



File Code: 1950

Date: February 26, 2014

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Ravalli County Commissioners

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Dear Interested Party,

The Darby Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest, proposes to reauthorize grazing on the North Sleeping Child Grazing Allotment. The allotment is located approximately ten miles southeast of Hamilton, Montana and borders Sleeping Child and Two Bear Creeks. The proposal makes changes to livestock grazing that are intended to improve soil productivity, water quality and forage plant condition.

Grazing History:

The North Sleeping Child Allotment encompasses about 8,500 acres on National Forest System lands. The annual authorized grazing levels on the allotment have varied between 160 to 180 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) over the last ten years. This equates to about 45 cow/calf pairs for a four month season from June 1 to September 30. Records show that authorized livestock grazing has occurred on the North Sleeping Child Allotment since 1942. The highest recorded permitted numbers on the allotment totaled 400 AUMs or 100 cow/calf pairs over a four month season during the 1940s. Additional documentation indicates varying levels of livestock use since the 1930's.

Purpose and Need for Action:

In 1995, Congress passed the Rescission Bill (Public Law 104-19, Section 504a), which requires National Forests to schedule and complete NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) analysis on all allotments, where needed, to support permitted grazing activity. The Bitterroot National Forest developed a Rescission Bill schedule for the grazing allotments needing analysis in accordance with this national direction. The schedule identified 2014 as the year to complete the NEPA analysis for the North Sleeping Child Allotment.

Existing Resource Condition Summary:

Soil disturbance from domestic livestock grazing is found primarily in the western half of the allotment and is associated with the flatter ridgetops that allow cattle easier access to forage. Site specific soil disturbances exist but overall soil conditions averaged across the allotment are within Region One soil quality standards.

Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout are present in Sleeping Child Creek and Two Bear Creek. Direct effects of cattle on the fish-bearing streams are uncommon. These larger stream channels are generally in good functioning condition. They have relatively clean water with streambeds that have normal amounts of fine sediment and healthy streamside vegetation. The condition of smaller tributary channels vary, with some in a non-functioning state. Indirect



effects to the two larger streams containing fish occur annually through sediment transport from smaller intermittent and perennial stream channels.

The most heavily used riparian areas do not meet Forest Plan Standards and have potential to contribute sediment to downstream channels during high flow events.

Invasive plant species, most commonly spotted knapweed, have invaded the grassland habitat types and open canopy sites across the allotment resulting in reduced forage quantity and quality for wildlife and domestic livestock. Native and desirable non-native plant species maintain a variable density, vigor and distribution across the allotment.

Proposed Action:

The proposed action would institute a progressive management approach that facilitates compliance with annual standards and guidelines leading to improved resource conditions. The Forest Service proposes to reauthorize livestock grazing on the North Sleeping Child Allotment under the following conditions:

1. Set an upper limit of 160 AUMs for the maximum stocking rate under an updated Term Grazing Permit in order to reflect more accurately the current livestock carrying capacity of the allotment.
2. Reduce the annual duration of livestock grazing on the allotment from the current permitted range of 16 weeks from June through September to no more than 14 weeks within the same current permitted months. Include an annual option for extending the duration of grazing if impacts hold below allowable limits.
3. Establish a cycle of periodic yearlong rest possibly coupled with periodic late entry or early removal of cattle.
4. Adjust the allotment boundaries to:
 - a. exclude certain sensitive wetland/riparian sites in the eastern higher elevation portions and
 - b. include an equal or lesser amount of acres of timbered drier suitable rangelands that currently lie outside and adjacent to the lower elevation western portion of the allotment.
5. Develop at least one additional livestock water source to aid in proper distribution and utilization
6. Tailor forage utilization and stream impact guidelines to match site-specific resource tolerance thresholds.
7. Include an adaptive management strategy that can adjust allowable impact thresholds, stocking rates and frequency of rest as needed to meet resource objectives and respond to changing resource conditions.

What are the next steps in the process?

We will use your scoping comments to fine tune the proposal , help identify issues and develop alternative actions for analysis in the document. At this time, we anticipate that an Environmental Assessment (EA) will provide the adequate level of analysis for this project. There are several more steps in the public involvement process leading to the final decision. More detail on these steps will be provided along with the release of the EA for Comment later in the year.

The proposed activity is implementing a land management plan and is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA); therefore, it is subject to the provisions of 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B. Only individuals or organizations who submit timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed activity during a public comment period established by the Responsible Official are eligible to file an objection (36 CFR 218.5(a)). Opportunities for public comment on an EA includes during scoping or any other instance where the Responsible Official seeks written comments (36 CFR 218.5(a)).

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments will be accepted through March 14, 2014. When submitting written comments, please include: (1) your name, address, telephone number and organization represented, if any; (2) a reference to the North Sleeping Child Grazing Allotment in your comment; (3) any information and rationale regarding the proposed action that you believe we should consider; and (4) your signature.

