



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Elko Field Office
3900 East Idaho Street
Elko, Nevada 89801-0611
www.nv.blm.gov/Elko



In Reply Refer To:
4130 (NV-012)
JDR# 6539, 6540

APR 14 2005

Dear Interested Party:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is proposing to construct three riparian enhancement and management projects within the North Pequop Mountain Pasture of the East Big Springs Allotment. These include: (1) construction of riparian management fencing along East Squaw Creek, to create the Upper Squaw Creek Riparian Pasture; (2) reconstruction of an existing fence around the Squaw Creek Ranch, or, as an alternative, remove portions of this existing fence and construct shorter sections of new fence to reduce the size of this field; and (3) construction of approximately 3.5 miles of the new Big Springs Division fence between East and West Big Springs Allotments, to help control drift of livestock between the two grazing use areas. A preliminary description and map of the proposed projects is enclosed for your review.

These projects were first outlined in the Big Springs Final Multiple Use Decision (FMUD), which was issued in 2002. We are in the process of developing an environmental assessment (EA) that will tier to the FMUD and the associated EA. At this time, BLM is requesting scoping input regarding development and analysis of the proposed action and alternatives. Please provide any additional information you may have which will benefit wildlife and minimize conflicts with other resource values. We are particularly interested in any information you may have on status or distribution of sensitive plant or animal species in the area which could potentially be impacted by the project.

To ensure your comments can be considered as BLM prepares the EA, please respond by May 16, 2005. If you need additional information about the project, please contact Jeff Moore at (775) 753-0359 or Wendy Fuell at (775) 753-0262. Thank you for your interest in the management of public lands in the Big Springs Allotment.

Sincerely,

Tom W. Warren
Assistant Field Manager
Renewable Resources

Enclosure: Preliminary Project Description and Map

Distribution List:

Big Springs/Parasol Ranch LLC
Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses
Elko Board of County Commissioners
Friends of Nevada Wilderness
Fund for Animals
Martha Hoots
Merrill Livestock LLC
Nevada Cattleman's Association
Nevada Department of Wildlife
Nevada Land & Resource Company
Nevada Natural Heritage Program
Nevada State Clearing House
Newmont Gold Company
Resource Concepts, Inc
Sierra Club
US Fish & Wildlife Service
Vidler Water Company
Western Watersheds Project
Western Watersheds Project
Wild Horse Organized Assistance

4/2005

East Squaw Creek Riparian Enhancement and Management Projects April 2005

Background

The Big Springs Allotment is located in the eastern portion of the Elko District, in Elko County, Nevada, and contains 365,493 acres of public land and 113,595 acres of private land. The crest of the Pequop Mountains generally divides the area into two grazing use areas. The area west of the divide encompasses the northern portion of Independence Valley, and the area to the east includes the Steptoe/Goshute Valleys. On September 17, 2002, BLM issued an Environmental Assessment (EA; BLM/EK/PL-2002/029) and Final Multiple Use Decision (FMUD) for the allotment. The FMUD divided the allotment into the East Big Springs Allotment and the West Big Springs Allotment, thus allowing issuance of separate grazing permits for each allotment that includes interim and final grazing plans for pastures in each allotment. The FMUD further identified actions deemed necessary to make progress towards meeting standards for rangeland health, as defined by the Nevada Northeastern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council (RAC), established allotment-specific objectives for resource management, and outlined range improvement projects to implement the decisions.

BLM is preparing an EA to analyze site-specific impacts of three fencing projects and alternatives in the North Pequop Mountain Pasture that are proposed for construction in 2005-2006. The projects are proposed to implement the final grazing plan for the North Pequop Mountain Pasture and protect riparian habitat values along East Squaw Creek as it flows through the pasture in the East Big Springs Allotment (see map). BLM's EA will tier to and incorporate pertinent portions of the 2002 FMUD EA. The 2002 FMUD and EA are available upon request to the BLM, Elko Field Office.

The North Pequop Mountain Pasture covers the portion of both allotments north of I-80. East Squaw Creek drains the portion of this pasture in the East Big Springs Allotment, and provides the only perennial stream flows in the allotment. The fenced Squaw Creek Ranch Field, which was acquired by BLM in the 1999 Big Springs Ranch land exchange, is located within the pasture. The projects include creation of the Upper Squaw Creek Riparian Pasture, reconstruction and/or relocation of the existing fence around the Squaw Creek Ranch Field, and construction of the Big Springs Division Fence.

Need for and Purpose of Action

Improvements are needed to livestock management to achieve, or make significant progress towards achieving, Standards for Rangeland Health for the Northeastern Great Basin Area of Nevada, and to ensure attainment of resource management objectives established by the 2002 FMUD. Purposes of the currently proposed range improvements are to:

- Restore and protect up to 3 miles of riparian habitat along East Squaw Creek as it flows through the proposed Upper Squaw Creek Riparian Pasture and the existing Squaw Creek Ranch Field.

- Enhance approximately 4,000 acres of important brood rearing habitat for sage grouse, consistent with the *Elko County Sagebrush Ecosystem Conservation Strategy*.
- Facilitate big game movement. Construct new fences or modify existing fences with let-down features to reduce impacts to big game populations and fence maintenance requirements.

Alternatives

As described below and shown on the attached map, three projects are proposed for implementation in 2005-2006 in the North Pequop Mountain Pasture of the East Big Springs Allotment. Alternatives considered include those outlined below, and the **No Action** alternative, under which grazing in the pasture would continue as specified by an Interim Grazing Plan for the North Pequop Pasture in the 2002 FMUD (pages 16-17). Public input provided through the scoping process for this EA will be used to formulate any additional alternatives, as well as determine the issues to be analyzed for impacts.

A. Upper Squaw Creek Riparian Pasture Fence (2002 FMUD, pages 22-23)

Construct a fence along about 1.5 miles of the middle fork of East Squaw Creek to create the Upper Squaw Creek Riparian Pasture, extending upstream (east) from the existing East Squaw Creek Field Fence. This would require at least 3 miles of fencing, and cattleguards would also be installed where necessary. The new pasture would be rested from grazing by livestock until the stream has achieved proper functioning condition. Once achieved, the permittee would meet with BLM each year to plan any grazing of the pasture. Protection of the riparian area is BLM's highest priority, and so construction of this project is scheduled in 2005.

B. Squaw Creek Ranch Field Fence (2002 FMUD, page 24)

Modify the existing fence around the Squaw Creek Ranch to BLM standards. BLM has scheduled the reconstruction in 2005, if funding allows. Two options are being considered:

Option 1 – Reconstruct approximately 5 miles of existing fence around the Squaw Creek Ranch to BLM standards and install cattle guards where necessary.

Option 2 -- Remove portions of this existing fence and construct shorter sections of new fence, which would reduce the size of this field.

C. Big Springs Division Fence (2002 FMUD, pages 21-22)

To prevent livestock drift, construct about 3.5 miles of boundary fence between the East and West Big Springs Allotments within the North Pequop Mountain Pasture. The fence would run from Interstate 80 at Pequop Summit north to Rocky Point. A short gap fence in the canyon immediately north of Rocky Point would also be constructed. This project is scheduled for construction in 2005 or 2006.

Special Design Features Common to All Action Alternatives. Construction or modification of all proposed fences would be subject to BLM design standards where necessary to reduce conflicts with wildlife and facilitate big game movement, protect cultural resources and ensure weeds are not introduced or spread in the project areas.