

Determination of Lands Suitable and Capable for Livestock Grazing – Southwest Region (R3) Plan Revisions

Version 3.1 – January 2010

Operational Draft: This document is prepared to provide guidance to forest plan revision teams. As this guidance is implemented we expect to learn improved ways to do this work. As we learn, this document will be updated. This document was reviewed and revised as appropriate in January 2010 to conform to the requirements of the 1982 Planning Rule provisions, as accessed by the 2000 Planning Rule transition language at 36 CFR 219.35 (Federal Register, Volume 74, No. 242, Friday, December 18, 2009, pages 67073 and 67074) .

Introduction

This guidance is applicable where Forests choose to use the transition procedures of the 2000 Planning Rule to revise a Forest Plan under the 1982 Planning Rule Procedures. Procedures in the 1982 Planning Rule require that the suitability and capability of National Forest System Lands for producing forage for grazing animals be determined in forest planning. Suitability is the appropriateness of applying certain resource management practices to a particular area of land in consideration of the relevant social, economic, and ecological factors. Capability is the potential of an area of land to produce resources and supply goods and services. Capability depends upon current conditions and site conditions such as climate, slope, landform, soils, and geology.

Suitability should be determined based on compatibility with desired conditions and objectives in the plan area. The Responsible Official shall not identify lands within the plan area as suitable for a certain use if that use is prohibited by law, regulation or policy; would result in substantial and permanent impairment of the productivity of the land or renewable resources; or, if the use is incompatible with the desired conditions for the relevant portion of the plan area.

The identification of an area as suitable for various uses is guidance for project and activity decision making, and is not a commitment or a final decision approving projects and activities. For example, the identification of lands suitable for livestock grazing within a revised plan is not a decision to authorize livestock grazing: The final decision to authorize livestock grazing would be made at a project (allotment) level.

Suitability for livestock grazing in current Forest Plans was determined following the procedures of the 1982 Planning Rule. Subsequent to publication of the Forest Plans, site specific analysis of individual grazing allotments under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has been an ongoing process in accordance with schedules set pursuant to the Rescissions Act of 1995¹. This process ensures that livestock grazing is consistent with desired conditions and objectives for a particular management area or geographic area within a planning unit.

Description of Other Terms

- Areas suitable for livestock grazing – livestock grazing on these lands is compatible with the desired condition in the forest plan. This does not mean that livestock grazing will occur over the entire area.

¹ See [Rescissions Act of 1995](#) , PL 104-19, Section 504

- Areas not suitable for livestock grazing – livestock grazing on these areas is not compatible with the desired conditions of the forest plan. .
- Compatibility with other uses- Livestock grazing is generally compatible with other uses although it may not be compatible with all uses in all locations.

Forest Plan Revision

Capability

The capability of National Forest System lands in the Southwest to produce forage for grazing animals was determined in the 1980s for the first round of forest planning. Most landscape scale conditions that determine capability (such as landform, geology, slope, climate) have not changed significantly since the first evaluation, therefore capability determined in the original Forest Plans are likely still applicable. Forests should review the current capability determinations to ensure they are still valid. Cyclical or temporal fluctuations in climatic conditions such as El Nino cycles or drought periods are not cause for reanalyzing capability, but should be considered by the Forest when making project level grazing decisions and responded to through adaptive management. Current climate conditions and trends have not been shown to be outside of historical norms for the Southwest.²

Suitability

Existing suitable and non-suitable use identification in current plans is the starting point for identifying suitability of land use when revising a Forest Plan. In the Region 3 Plan Revision process, the identification of lands as suitable for livestock grazing is carried forward from current Forest Plans as the existing suitability determination.

A comprehensive review of suitable uses is part of the Forest Plan revision process. Region 3 Forests have been managing grazing allotments since the forests were established, and more intensively managing them for the past 20 years. This experience is of great value when determining where grazing should and should not occur on National Forest System lands. The following is guidance for completing the review of lands currently identified as suitable for livestock grazing. There may be some cases where a review of areas currently identified as not suitable is needed. In either case, use the following process and engage the public in a collaborative discussion.

