

SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE  
McPherson Individual Allotment Grazing Permit Renewal  
Four Rivers Field Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to issue a livestock grazing permit in accordance with Idaho Standards for Rangeland Health (Standards) and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management (Guidelines) and the Cascade Resource Management Plan (RMP). Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this scoping/information package is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and solicit scoping comments to assist BLM with the NEPA review of the proposed action and alternatives. Analysis of alternatives will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of May 15, 2012. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that will meet the purpose and need for the project.

**Need for and Purpose of Action**

On February 28, 2012, Mr. Hanson's grazing permit on the McPherson Individual Allotment expired. Slickspot peppergrass (*Lepidium papilliferum*), a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), has been identified in the allotment. The element occurrence (EO) and associated occupied habitat were not identified until 2005, one year after grazing permits with known occupied habitat were modified to include terms and conditions based on a 2003 Candidate Conservation Agreement. Because new information and management concerns have been identified, BLM must fully evaluate and process the grazing permit in light of these findings/listings.

The action alternatives should meet the following objectives:

- maintain resource conditions where they are meeting Standards;
- make significant progress toward meeting Standards where resource conditions are not meeting Standards;
- meet Guidelines and BLM policy; and
- implement appropriate conservation measures identified in the 2003 Candidate Conservation Agreement for Slickspot Peppergrass (2003 CCA) and 2009 Conservation Agreement for Slickspot Peppergrass (2009 CA).

**Existing Condition**

*General*

The allotment is located approximately 2.5 miles northeast of Star and 3.5 miles northwest of Eagle, Idaho (Map 1). The area is characterized by gently rolling topography with elevations ranging from approximately 2,600-2,800 ft. The allotment is comprised of 235 acres of BLM-administered and 41 acres of private lands.

A preliminary/cursory assessment, evaluation, and determination of Rangeland Health Standards have been completed for the McPherson Individual Allotment (Table 1). The assessment provides a picture of general condition which informs the evaluation of the allotment's

applicable standards (i.e. meeting or not meeting) and the determination of causal factors (e.g. current livestock management, historic livestock management, and/or wildfire) where standards are not being met.

Table 1. Preliminary evaluation of rangeland health standards and identification of causal factors (where standards are not being met) based on initial assessment, McPherson Individual Allotment, Ada County, Idaho.

Standard	Evaluation	Determination (Causal Factor)
1 (Watershed)	Meeting	Soils are adequately stabilized and ecological processes maintained primarily by high exotic annual grass cover, some perennial grass cover, and biological soil crusts.
2 (Riparian Areas and Wetlands)	N/A	
3 (Stream Channel/Floodplain)	N/A	
4 (Native Plant Communities)	Not Meeting	Wyoming big sagebrush understories have largely been converted to cheatgrass with varying densities of perennial bunchgrasses remaining. <b>(Wildfire)</b>
5 (Seedings)	N/A	
6 (Exotic Plant Communities, other than seedings)	Meeting	Cheatgrass dominated communities (where shrubs are absent) appear to be maintaining remnant perennial grasses and forbs, and no noxious weeds have been recorded on site.
7 (Water Quality)	N/A	
8 (T&E species and SSS) <sup>2</sup>	Not Meeting	Conversion of Wyoming big sagebrush communities to exotic, invasive annual grass dominated understories and exotic plant communities, in turn, results in poor (or reductions in) quality habitat for sagebrush dependent T&E species (e.g. slickspot peppergrass) and/or SSS. <b>(Wildfire)</b>

<sup>1</sup> Federally listed Threatened & Endangered (T&E) species and BLM Special Status Species (SSS).

### *Soils*

The soils range from deep sandy loams to moderately deep clay loams. Standard 1 addresses the soil stability of a site, and the site's ability to perform ecological processes, such as cycle nutrients and water based on the amount and type of plants and other ground cover present. Standard 1 is currently being met (Table 1). Vegetative and biological soil crust cover and litter amount is adequate to stabilize soils and cycle water and nutrients.

