



DUCHESNE COUNTY COMMISSION

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June 24, 2019

Mr. David Whittekiend, Supervisor
Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest
857 W South Jordan Parkway
South Jordan, UT 84095

Mr. Jeff E. Schramm, Supervisor
Ashley National Forest
355 N Vernal Avenue
Vernal, UT 84078

RE: Comments on High Uintas Wilderness Domestic Sheep Analysis DEIS

Dear Forest Officials:

The Duchesne County Commission appreciates the opportunity that we and our staff have had over the last few years to participate, as a Cooperating Agency, in the development of the subject DEIS.

Our review of the DIES reveals that our comments and concerns have been addressed. If the Responsible Officials take action based on this study to adopt the Proposed Action, the decision will be in compliance with the Duchesne County Resource Management Plan, which is part of the County's General Plan. Deciding to select the No Grazing Alternative would be contrary to our plans and policies and would be futile given the likelihood of bighorn sheep coming into contact with domestic sheep on private and BLM lands near their Core Herd Home Range.

The following **bolded** objectives and policies of our Resource Management Plan apply to the project:

Livestock & Grazing Objectives:

- 1. Maintain cattle and sheep grazing on BLM and U.S. Forest Service lands at the highest reasonably sustainable levels.**
- 2. Maintain cattle and sheep grazing on BLM and U.S. Forest Service lands during seasons of use that benefit livestock producers but maintain healthy range conditions.**
3. Avoid the reduction of grazing to support wildlife, especially non-native species.
- 4. Cooperate with U.S. Forest Service to address the transmission of disease from domestic sheep to wild sheep.**

Livestock & Grazing Policies: Consistent with the state laws associated with grazing on federal lands, it is the position of Duchesne County that:

1. **Well managed livestock grazing, though poorly understood by the average citizen, is the most effective way to manage vegetation on a large scale to benefit watershed health and preserve wildlife habitat.**
2. Improving grazing management on Duchesne County's private and public lands should be viewed as a long term priority.
3. **Public lands shall be managed to maintain or increase forage allocation for livestock grazing. Annual monitoring should be done to verify whether desired conditions are being maintained.**
4. Good monitoring and allotment management plans shall be supported. The County encourages frequent data collection to inform allotment management plans. The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food should be involved in areas of dispute regarding range conditions.
5. **Public land agencies shall maintain livestock grazing permits and grazing allocations at present levels unless a study of rangeland conditions justifies increased or decreased grazing.** The county recognizes that drought, wildfire and other factors may affect the terms of grazing permits.
6. **The County opposes the reduction, relinquishment or retirement of grazing animal unit months in favor of conservation, wildlife, and other uses.** Any decreases should be temporary in nature due to ever-changing range conditions. The county expects the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources to coordinate with land management agencies as they manage forage and grazing allotments for the benefit of livestock and wildlife populations.
7. Land management plans, programs, and initiatives should provide that the amount of domestic livestock forage, expressed in animal unit months, for permitted, active use as well as the wildlife forage included in that amount, be no less than the maximum number of animal unit months sustainable by range conditions in grazing allotments and districts, based on an on-the-ground and scientific analysis.
8. The County favors the best management practices that are jointly sponsored by cattlemen's, sportsmen's and wildlife management groups such as chaining, logging, seeding, burning, and other direct soil and vegetation prescriptions that are demonstrated to restore forest and rangeland health, increase forage, and improve watersheds in grazing districts and allotments for the mutual benefit of domestic livestock and wildlife. When the practices described above increase a grazing allotment's forage beyond the total permitted forage use that was allocated to that allotment in the last federal land use plan or allotment management plan still in existence as of January 1, 2005, a reasonable and fair portion of the increase in forage beyond the previously allocated total permitted use should be allocated to wildlife as recommended by a joint, evenly balanced committee of livestock and wildlife representatives that is appointed and constituted by the governor for that purpose. The County favors quickly and effectively adjusting wildlife population goals and population census numbers in response to variations in the amount of available

forage caused by drought or other climatic adjustments, and state agencies responsible for managing wildlife population goals and population census numbers will give due regard to both the needs of the livestock industry and the need to prevent the decline of species to a point where listing under the terms of the Endangered Species Act when making such adjustments.

