

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

NV-040-5-27-S1-2000

COVE ALLOTMENT DIVISION FENCE

United States Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Ely Field Office

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## I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This environmental assessment (EA) incorporates by reference and is tiered to the districtwide fenceline programmatic environmental assessment EA-NV-040-5-27. This EA also incorporates by reference and is tiered to the Proposed Egan Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/FEIS), dated December 24, 1983, and the Egan Resource Area Record of Decision (ROD) which was finalized on February 3, 1987. This EA fulfills the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirement for a site-specific analysis.

### Need for the Proposal

This fence was identified in the Cove Allotment Evaluation of February 1996 as a range improvement which would help meet Land Use Plan (LUP) multiple use objectives for the allotment. It would also contribute to achieving Standards for grazing administration and healthy rangelands. A need to improve the plant communities of the Cove Allotment has been identified following several years of rangeland monitoring data gathered for this area. The enhancement of rangeland plant communities would be a benefit to livestock, wild horses, and wildlife.

### Relationship to Planning

The project is in conformance with the Egan Resource Area Record of Decision (ROD) signed February 3, 1987, and is consistent with the goals outlined in the ROD page 3, which states in part, "...develop and implement range improvements which emphasize greatest return on investment in relationship to resource needs...."

The project is in conformance with the Proposed Egan Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/FEIS), dated December 24, 1983. The implementation of rangeland improvement projects is listed as a long-term selected management action (5-20 years) on page 20 of the RMP/FEIS. The project is consistent with the County Policy Plan for Nye County, which states that "The federal government should continue to make the public rangelands economically and realistically available for livestock grazing, where compatible with other multiple use objectives."

The project would help meet the district's goal of being in conformance with the Northeastern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council's (RAC) Standards and Guidelines for Grazing Administration, approved by the Secretary of the Interior on February 12, 1997. Standard 3 (Habitat) states in part, "...habitats exhibit a healthy, productive, and diverse population of native and/or desirable plant species, appropriate to the site characteristics, to provide suitable feed, water, cover and living space for animal species and maintain ecological processes."

### Major Issues

There are no major issues currently identified for this fence.

## II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to build approximately five miles of fence in generally an east/west direction through the western portion of White River Valley in the Cove Allotment (0817). The Cove Allotment is an "M" category allotment. The fence would be a pasture division fence, creating a two pasture rotation system for cattle grazing. Approximately 350 head of cattle plus calves are permitted to graze the Cove Allotment from 01/01 to 04/30.

This fence would be a livestock pasture division fence and drift fence, open ended on both sides to allow wild horses free and easy access to their historical range. A cattleguard would be installed on BLM road 4057 south of Government Well. Gates would be installed on either side of the cattleguard and at other designated locations along the fence. Cross country travel by vehicles would be permitted along the fenceline route during construction (see Maps 1 & 2 for fence location).

The fence would begin on BLM public lands in the big sagebrush/greasewood flat in the eastern portion of the Cove Allotment in T. 10N., R. 60E., Section 36, SE1/4 of the NE1/4. The fence would bear southwesterly then westerly and stop at a point in native range on the lower slopes of the Horse Range Mountains in T. 9N., R. 60E., Section 7. The fence would be built to meet stated cattle and wildlife specifications (BLM Manual 1737), and would consist of a smooth bottom wire and three strands of barbed wire. The fence would create a two pasture rotation grazing system, resulting in improved production, vigor, and utilization of the predominately winterfat forage resource. Cattle distribution and control would also be improved. The fence would be constructed using white topped green steel posts for increased visibility. White flagging would be attached to the top wire between posts to alert wild horses, wildlife and livestock to the new fence.

The following mitigation measures from the programmatic fenceline EA apply to this action:

- 1) Efforts should be made to avoid significant cultural resource sites during the survey and design phase. The BLM archaeologist should be involved in the planning, survey, and design phases of the fence.
- 2) Ensure the fence is built to specifications and maintained in good working condition.
- 3) Fences in wild horse areas will contrast enough with the surroundings so as to be visible to wild horses and will be constructed according to BLM Manual 1737. Selected portions of the new fence will be flagged or otherwise marked for one year after construction to make them visible to wild horses. White flagging would be attached to the top wire between posts to alert wild horses, wildlife and livestock to the new fence.

This fence would be constructed by the authorized permittee, with BLM supplying the fence materials. BLM would provide the cattleguard, which the permittee would install. Construction work on the fence would commence during the summer of 2000 and would take from two to four weeks. BLM would supervise construction of the fence to insure specifications (BLM Manual

1737) and standard operating procedures (SOP's) are followed. SOP's are requirements that must be met for any federal action on public lands, and are referenced to pages 25-28 of the Egan RMP/FEIS. SOP's to be followed for this project are listed in Appendix I.

