

EVALUATION REPORT

Achieving the Idaho Standards for Rangeland Health

Field Office: ID 120 Evaluation Date(s): September 30, 2009
Grazing Allotment Name/Number: Nahas FFR #0892
Name of Permittee(s): Sierra Del Rio (GRN# 1100227)

INTRODUCTION:

The Nahas FFR Allotment is located at the northern end of Big Springs Allotment #0803 along the Mud Flat Road, which has also been designated as the Owyhee Upland Backcountry Byway. It consists primarily of federal and State of Idaho lands that are fenced in with the Upper Avery base property controlled by Sierra Del Rio. That property is used in conjunction with their BLM permits in both the Nahas FFR and Big Springs allotments.

The federal lands in Nahas FFR are grazed primarily in fall after cattle are removed from the Big Springs allotment, as they have been for many years. Two larger pastures include most of the federal lands. Other isolated corners are fenced in with private lands that may be grazed by cattle and horses in the spring and summer months. A shipping pen is also located on private land. FFR status was granted by decision in 1997, giving Sierra Del Rio broad discretion in numbers and season of use. An annual bill for 80 AUMs is issued for use of the 692 acres of included federal lands.

The allotment consists of a broad basin amid tablelands. Avery Table Spring (#6197), which feeds Circle Pond, is the only riparian habitat of note. The wetland is within an enclosure, with a trough available outside of the enclosure. The trough probably dates back to the CCC. The pond was constructed prior to 1981, and now supports spotted frogs, a Candidate species. A Public Water Reserve withdrawal I-15366A was in place from 1930 to 1982, when it was revoked. Mud Flat milkvetch, a BLM sensitive plant species, also occurs within the allotment.

STANDARDS APPLICABLE:

Standards 1, 2, 4, and 8 (sensitive animals and sensitive plants) are applicable to the Nahas FFR Allotment.

An Evaluation is conducted to arrive at two outcomes (H-4180-1 page I-3):

- Firstly, an Evaluation conducts an analysis and interpretation of the findings resulting from the Assessment, relative to land health Standards, to evaluate the degree of achievement of land health Standards.
- Secondly, an Evaluation conducts an analysis and interpretation of information – be it observations or data from inventories and monitoring – on the causal factors for not achieving a land health Standard. An Evaluation of the suspected causal factors provides the foundation for a Determination.

BLM is further directed to evaluate all the data for each subdivided unit (i.e. allotment, watershed) to identify cause-effect relationships and draw conclusions about whether or not each Standard is being met for the Evaluation area as a whole (H-4180-1 page III-10).

EVALUATE STANDARDS

Standard 1 (Watersheds)

Standard doesn't apply

Watersheds provide for the proper infiltration, retention, and release of water appropriate to soil type, vegetation, climate, and landform to provide for proper nutrient cycling, hydrologic cycling, and energy flow. Indicators may include, but are not limited to the following:

- The amount and distribution of ground cover, including litter, for identified ecological site(s) or soil-plant associations are appropriate for site stability.
- Evidence of accelerated erosion in the form of rills and/or gullies, erosional pedestals, flow patterns, physical soil crusts/surface sealing, and compaction layers below the soil surface is minimal for soil type and landform.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Objectives:

WS 1: Maintain stability of 408,300 acres of moderate . . . erosion hazard classes by reducing or minimizing wind and water erosion.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Decisions:

WS-1.1: Minimize erosion by maintaining good perennial vegetation cover where it exists and where feasible/economical strive for establishing perennial vegetation cover to benefit all uses. If not feasible/economical to establish perennial vegetation manage to achieve stable watershed conditions.

WS-1.2: Minimize soil erosion of all surface disturbance activities through proper timing with regards to soil moisture content. All projects and/or authorized uses will consider soil erosion both on-site and off-site.

Evaluation and Information Sources:

Rangeland Health: One rangeland health evaluation was completed in each of the two pastures of the Nahas FFR Allotment during 2004. In Pasture 1, the evaluation site displayed a slight departure from expected conditions related to Standard 1. The site is stabilized by gravel and vegetation, but some distinct water flow patterns were noted. Plant community composition is near potential, with only a slight decrease in interspatial bunchgrasses associated with water flow paths. In Pasture 2, conditions related to Standard 1 are near reference condition. Soils are stable, and vegetation cover and structure are adequate to protect soil surfaces and facilitate proper nutrient cycling, hydrologic cycling, and energy flow. Overall, Standard 1 is being met in the Nahas FFR allotment.