### *Upland Vegetation*

Upland vegetation has been shaped by physical site characteristics such as soils, precipitation amount, and past disturbance (primarily wildfire). Specifically, the 1997 Little Gulch Fire burned approximately 182 acres (77%) of BLM-administered lands and the 2010 Big Fire burned 87 acres. As a result, a mosaic of Wyoming big sagebrush communities with scattered rabbitbrush and bitterbrush and understories comprised primarily of cheatgrass and occasional perennial grasses and forbs interspersed with cheatgrass communities (lacking shrubs) now occupy the allotment.

Standard 4 was applied to vegetative communities maintaining approximately 25% to 30% composition of Wyoming big sagebrush (regardless of the understory); that range matches or nearly matches the Ecological Site Descriptions for sagebrush respective to each ecological site. In these areas, Standard 4 is not being met due to shifts from native perennial grasses and forbs

to exotic annual grass dominated understories (Table 1). These shifts can largely be attributed to the Little Gulch Fire, and may have been exacerbated by the Big Fire.

Standard 6 was applied to vegetative communities dominated by cheatgrass with low densities of herbaceous perennial vegetation and lacking shrubs. These plant communities are meeting the standard by maintaining adequate ground cover for site protection, maintaining existing perennial plants, and noxious weeds are not increasing or invading (Table 1).

#### *Noxious Weeds*

No noxious species have been identified, though exotic annual invasive species, namely cheatgrass, are present to varying degrees.

#### *Threatened and Endangered and Special Status Plant Species*

Special status species include species listed or proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and species designated as sensitive by the BLM State Director. BLM special status plants are given a numeric ranking (from 1 to 4) based on several criteria including risk of extinction, population size, distribution, and trend. Species with the greatest threat are assigned a ranking of Type 1 and those with the least threat are assigned a ranking of Type 4. The Four Rivers Field Office (FRFO) received updated lists of ESA Listed, Proposed, and Candidate species and critical habitat US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) dated June 1, 2009 (Semi-annual Species List Update from the Idaho USFWS, #1002.0000 14420-2009-SL-0365).

Slickspot peppergrass is currently listed as threatened (Type 1) under the ESA. Slickspot peppergrass Management Area 2C, element occurrence (EO) 76, proposed critical habitat, occupied habitat and slickspot peppergrass habitat occur in allotment (Table 2). No other special status plant species are known to occur.

Table 2. Slickspot peppergrass habitat designations, McPherson Individual Allotment, Ada County, Idaho.

<b>Habitat Designation</b>	<b>BLM Acres</b>
Element Occurrence 76 (T5N R1W Sec. 27)	22
Proposed Critical Habitat	221
Occupied Habitat	267
Slickspot Peppergrass Habitat	3.8

An EO is a group of slickspots where slickspot peppergrass plants are known to occur. Proposed critical habitat is habitat that has been defined by the USFWS as critical to the long term survival of the species (221 acres could potentially be affected by livestock grazing). Occupied habitat consists of a 0.5 mile radius buffer around currently known EOs and was established to provide protection of habitat for the benefit of insect pollinators of slickspot peppergrass (267 acres could potentially be affected by livestock grazing). Slickspot peppergrass habitat is habitat that has been surveyed for the presence of the species at least once and is known to contain slickspots (3.8 acres could potentially be affected by livestock grazing).

Slickspot peppergrass is endemic to the Snake River Plain and extends from Parma, Idaho to Glens Ferry, Idaho in the north and to near Twin Falls, Idaho in the south. Livestock grazing affects slickspot peppergrass and its habitat primarily through the direct and indirect effects of trampling and may include any or all of the following: 1) reduction in a diversity of pollen

sources (diversity of perennial forbs) resulting in a reduced diversity of pollinators, from both physical trampling and persistent grazing of perennial forbs during the critical growth period; 2) mechanical damage to slickspots, especially when soils are saturated; 3) potential damage to long term seed availability; 4) damage to soil crusts, both in the slickspots and the surrounding area; and 5) spread and continued persistence of invasive annuals and noxious weeds through both physical transport and continuous soil disturbance. In 2006, BLM and the USFWS entered in a conservation agreement that provided for implementation of a number of conservation measures including measures designed to help offset adverse impacts to the species from livestock grazing. The primary intent of these measures, with respect to livestock grazing, was to manage livestock grazing and trailing to conserve suitable habitat conditions for slickspot peppergrass.