Fence construction would be supervised and monitored by the BLM to insure all requirements are met, particularly that impacts to the vegetative resource are kept to a minimum. As stated below in the Suggested Monitoring section, the vegetative resource would continue to be monitored in the long term using several rangeland monitoring methods.

Monitoring will be conducted in the form of compliance and data collection.

a. Compliance

The project inspector (PI) or a representative from the BLM would make periodic site visits to check on compliance of specifications and progress during fence construction. Upon completion of the fence, a final inspection would be made to ensure compliance with specifications. Any deficiencies will be corrected at that time. Periodic compliance checks for maintenance will be made by the rangeland specialist following fence completion in conjunction with routine rangeland monitoring of the Cove Allotment.

b. Data Collection

Data collection would continue in the form of establishing key areas, monitoring utilization levels, frequency trend, ecological condition, cover, observed apparent trend, actual use reports, and compliance checks. This data will be collected by the rangeland management specialist.

III. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED IN DETAIL

Hauling water for livestock distribution was also considered as an alternative method for achieving project goals. Water hauling alone was eliminated from detailed analysis for the following reasons:

1. Cattle have already established a grazing pattern of repeatedly returning to Gubler Well, which is often the sole watering source in the allotment.
2. More uniform, widespread utilization of winterfat can be achieved by constructing a pasture division fence.
3. Constructing the fence and water hauling together present the most reasonable alternative for accomplishing vegetation objectives and progressing towards standards and guidelines for grazing administration.
4. Water hauling alone would be more economically costly in the long term.

No other alternatives were necessary to respond to unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources.

#### IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The affected environment is described in the Egan RMP/FEIS. The Cove Allotment (0817) encompasses approximately 26,538 federal acres and 320 private acres for 26,858 acres total. The allotment is situated in the south middle portion of the Ely District, in Nye County, approximately 50 air miles southwest of Ely, Nevada. The allotment is situated on the west side of the White River Valley. The Horse Mountain Range traverses the western portion of the allotment in a north - south direction. The general aspect of the allotment is a gradual eastward slope into the White River Valley from the Horse Range. Elevations range from 5,340 feet at valley bottom to 7,000 feet in the Horse Range. An old unsuccessful Siberian wheatgrass seeding (fenced) of approximately 1,000 acres is located in the northeast portion of the allotment. The Preston - Lund Sheep Trail runs north - south for approximately four miles through the central portion of the allotment, near Government Well and Gubler Well. Main access to the allotment is via State Highway 318 south of Lund, Nevada.

The three main vegetative types within the allotment are salt desert shrub, northern desert shrub (big sagebrush types) and pinyon - juniper. There are no riparian areas identified on the allotment. The allotment does not occur within a wilderness study area.

There are no sage grouse strutting grounds (leks) documented on the Cove Allotment. It is estimated by the Nevada Division of Wildlife that from 35 - 50 antelope use the allotment for approximately six months. Deer migrate through the allotment. Elk, bighorn sheep, and chukar partridge are not known to use the allotment. The ferruginous hawk nests on the allotment. Bald eagles, golden eagles, and peregrine falcons may be observed on the allotment.

The Cove Allotment was evaluated and a final multiple use grazing decision issued in December of 1996. A portion of the White River Wild Horse Herd Management Area (HMA) lies within the western half of the Cove Allotment (13,000 acres). The appropriate management level (AML) is 42 wild horses year-long and 10 wild horses for three months, or 528 AUMs total. The most recent ground census completed for the Cove Allotment in April of 1999 indicates up to 160 wild horses are using the allotment seasonally from about March through June.

Site specific descriptions of portions of the affected environment are included, as needed, in the Environmental Consequences section of this EA to facilitate understanding of anticipated impacts.

#### V. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The following resources would not be impacted by the construction of the proposed allotment division fence.

- 1) Federally listed or proposed Threatened or Endangered Plants or Animals.

- 2) Floodplains, Wetlands, and Riparian Areas.
- 3) Wilderness Values, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, and Wild and Scenic Rivers.
- 4) Prime or Unique Farmlands.
- 5) Environmental Justice
- 6) Cultural, Paleontological, and Historical Resource Values.
- 7) Water Quality (Drinking/Ground).
- 8) Native American Religious Concerns.
- 9) Wastes, Hazardous and Solid.
- 10) Human Health or Environment of Minority or Low Income Populations.