Rangeland Health Changes: Indicators in both pastures include historic erosional processes (water flow patterns and some pedastalling of plants). Western juniper is encroaching on these sites, and bunchgrasses are slightly below potential in some areas; however these changes are not negatively affecting watershed function. Trend data are not available for this allotment.

Livestock Grazing Management: Livestock use in this pasture is currently limited, and often occurs in the fall.

Information Sources: Rangeland Health Evaluations, Site Photos, Field Visits.

Evaluation Finding - Allotment/watershed is:

- Meeting the Standard
- Not meeting the Standard, but making significant progress towards meeting
- Not meeting the Standard

Rationale for Evaluation Finding

Based upon the resource conditions found on the Nahas FFR during the Rangeland Health Evaluations, current livestock grazing management appears to be compatible with attainment of Standard 1.

Standard 2 (Riparian Areas and Wetlands) Standard doesn't apply

Riparian-wetland areas are in properly functioning condition appropriate to soil type, climate, geology, and landform to provide for proper nutrient cycling, hydrologic cycling, and energy flow. Indicators may include, but are not limited to the following:

- The riparian/wetland vegetation is controlling erosion, stabilizing streambanks, shading water areas to reduce water temperature, stabilizing shorelines, filtering sediment, aiding in floodplain development, dissipating energy, delaying flood water, and increasing recharge of groundwater appropriate to site potential.
- Riparian/wetland vegetation with deep strong binding roots is sufficient to stabilize streambanks and shorelines. Invader and shallow rooted species are a minor component of the floodplain.
- Age class and structural diversity of riparian/wetland vegetation is appropriate for the site.
- Noxious weeds are not increasing.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Objectives:

WL 4: Manage upland game and waterfowl habitats in the Bruneau Planning Unit (BPU) to increase populations of these highly desired species.

WL 6: Manage all meadows and riparian habitat in the BPU to obtain a maximum diversity of vegetative species in order to provide for a maximum diversity and optimum abundance of wildlife species.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Decisions:

RM 1.1: Implement less intensive management on 5 allotments (0892 added to this list by later rangeline agreement).

- Livestock rest or deferment systems would be established on critical sage grouse brood-rearing areas. If grazing systems do not improve habitat conditions, large meadow complexes may be fenced and excluded . . . or have special grazing management applied (e.g., use only after seed ripe).

WL 4.3: Manage springs, seeps, and meadows and adjacent upland areas as key wildlife habitats for upland game. Specifically:

- Control livestock grazing on these habitats by the implementation of grazing systems, season of use and other management practices.
- If livestock overuse cannot be avoided, physically protect springheads and wet areas.

WL 6.1: To enhance wildlife diversity and abundance, riparian and meadow habitats will be managed to attain and/or maintain a good ecological condition class. Specifically:

- Employ livestock management systems/practices/improvements including exclusion of grazing where necessary.
- Restore desiccated and former meadows where technically/economically feasible.

Evaluation and Information Sources:

No known perennial or intermittent streams are present in the Nahas FFR. The Circle Pond spring complex is located on public land within the Nahas FFR, and is fenced to exclude livestock use. There is a spring disconnected but adjacent to Circle Pond that is in proper functioning condition.

Evaluation Finding - Allotment/watershed is:

- Meeting the Standard
- Not meeting the Standard, but making significant progress towards meeting
- Not meeting the Standard

Standard 3 (Stream Channel/Flood Plain) Standard doesn't apply

Standard 4 (Native Plant Communities) Standard doesn't apply

Healthy, productive, and diverse native animal habitat and populations of native plants are maintained or promoted as appropriate to soil type, climate, and landform to provide for proper nutrient cycling, hydrologic cycling, and energy flow. Indicators may include, but are not limited to the following:

- Native plant communities (flora and microbiotic crusts) are maintained or improved to ensure the proper functioning of ecological processes and continued productivity and diversity of native plant species.
- The diversity of native species is maintained.