*Wildlife/Special Status Animals*

The allotment provides a limited amount of quality wildlife habitat. Human activity has fragmented the landscape, subsequently degrading wildlife habitat in around the allotment. Standard 4, which is directly related to wildlife habitat conditions, is not being met. Additionally, wildfires have altered native sagebrush communities, where invasive annual grasses have replaced shrub communities or have replaced the herbaceous understory of shrubs. Consequently there are no Special Status Species associated with sagebrush habitat within the McPherson Allotment.

*Livestock Grazing*

Livestock use currently occurs during the spring (Table 3). Actual use has varied slightly, as the turn-out date is determined by when the irrigation district fills the canal at the southern border of the allotment. The full canal provides a barrier to livestock movement, as well as a water source. Because of this, the majority of livestock use occurs in the southwestern portion of the allotment. Actual use averaged 33 AUMs between 2000 and 2010.

Table 3. Current livestock grazing authorization for Hanson, McPherson Individual Allotment, Ada County, Idaho.

Allotment Name	Livestock		Start	End	%PL	Preference AUMs <sup>1</sup>		
	Number	Kind				Active	Suspended	Total
McPherson Individual	20	C	04-11	05-31	98	34	0	34

<sup>1</sup> Animal Unit Month (AUM) is the amount of forage required by an animal unit (i.e. cow or cow/calf pair) for one month.

In response to the 2010 Big Fire, an Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation Plan (ESR) and associated grazing decision closed half of the allotment to grazing until vegetation recovery objectives are met. The grazing preference was temporarily reduced to 10 cattle and 17 active AUMs. A fence was constructed to keep livestock out of the closed area (Big Fire ESR fence) (Map 1).

Slight discrepancies currently exist between GIS and the Rangeland Administration System in regard to actual acres fenced/available within the allotment. These will be resolved during this process.

**Preliminary Alternative Development**

The following alternatives have been identified based on the permittee application and the internal scoping process:

- Alternative A – Extended Rest
- Alternative B – Continue Current Use
- Alternative C – Permittee Application
- Alternative D – BLM Proposal

**Alternative A – Extended Rest**

A livestock grazing permit would not be issued and no livestock grazing would occur for a 10-year period on BLM-administered lands (Table 4).

Table 4. Livestock grazing authorization for Alternative A, McPherson Individual Allotment, Ada County, Idaho.

Allotment Name	Livestock		Start	End	%PL	Preference AUMs <sup>1</sup>		
	Number	Kind				Active	Suspended	Total
McPherson Individual	20	C	04-11	05-31	98	0	34	34

*Rangeland Management Projects*

No new projects would be constructed. The Big Fire ESR fence would be removed.

**Alternative B – Continue Current Use**

A total of 34 AUMs of spring use would (April 11-May 31) be permitted (Table 3). No terms and conditions specific to slickspot peppergrass would be implemented.

*Rangeland Management Projects*

No new projects would be constructed. The Big Fire ESR fence would be removed when vegetation objectives were met. Full use could occur after the fence was removed.

**Alternative C- Permittee Proposal**

A total of 34 AUMs would be permitted (Table 5). The grazing season would be from April 1 to October 31, two pastures would be created, and more livestock (34 animals) could be grazing during a use period. However, the pasture with slickspot peppergrass (East Pasture) would be rested in alternate years and terms and conditions from the 2003 CCA and 2009 CA would be incorporated.

Table 5. Livestock grazing authorization for Alternative C, McPherson Individual Allotment, Ada County, Idaho.