#### Anticipated Impacts

#### Proposed Action

General impacts are as described in the programmatic EA. More specific impacts include better control of cattle movements resulting in improved cattle distribution and utilization of key forage species in each of the two rotation pastures. Improvement in cattle distribution and utilization should result in enhanced forage production, vigor, species composition, diversity, and range condition and trend. Areas of overutilization should be reduced. Forage availability should increase for livestock, wild horses, and wildlife.

Increased forage production and an improved ground cover should result in less soil erosion and better soil/water relations. Progress should be made in achieving Standards and guidelines for grazing administration.

#### 1. Soils

The soils in the proposed fence area are predominately very fine sandy loams, silty clays, and variations of loams. The potential for sheet and rill erosion is slight to moderate. Short term impacts to soils from fence building activities should be minimal. A minor increase in soil compaction and disturbance to soil structure could result, mainly due to vehicle activity during construction. Minor soil loss could occur. In the long term, it is expected that soil characteristics will benefit from the two pasture rotation system.

#### 2. Vegetation

The main vegetative type within the project area is a salt desert shrub type with winterfat dominating. A second type that covers a large acreage is dominated by black greasewood and shadscale. Other shrubs common to the project area include big sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and bud sagebrush. Common grasses include bottlebrush squirreltail and Indian ricegrass. By creating a two pasture rotation grazing system, the fence is expected to lead to positive vegetation impacts such as improved vigor, increased cover, increased production and forage availability, an improved plant composition and diversity, and an improved rangeland trend. Some vegetation would be crushed during fence construction.

### 3. Wildlife

Resident wildlife along the fence corridor, including birds, small mammals, rodents, and reptiles would be temporarily disturbed and displaced by fence construction activity. Wildlife habitat would be enhanced by improved ground cover and a better quantity, diversity, and quality of forage.

Antelope use the western portion of White River Valley, including the Cove Allotment, for approximately six months of the year. The fence would be built to antelope specifications. It is unlikely that antelope would become entangled in the fence. Antelope use of the area would be interrupted until they become accustomed to the fence. No sage grouse leks are located on or near the proposed fence line.

### 4. Recreation

Recreation in this area includes large and small game hunting, wildlife observation, wild horse observation, and minor off road vehicle exploration. Fence gates will continue to provide access to recreationists. Motorized access may be promoted along the fence corridor. The proposed fenceline would not interfere with recreation activities. Impacts to activities would be minimal.

### 5. Cultural Resources

There would be no effect to any Historic Properties by this project. A Class III cultural inventory for the project area was done May 27, 1999 (see report CRR-2000-04-1326N). A total of 5.25 miles was inventoried for cultural resources. No cultural resources were located or recorded during the survey.

### 6. Visual Resources (VRM)

There would be slight visual impairment in the project area because the fence would introduce straight lines into the environment. No trees grow along the proposed fence line, thus no trees would have to be removed. Shrubs, grasses, and forbs would be trampled during fence installation; however, vegetation is expected to return to a composition similar to what existed prior to fence construction. The fence would not be visible from highway 318. The proposed project is consistent with the Visual Resource Management Class IV objectives for this area.

## 7. Air Quality

A very short term, minor, and local impact to air quality could result due to ground disturbance by vehicles and construction activities.

## 8. Wild Horses

Implementing the proposed action would have a minimal effect upon wild horses in White River Valley. In the Cove Allotment, wild horses normally utilize range on the east slopes of the Horse Range Mountains, generally to the west of the fence's west ending point. The fence would not be a barrier to normal movements. A large corridor would be provided around the west end of the fence, allowing wild horses access to their historical range. A corridor would also be provided around the east end of the fence, which is outside the White River Herd Management Area. Wild horses should benefit from an improved forage resource. Wild horses can become entangled in a new fence. This impact would be minimized by using white topped steel posts and white flagging on the fence (increasing visibility).

## 9. Social and Economic Values

The proposed range improvement would have positive economic benefits for the livestock permittee in this allotment. The proposed fence would facilitate livestock management.

The site of the proposed fence is located within a relatively remote, uninhabited portion of public land. Therefore, the proposed range improvement would not have any adverse effect on the human health or environment of minority and low income populations.