9. The County recognizes grazing permits on public lands as an asset, which may be transferred by the permit owner. Such transactions must be processed by the land management agency within a reasonable time frame after proper notification. Any reduction in the size of the permit or forage allocation as a result of the transaction shall not be made without a specific scientific justification.
10. When grazing permits are withdrawn from a livestock operator due to grazing violations, the permit shall not be reallocated to other uses and shall be made available for continued livestock use as soon as possible.
11. Access to public rangeland is a valid existing right that is vital to the permit-holders and the land management agency for planning, management, and development. Access shall be maintained open and shall be improved as management needs require.
12. The permit-holder shall be compensated for the remaining value of improvements made by the permittee on reduced allotments, unless the permit was canceled for non-compliance with grazing regulations. Said compensation will be provided for in accordance with Section 402 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, which provides a reasonable compensation for the adjusted value, to be determined by the Secretary concerned, of his interest in authorized permanent improvements placed or constructed by the permittee or lessee on lands covered by such permit or lease, but not to exceed the fair market value of the terminated portion of the permittee's or lessee's interest therein.
13. The County opposes the transfer of grazing animal unit months to wildlife for reasons of rangeland health. Livestock allocations shall not be converted to wildlife allocations as long as the land supports the grazing Animal Unit Months (AUM's) assigned to the allotment. See Chapter 5 (Wildlife).
14. Reductions in domestic livestock animal unit months must be temporary and scientifically based upon rangeland conditions. Reductions in AUMs should be allocated on a species basis [wildlife, wild horse, wild burros & livestock] with a percentage allocated to each species type. The only justification for decreasing domestic livestock grazing AUM's is for there to be a valid and documented scientific finding that the range district will no longer support the AUM's in question. The BLM and Forest Service are expected to comply with and honor the domestic grazing preference on grazing districts. Likewise, the permittee is also expected to abide by the terms and conditions identified in the grazing permit.
15. Federal policies, plans, programs, initiatives, resource management plans, and forest plans may not allow the placement of grazing animal unit months in a suspended use

category unless there is a rational and scientific determination that the condition of the rangeland allotment or district in question will not sustain the animal unit months sought to be placed in suspended use. Any grazing animal unit months that are placed in a suspended use category should be returned to active use when range conditions improve.

16. Federal policies, plans, programs, and initiatives related to vegetation management should recognize and uphold the preference for domestic grazing over alternate forage uses in established grazing districts while upholding management practices that optimize and expand forage for grazing and wildlife in conjunction with state wildlife management plans and programs in order to provide maximum available forage for all uses. In established grazing districts, animal unit months that have been reduced due to rangeland health concerns should be restored to livestock when rangeland conditions improve, and should not be converted to wildlife use.
17. Duchesne County recognizes that 43 CFR part 4110.3 provides for changes in permitted use. Conversion of allocated forage from one grazing animal to another would require a NEPA process that conforms to land use plans.
18. Management decisions shall be based on the individual range allotment condition and not on the overall condition of surrounding lands. Increases in available forage resulting from the conservation practices of livestock permit-holders shall not be allocated or credited to other uses.
19. Forage allocation reductions resulting from forage studies, drought, or natural disasters shall be implemented on an allotment basis. Reductions shall be applied proportionately to all allocations unless it can be proven that a specific type of grazing animal is causing the land health degradation. Duchesne County recognizes that, in the event of fire, drought or natural disaster, a variety of emergency or interim actions may be necessary to minimize land health degradation, such as temporary reduced forage allocation for livestock and wildlife. Forage allocation reductions shall be temporary. Grazing allocations shall be restored when forage production is restored.
20. Weed control efforts that affect forage allocations shall be discussed by the land management agency with livestock representatives, neighboring landowners, and the County weed specialist. After the discussion, a weed control plan shall be developed and implemented.
21. Public land management agencies shall endeavor to inspect riparian and sensitive areas with livestock permittees approximately one week before livestock are admitted to the grazing allotment. If riparian areas are damaged or degraded before the livestock enter the grazing allotment, the management agency and representatives shall make a record of the condition and appropriate mitigation shall be acceptable to all parties. A copy of the signed report shall be filed with the agency and provided to the permit-holder.
22. Increases in available forage resulting from practices or improvements implemented by managing agency will be allocated proportionately to all forage allocations, unless the funding source specifies the benefactor.