1. Starting from the current suitability classification from your Forest's existing plan, determine if there is a need to change the identification of areas suitable for livestock grazing. This should be done during the analysis of the management situation (AMS).
 - a. Uses, including livestock grazing, are generally suitable unless proven otherwise. This is consistent with the basic philosophy that these are the people's lands, and therefore it is appropriate to have a presumption that lands are suitable for a variety of uses (USDA 1999).
 - b. Compatibility with desired conditions is the basis for determining whether or not livestock grazing is suitable for a particular area. During the need for change analysis, comparisons between existing conditions and desired conditions (as well as anticipated changes to those desired conditions) from your current plan will be used to determine if there is a need for change in management direction.
 - c. Determine if the current identification of areas suitable for livestock grazing is precluding the ability to manage those areas to achieve desired conditions.

² Forests may want to establish measures to monitor changing landscape scale conditions over time to help determine if future adjustment to capability determinations may be warranted.

- d. Keep in mind that suitability of land uses is a broad-scale identification (see discussion of scale below) and is not appropriate for site-specific problem solving.
 - e. Review recent NEPA based decisions for grazing allotments in the area. If there are “No Grazing” decisions covering most of the area, then the area is probably not suitable for livestock grazing.
 - f. Based on the above discussions, the Responsible Official will decide whether there is a need for change.
2. If indications are that there is a need to change the current identification of areas suitable for livestock grazing, the following process is recommended (during development of the Proposed Plan) to address the need for change.
 - a. As desired conditions for the Proposed Plan are formulated, continually check to ensure livestock grazing is compatible with these desired conditions. Iteratively do this as desired conditions are developed or refined.
 - b. If you have an area where livestock grazing is generally not compatible with the desired condition, but there are parts of the area where livestock grazing is compatible, add a description to the desired condition that livestock grazing may be compatible in certain identified areas³.
 3. If an area is identified as suitable for livestock grazing in the current plan but grazing has been removed through non-use or other means, include the NEPA documentation that made the changes and adjust suitability for the revised plan to align with those decisions.

Scale of Identification

The scale of the suitability identification should be the same as the desired condition and objective descriptions. These may be management areas, land use zones, or ecological management areas. Although allotment level data is used in aggregate to determine landscape level suitability, identification of plan level suitability is not appropriate at the allotment scale. Where forests share common boundaries, there should be cooperation with neighboring lands (federal and non-federal) to maintain consistency in desired conditions and identification of suitability of uses.

Map Display

- Suitable for livestock grazing: Current active and vacant allotments
- Not suitable for livestock grazing: Closed allotments and NFS areas that are not in allotments
- Not covered by this plan: Any lands within the proclaimed unit boundary that are not NFS lands.

GIS Feature Classes

- **Use:** allotment: This feature class represents current active and vacant allotments; gen resrc: This feature class represents areas outside of allotments
- **Do Not Use:** enclosure: This feature class represents fencing or other natural boundaries used to restrict access to an area to realize a land management objective. It is sub-allotment in scale

³ If livestock grazing is currently allowed but is not compatible with the desired conditions in the proposed plan, take the following steps post plan-revision: If it is clear that an area is not suitable for livestock grazing but there is a current, active grazing permit in the area, a site-specific NEPA analysis will be required outside of the plan revision process to make the “final” determination of whether the allotment should be closed, or if compatibility with desired conditions can be achieved with site-specific management changes.

and so is not appropriate for determining general suitability for livestock grazing. Also, this feature class often includes private land and therefore is not appropriate to use to make land use suitability determinations.

References

2000 Planning Rule, as re-posted in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFRs), Federal Register notice, Volume 74, No. 242, Friday, December 18, 2009, pages 67059 thru 67075

USDA, 1999. Committee of Scientists' Report: Sustaining the People's Lands.