## 10. Noxious Weeds or Invasive, Nonnative species

See Appendix II for the Noxious Weed Risk Assessment. The Risk Factor for spread of noxious weeds is low at the present time. Fence building activity should not result in an increase in noxious weeds to the area impacted by fence construction. Currently the invasive weed species halogeton (Halogeton glomeratus) and the nonnative grass cheatgrass (Bromus tectorium) have been identified in the project area. Other invasive species present in the project area include

Russian thistle and Douglas rabbitbrush. Fence building activity could result in an increase in invasive or nonnative species in the project area. (The disturbed area will be monitored for noxious or invasive weeds or nonnative species (see Appendix II)).

## 11. Cumulative Impacts

No cumulative impacts of concern are anticipated as a result of the proposed project. There have been limited previous actions occurring in the same area. No other fences are planned to be constructed in the area. There is little cumulative visual impairment in the area. Future wild horse gathers would not be impeded by the fence.

## VI. PROPOSED MITIGATION MEASURES

No additional mitigation is proposed.

## VII. SUGGESTED MONITORING

No monitoring is suggested in addition to that which is identified in the proposed action.

## VIII. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

### Intensity of Public Interest

The intensity of public interest is low for this project. As previously mentioned, there are no major issues identified for this project. Public comments will be solicited for this EA. There will be a 15 day comment period. Changes in the EA based upon public input will be made as determined to be appropriate.

### Record of Persons Contacted

Lou Willfong and Jerry Baker, (Permittees - Cove Allotment)  
Nevada Division of Wildlife  
Ely Shoshone Tribe  
Bob Wilson, White Pine County Agricultural Extension Agent

### Internal District Review

Chris Mayer	Range
Bob Brown	Wild Horses
Mark Barber	Threatened and Endangered Animals, Plants
Mike Perkins	Wildlife

### Internal District Review (continued)

Carolyn Sherve	Cultural Resources
Fred Fisher	Operations
Larry Martin	Engineering
Harry Rhea	Operations & Weed Management
Shane DeForest	Weed Management
Gary Medlyn	Soils, Air, Water Resources
Curtis Tucker	Native American Concerns
Gretchen Burris	Recreation, Visual Resources
Susan Howle	Environmental Coordination

**APPENDIX I**  
**STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES**

The following standard operating procedures (SOP's) will be followed for the fence project:

1. Environmental assessment will be conducted before project development so that, depending on impact, modification or abandonment of the proposed project may be considered.
2. Cultural resource protection requires compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, Section 2(b) of the Executive Order 11593, and Section 101(b)(4) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. Prior to project approval, intensive field (Class III) inventories will be conducted in specific areas that would be impacted by implementing activities. If cultural or paleontological sites are found, every effort will be made to avoid impacts.
3. Only the minimal clearing of vegetation will be allowed on project sites requiring excavation.
4. Fence construction must comply with BLM Manual 1737. Fences in wild horse areas will contrast enough with surroundings so as to be visible to wild horses and will have gates installed at least once every mile and at all corners. Fences in wild horse herd use areas will be located to minimize interference with the normal distribution and movement of wild horses. Selected portions of new fences will be flagged or otherwise marked for one year after construction to make them more visible to wild horses.

**APPENDIX II**  
**NOXIOUS WEED RISK ASSESSMENT**

On February 25, 2000 a Noxious Weed Risk Assessment was completed by Mark Lowrie, rangeland management specialist, for the Cove Allotment Division Fence, located in the Cove Allotment in Nye County, Nevada. The legal location for the fence is T. 9 & 10N., R. 60E., various sections. This project will disturb approximately 10 acres of public lands.

Factor 1 assesses the likelihood of noxious weed species spreading to the project area.

For this project, the factor rates as (low,2) at the present time. This means that noxious weeds were located adjacent to, but not within, the project area. The weeds specialist for the Ely District inventoried the proposed fence route and two track roads near the project area in May of 1999. No noxious weeds were observed in the project area and no concerns about weeds were recorded. The fenceline was again surveyed for noxious weeds during the cultural resources inventory and no weeds were recorded.

Factor 2 assesses the consequences of noxious weed establishment in the project area.

For this project, the factor rates as (low,3) at the present time. This means that there is very little likelihood that noxious weeds will spread to the area disturbed by the proposed fence. No cumulative effects of noxious weeds spreading to the native plant community are expected.

The Risk Rating is obtained by multiplying Factor 1 by Factor 2.

For this project, the Risk Rating is (low,6) at the present time. This means that the project can proceed as planned. Control treatments would be initiated on noxious weed populations that get established in the project area. The fence line should be monitored the first year following fence construction for noxious weeds. It is possible noxious weed seed could be imported to the area via livestock, wildlife, people, vehicles, or other modes of transport.

Reviewed by: 

Date: 6/14/00