- Plant vigor (total plant production, seed and seedstalk production, cover, etc.) is adequate to enable reproduction and recruitment of plants when favorable climatic events occur.
- Noxious weeds are not increasing.
- Adequate litter and standing dead plant material are present for site protection and for decomposition to replenish soil nutrients relative to site potential.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Objectives:

RM 1: Increase 343,522 acres currently in fair condition to good condition in 20 years. Following this 20 year period, the goal would be to improve all range to good condition.

RM 3: Allocate livestock forage in each of the allotments in the Bruneau Planning Unit within the limits necessary to maintain and/or enhance the range and soil resource.

WL 3: Manage 1,143,000 acres of big game habitat in the BPU . . . to obtain good ecological condition.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Decisions:

RM 1.1 (2): Implement less intensive management on 5 allotments (0892 added to this list by later rangeline agreement).

- Livestock rest or deferment systems would be established on critical sage grouse brood-rearing areas. If grazing systems do not improve habitat conditions, large meadow complexes may be fenced and excluded . . . or have special grazing management applied (e.g., use only after seed ripe).

RM 1.5: Adjust livestock season of use and/or implement grazing systems on spring and summer ranges to meet minimum growth needs of preferred plant species.

RM 3.1: Initial livestock use levels by allotment will be established at the five-year licensed active use levels from the years 1976-80 or by mutual agreement. Any subsequent increase or reduction in AUMs . . . will be based upon monitoring and other resource needs as identified in this MFP . . .

WL 3.2: Manage 1,106,000 acres of mule deer spring, summer, and fall range in the BPU . . . so there is adequate food, cover, and water for 2,155 animals by 1990. Specifically:

- Implement livestock grazing systems and practices that recognize the physiological requirements of forbs and shrubs . . .
- Allow no more than 50% total utilization of the current annual production of key shrub species by all classes of animals combined.

WL 3.3: Manage 1,079,000 acres in the BPU as pronghorn habitat . . . to provide sufficient forage, water, cover, and space for 1,175 animals by 1990. Specifically:

- Manage habitat for good ecological condition where feasible/economical.

Evaluation and Information Sources:

Rangeland Health: Rangeland Health Evaluations were completed in the Nahas FFR during June, 2004. Prior to the evaluations, the area experienced a dry winter followed by above-normal precipitation during May and June, 2004. In Pasture 1, indicators related to Standard 4 showed an overall “none to slight” departure from reference conditions. The evaluation site was dominated by deep rooted cool season bunchgrasses, with a sub-dominant shrub component (big sagebrush and bitterbrush), and supported a diversity of forbs. In Pasture 2, indicators related to Standard 4 showed an overall “slight to moderate” departure from reference conditions. Although Idaho fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass were near potential for the site, bulbous bluegrass was a common throughout the site, and forb abundance was lower than expected. Overall, the Nahas FFR is supporting diverse, healthy native plant populations that are adequate to provide for proper nutrient cycling, hydrologic cycling, and energy flow, and is meeting Standard 4.

Rangeland Health Changes: Trend data is not available for this pasture. Native plant communities appear to be maintained, though some non-native grasses occur within limited areas on the allotment (bulbous bluegrass and cheatgrass). Western juniper appears to be increasing across much of the allotment.

Information Sources: Rangeland Health Evaluation Summary Worksheets from 2004, Soils and ESI data from 1981.

Evaluation Finding - Allotment/watershed is:

- Meeting the Standard
- Not meeting the Standard, but making significant progress towards meeting
- Not meeting the Standard

Rationale for Evaluation Finding:

The standard is being met, with BLM lands within this FFR functioning properly.