Allotment Name	Year	Pasture	Livestock		Start	End	%PL	Preference AUMs		
			Number <sup>1</sup>	Kind				Active	Suspended	Total
McPherson Individual	Odd	East	34	C	04-01	10-31	100	17	0	34
		West						17		
	Even	East	34	C	REST		100	0	0	34
		West			04-01	10-31		34		

<sup>1</sup> Livestock numbers may not exceed 34 head at any time and AUMs could not be exceeded.

*Slickspot Peppergrass Specific Terms and Conditions*

Permittee shall place water and salt/supplements to minimize trampling of slickspot peppergrass and of slickspots. Water/supplements would be placed at least ½ mile, preferably ¾ mile, from known occurrences. Supplements that are attractants should be placed so that cattle would not trail through an EO to access the supplement. Attractants should be placed so that cattle are drawn away from these areas.

Livestock turnout would not occur when slickspot soils are saturated.

Livestock would not be trailed through element occurrences in the management area when slickspot soils are saturated.

If soils become saturated, permittee would move cattle away from element occurrences to a point where the slickspots are not present. This would help prevent penetrating trampling.

Within the management area, permittee would use only existing roads and tracks for vehicle travel.

*Rangeland Management Projects*

The following projects would be constructed:

- The Big Fire ESR fence would become a permanent pasture fence.
- The southern boundary of the West Pasture would be fenced (0.74 miles total, 0.05 miles on BLM-administered lands) along the canal and property boundaries to allow livestock control when water is not present in the canal (Map 2).
- The east boundary fence of the East Pasture would be moved to the ownership boundary (remove 0.12 miles of existing fence and construct 0.14 miles of new fence) and a cattleguard would be placed the fence crosses an unimproved road.

**Alternative D – BLM Proposal**

A total of 34 AUMs would be permitted during a fall-winter use period (Table 6). Terms and conditions from the 2003 CCA and 2009 CA would be incorporated (as described in Alternative C).

Table 6. Livestock grazing authorization for Alternative D, McPherson Individual Allotment, Ada County, Idaho.

Allotment Name	Livestock		Start	End	%PL	Preference AUMs <sup>1</sup>		
	Number	Kind				Active	Suspended	Total
McPherson Individual	20	C	11-01	02-28	100	34	0	34

*Rangeland Management Projects*

The Big Fire ESR fence would be removed as described in Alternative B and the southern boundary and northeastern boundary realignment fences would be constructed as described in Alternative C (Map 2).

**Preliminary Issues**

*Slickspot Peppergrass* - Livestock grazing could affect the species and its habitat.

*Native Plant Community Health* – Potential effects of grazing to native plant community conditions.

*Noxious Weeds and Invasive Plants* – Livestock grazing and vegetation community health could influence spread of noxious weeds and invasive plants.

*Seasonal Forage Availability* - Annual fluctuations in precipitation and weather (e.g., timing and intensity) could affect spring forage availability.

*Recreation* – Rangeland management projects could affect recreational opportunities in a popular use area.

*Residential Development* - Proposed development adjacent to the allotment could affect livestock grazing.

### **Decision to be Made**

The manager is the authorized officer responsible for the decision regarding management of the allotments. Based on the results of the NEPA analysis, the FRFO manager will issue a decision document that includes a determination of the significance of the environmental effects and whether an environmental impact statement (EIS) would be required. If the FRFO manager determines that it is not necessary to prepare an EIS, the manager will decide which management actions, mitigation measures, and monitoring requirements will be prescribed for the allotment, including permitted number of animals, season of use, allowable utilization standards, and terms of the permit.

### **Public Input Needed**

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by April 20, 2012 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA. Comments sent electronically should be sent to [mespil@blm.gov](mailto:mespil@blm.gov) with the title of this project in the subject line. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Martin M. Espil Rangeland Management Specialist, Four Rivers Field Office, (208) 384-3224.

### **Maps:**

Map 1 - McPherson Allotment

Map 2 – McPherson Allotment Proposed Projects