23. Changes in season of use or forage allocation must not be made without full and meaningful consultation with permittee. The permittee must be the first point of contact.
- 24. The continued viability of livestock operations and the livestock industry shall be supported on federal and state lands within Duchesne County by management of the lands and forage resources and the optimization of animal unit months for livestock in accordance with the multiple-use provisions of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, 43 U.S.C. 1701 et seq., the provisions of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, 43 U.S.C. 315 et seq., and the provisions of the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978, 43 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.**
25. Duchesne County encourages responsible and innovative grazing management, increased grazing education opportunities, rangeland restoration projects as identified by the Utah Department of Agriculture's Grazing Improvement Program, improved rangeland monitoring, noxious and invasive weed control, brush management, wildlife management, irrigation improvements, nutrient management and soils testing to improve pasture and rangeland conditions.
26. Duchesne County supports the Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit (CWMU) program and advocates its continuation and expansion to provide compensation to large and small ranching operations to offset the damage to forage crops by wildlife.

Wildlife Objectives

1. Encourage the Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) to focus on projects that include private landowner involvement by having county representatives attend meetings of the WRI regional teams, express their views, advise the WRI to involve private land owners, and advocate for the kinds of watershed restoration efforts they feel are most important.
2. Maintain healthy populations of mule deer while minimizing negative impacts from winter migration, including vehicle collisions and residential and commercial vegetation damage.
3. Avoid damage caused by wild horses by preventing the introduction of wild horse populations.
- 4. Support bighorn sheep populations for hunting, viewing, and ecosystem support.**
5. Support energy development while minimizing loss or fragmentation of habitats and disturbance during sensitive periods.
6. Meet municipal and industrial water needs while preserving traditional agricultural uses and ensuring aquatic habitat to support wildlife.

County Bighorn Sheep Policy: It is the policy of Duchesne County to support efforts by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and federal land management agencies to manage Bighorn sheep populations for recreational purposes such as hunting and viewing and to

ensure their contribution to ecosystems, provided that such management can be accomplished in coordination with the domestic sheep industry in a manner that does not force domestic sheep operators from their ranges or force them out of business. The County supports efforts to manage and augment the bighorn sheep population as long as there is not competition or interference with domestic animals.

It is important to note that wildlife species in Utah are managed by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR). Within national forest boundaries, the USFS has responsibility to manage their habitat. Pages 167-168 of the DEIS demonstrate that the UDWR is supportive of continued domestic sheep grazing in the study area. UDWR believes that, by following their bighorn sheep management plan and working with other stakeholders, they can manage the bighorn sheep to maintain viable populations. Eliminating domestic sheep grazing allotments is simply not necessary to maintain sustainable bighorn sheep herds in the High Uintas.

We believe that the Management Requirements for the sheep grazing allotments set forth on Pages 27-28 of the DEIS are sufficient to mitigate or prevent significant environmental impacts associated with the grazing. We believe that the DEIS has sufficiently analyzed the potential environmental impacts and given the Responsible Officials the facts necessary to make a wise decision that allows domestic sheep grazing to continue.

Sincerely,

DUCHESNE COUNTY COMMISSION

Greg Todd
Irene Hansen
Ray Miller

Mike Hyde

Mike Hyde, AICP
Community Development Director