Standard 5 (Seedings) Standard doesn't apply

Standard 6 (Exotic Plant Communities, other than Seedings) Standard doesn't apply

Standard 7 (Water Quality) Standard doesn't apply

Standard 8 (Threatened and Endangered Plants and Animals) Standard doesn't apply

Habitats are suitable to maintain viable populations of threatened and endangered, sensitive, and other special status species. Indicators may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Parameters described in the Idaho Water Quality Standards

- Riparian/wetland vegetation with deep, strong, binding roots is sufficient to stabilize streambanks and shorelines. Invader and shallow-rooted species are a minor component of the floodplain.
- Age class and structural diversity of riparian/wetland vegetation are appropriate for the site.
- Native plant communities (flora and microbotic crusts) are maintained or improved to ensure the proper functioning of ecological processes and continued productivity and diversity of native plant species.
- The diversity of native species is maintained.
- The amount and distribution of ground cover, including litter, for identified ecological site(s) or soil-plant associations are appropriate for site stability.
- Noxious weeds are not increasing.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Objectives:

WL 1: Protect and/or improve endangered species habitat within the BPU.

WL 2: Manage sensitive species habitats to maintain or increase existing or potential populations.

RM 5: Provide for protection and conservation of rare and endangered plants within the planning unit.

Related Management Framework Plan (MFP) Decisions:

WL 4.4: Manage 520,000 acres of sage grouse range in the BPU . . . to improve nesting, brood rearing and winter habitats. Specifically:

- Improve sage grouse nesting and brood rearing habitats to good ecological condition.

RM 5.1: Manage all lands in a manner which will provide or enhance rare and endangered plants where they exist throughout the planning unit (BLM regulation and policy).

Special Status Animals

Evaluation and Information Sources:

Rangeland Health: Uplands are in good condition, with vigorous native bunchgrasses and mountain sagebrush. Habitat is suitable for sage grouse, other than the amount of juniper scattered within the sagebrush. Pygmy rabbits were found in the allotment, in areas of thicker mountain sage. Spotted frogs occur in several wet areas on private land and in Circle Pond Springs on public land, which is fenced to exclude livestock.

Non-grazing issues that need to be resolved include a wildlife-caused breach on the downhill side of the berm on Circle Pond which lowers the water capacity of the pond, a need for spotted frog-friendly vegetation maintenance of Circle Pond (i.e. back hoe excavation), and a plan in place to turn the spring development off while cattle are absent from the allotment.

Rangeland Health Changes: No information.

Livestock Grazing Management: Appears suitable.

Information Sources:

- Upland Health assessments 2004
- Sage grouse lek (mating ground) surveys by helicopter in April-May 2004
- IDFG sage grouse historical lek database, 2003
- Pygmy Rabbit Surveys 2005
- Conservation Data Center Rare Species database
- General wildlife field observations in 2004, 2005, and 2009

Evaluation Finding - Allotment/watershed is:

Meeting the Standard

Not meeting the Standard, but making significant progress towards meeting

Not meeting the Standard

Rationale for Evaluation Finding: Allotment has native sagebrush communities in good condition, with vigorous bunchgrasses.

Special Status Plants (SSP)

Evaluation and Information Sources:

Rangeland Health: BLM SSP exist on private and state land within the Nahas FFR, no impacts have been observed to BLM SSP that are currently known to occur on BLM land within this FFR.

Rangeland Health Changes: Currently there are no known impacts to BLM SSP located on BLM land in this FFR.

Information Sources: Locations of known populations of SSP were identified using the Idaho Fish & Game Conservation Data Center (CDC) database and field office maps. Data for species listed on the 2009 BLM sensitive species list were collected. Known populations of BLM SSP occurring in the neighboring Big Springs Allotment were also analyzed, and the known population on BLM land in this allotment was inspected in July, 2009. Inventories for SSP in this Use Area have primarily resulted from incidental observations from other work in the area, though this type of work has been limited.

Evaluation Finding - Allotment/watershed is:

Meeting the Standard

Not meeting the Standard, but making significant progress towards meeting

Not meeting the Standard

Rationale for Evaluation Finding: Currently there are no known BLM SSP located on BLM land in this FFR.

SECTION 1 – IS A DETERMINATION REQUIRED?

- All Standards are met or making significant progress towards meeting and there is conformance with the guidelines. **No Determination is required, review is complete.**
- One or more Standards is not being met or there is non-conformance with the guidelines. **An Authorized Officer's Determination is required; continue with Section 2.**

 /s/ Arnold L. Pike
Field Manager

 9/30/09
Date