization for herbaceous key species, percent of woody browse utilization, and percent of streambank alteration. Over time, the Forest Service may modify specific indicators and values, if needed, based on monitoring and assessment information. Modifications may be informed by recent NEPA analysis and/or ESA consultation, as long as they meet the intent of the Guideline. The Forest Service would clearly document the justification for modifying indicators and values.

Summary

We in the Forest Service look forward to publishing Revised Blue Mountains Forest Plans that will help us to better care for the land and serve people. In that spirit, Forest Service staff are recommending the grazing-related direction summarized above. By implementing this proposed direction, we are confident that the Revised Forest Plans would facilitate the protection and recovery of aquatic and riparian resources while also continuing to support livestock grazing on these National Forests.

The Forest Service values livestock grazing permittees and their many contributions to communities around National Forests. We wish to sincerely thank permittees for their years of hard work to steward the allotments upon which they rely each season. We will work side-by-side with permittees to implement the Revised Forest Plans, and we expect these Blue Mountains National Forests will continue to provide gainful grazing opportunities in the future.



Continued on next page.

Toward More Sustainable Documents

As a natural resource agency, we consider the environmental impacts of printing and mailing documents, which can consume large amounts of paper, ink, and energy. As you might expect, printing and mailing documents can also be very expensive. (It would cost well-over \$100,000 to provide copies of our Revised Forest Plans and FEIS to everyone on our current mailing list.) To minimize printing costs and conserve taxpayer dollars, we will be making the Forest Plans and FEIS available online.

Compared to paper documents, online and electronic documents offer several benefits to readers. Using a computer, readers can search for key words to focus on sections that are most important to them. Online and electronic document readers can also zoom in or out to improve their perspective of a map or chart. Some people may wish to use the copy-paste tool, so they can copy an excerpt and paste it into another document as they read. Additionally, our online and electronic documents will be “508 compliant” and accessible to all computer users.

Once published, how can you access the Revised Forest Plans, Draft Records of Decision, and Final Environmental Impact Statement?

- **We will provide a variety of public notifications when these documents are available.**
- **All documents will be online at fs.usda.gov/goto/BlueMountainsPlanRevision.**

We understand that online documents don't work for everyone, so we plan to order limited paper and electronic copies (e.g., CDs, thumb drives). Paper and electronic copies will be available for reference at select public libraries in eastern Oregon and Washington states. You can find the library list on our website or contact an office of the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. If you have a special need not accommodated by the options above, we will need you to call us by August 30, 2017 to allow time to address your special need in our publication plan. Dial (541) 523-1279, or TTY for the hearing impaired: 1-800-877-8339.

Coming soon! Public conference call with Forest Service staff

Thursday, August 3, 2017 - 5:30-6:30 PM - Dial: 1-888-844-9904 (Access Code: 2651088#)

We will discuss the topics covered in this newsletter and answer questions from the public. Please email your questions to bluemtnplanrevision@fs.fed.us by **July 30**, and we will do our best to respond during the call. Please note: This will be a broadcast-style call with one-way audio. To listen to previous recorded calls and read the transcripts, please visit fs.usda.gov/goto/BlueMountainsPlanRevision, and see “Recent Communications.”