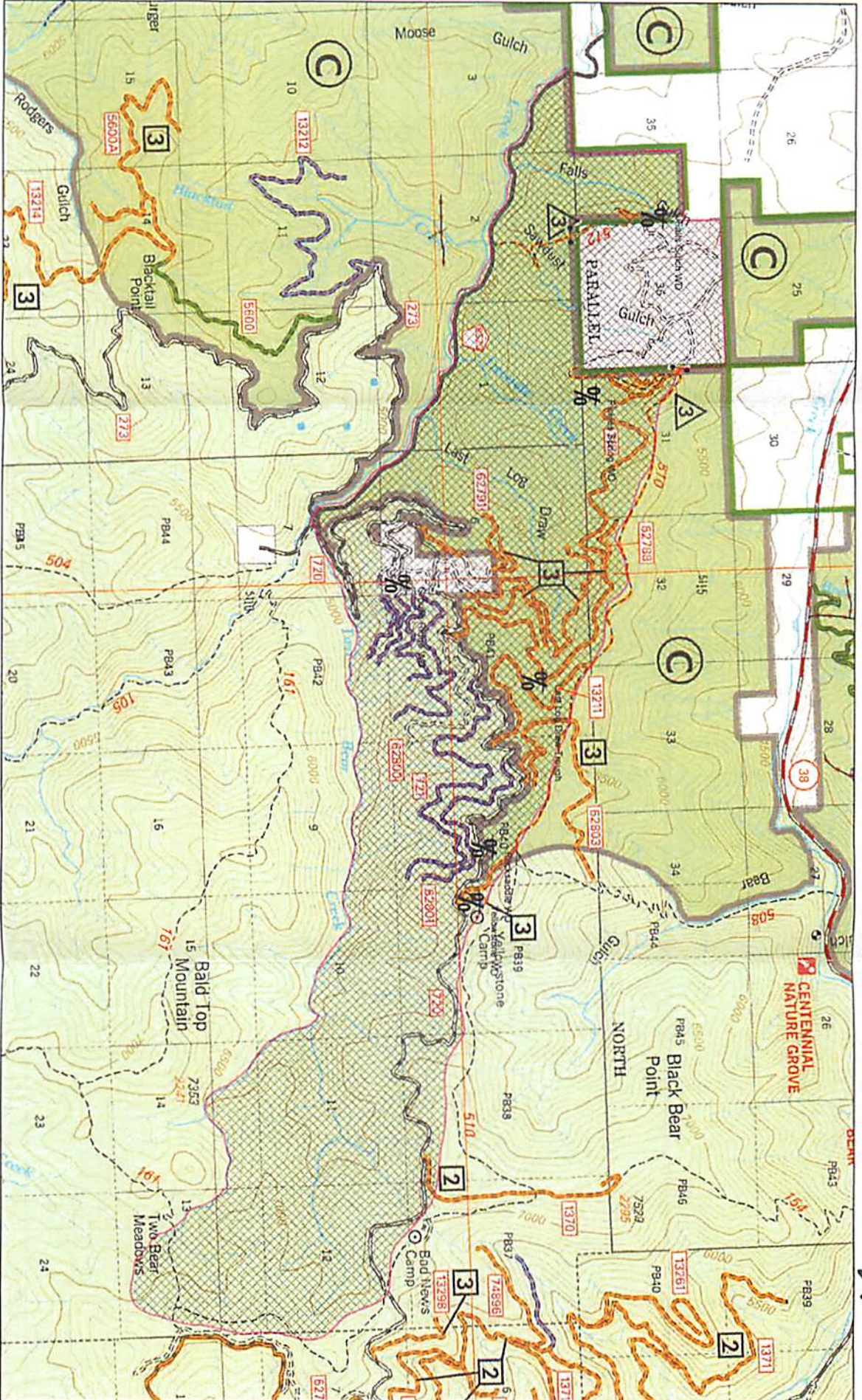
Submit written comments to: Chuck Oliver, District Ranger, Darby Ranger District, 712 N. Main St, Darby, MT 59829. Chuck serves as the "Responsible Official" for the decision about this project. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays (FAX Number = 406-821-4264. Electronic comments must be submitted in rich text format (.rft), Word (.doc) or Word Perfect format to: comments-northern-bitterroot-darby@fs.fed.us Names and contact information submitted with the comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information concerning this proposal, please contact Chuck Oliver, Darby District Ranger, at 712 N. Main St, Darby, MT 59829 or by phone at 406-821-3913, or Gil Gale, Forest Rangeland Specialist at the same Darby District address or by phone at 406-544-6321

Sincerely,


CHARLES T. OLIVER
Darby District Ranger

NORTH SLEEPING CHILD GRAZING ALLOTMENT



Legend: Current Allotment Area =  WATER DEVELOPMENTS = %