History and Process for Assessing Range Health Standards

Subsequent to the approval of revised BLM grazing regulations in 1995, BLM State Directors were assigned the task of crafting State level rangeland health standards (Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 4180.2). The process of developing standards and indicators was to be conducted in consultation with state Resource Advisory Councils (RAC's). The purpose for setting standards and identifying their indicators was to provide a basis for determining whether or not current management is meeting the Fundamentals of Rangeland Health described under CFR 4180.1

The BLM has agreed to work with the RAC's to expand these rangeland health standards so that they are relevant to all ecosystems, not just rangelands, and that they apply to all actions, not just livestock grazing. (Manual Handbook H-1601-1, Land Use Planning)

On August 12, 1997, the Oregon/Washington BLM Standards and Guides for Rangeland Health were approved by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. BLM field offices in Oregon/Washington were then directed to assess range health status according to these state standards over a 10-year period (1998-2008).

The Fundamentals of Rangeland Health

The objectives of the rangeland health regulations are: "to promote healthy sustainable rangeland ecosystems; to accelerate restoration and improvement of public rangelands to properly functioning conditions; . . . and to provide for the sustainability of the western livestock industry and communities that are dependent upon productive, healthy public rangelands."

To help meet these objectives, the regulations on rangeland health identify fundamental principles providing direction to the States, districts, and on-the-ground public land managers and users in the management and use of rangeland ecosystems.

A hierarchy, or order, of ecological function and process exists within each ecosystem. The rangeland ecosystem consists of four primary, interactive components: a physical component, a biological component, a social component, and an economic component. This perspective implies that the physical function of an ecosystem supports the biological health, diversity and productivity of that system. In turn, the interaction of the physical and biological components of the ecosystem provides the basic needs of society and supports economic use and potential.

The Fundamentals of Rangeland Health stated in 43 CFR 4180 are:

> 1. Watersheds are in, or are making significant progress toward, properly functioning physical condition, including their upland, riparian-wetland, and aquatic components; soil and plant conditions support infiltration, soil moisture storage and the release of water that are in balance with climate and landform and maintain or improve water quality, water quantity and the timing and duration of flow.

2. Ecological processes, including the hydrologic cycle, nutrient cycle and energy flow, are maintained, or there is significant progress toward their attainment, in order to support healthy biotic populations and communities.

3. Water quality complies with State water quality standards and achieves, or is making significant progress toward achieving, established Bureau of Land Management objectives such as meeting wildlife needs.

4. Habitats are, or are making significant progress toward being, restored or maintained for Federal threatened and endangered species, Federal Proposed, Category 1 and 2 Federal candidate and other special status species.

The fundamentals of rangeland health combine the basic precepts of physical function and biological health with elements of law relating to water quality, and plant and animal populations and communities. They provide direction in the development and implementation of the standards for rangeland health.

Geographic Management Areas

In order to accomplish this evaluation workload and conform to the need for completing land health assessments on a watershed basis, Vale District has been divided into administrative units referred to as ***Geographic Management Areas (GMA's)***. Each GMA has been assigned a boundary and a priority status for order of assessment based on resource issues such as riparian habitat, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, wild horses, and threatened and endangered species of plants or animals. GMA boundaries correspond to grazing allotments and substantially overlap with recognized watershed subunits.

The boundary identification and assessment prioritization phase of this process was conducted with public review and comment. Moreover, this information was included in the Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan (SEORMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

BLM Obligations Under Range Health regulations

Revised 2001 BLM regulations specify that "The authorized officer shall take appropriate action as soon as practicable but not later than the start of the next grazing year upon determining, through assessment or monitoring by experienced professionals and interdisciplinary teams, that a standard is not being achieved and that livestock are a significant contributing factor to the failure to achieve the standards and conform with the guidelines" (BLM Manual Handbook H-1601-1).

Public Involvement

Consultation, cooperation, and coordination with range users and the interested public is part of the range health assessment process. This means that grazing permittees and other members of the public are: 1) invited to go out with BLM Interdisciplinary Teams to gain an understanding of the assessment field procedures 2) participate in crafting remedies to resource problems where Range Health Standards are not being met.