

NORTH CATLOW WINTER PASTURE FENCES AND PIPELINE
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA OR-025-01-08

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

As a result of the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act (Act) of 2000, one of several land trades authorized by this Act transferred ownership of public land within the Blitzen Grazing Allotment (6009) to Roaring Springs Ranch, Inc., (RSR). Each year since 1990, a neighboring ranch, Rock Creek Ranch, Inc., (RCR) was licensed to graze cattle during the winter in the Blitzen Allotment on a temporary, nonrenewable basis. During the period the Act was being created, these two ranches entered an agreement whereas RSR would deed 2.5 sections of private land (T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Section 23, S½, Sections 25 and 35) to RCR. RSR also agreed to enter a Range Line Agreement with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that would add four sections of public land (T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Sections 13, 24, 26, and 36) in the South Steens Allotment (6002) and two sections of public land (T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Sections 1 and 12) from the Blitzen Allotment to the North Catlow Allotment (6001) (see Map 1). The North Catlow Allotment is an individual allotment licensed to RCR.

The additional private and public lands, and public land already in the North Catlow Allotment, are proposed to be fenced and stock water provided by a well and pipeline with two troughs. These proposed range improvement projects would create a new winter pasture for RCR in the North Catlow Allotment to replace the Blitzen Allotment.

The proposed winter pasture is located on the west side of Catlow Valley, approximately 14 miles northeast of Beatys Butte. Terrain is mostly gently sloping with a rim on the west side that rises 50 feet and a short, approximately 2-mile stretch of rim in the southeast corner that drops approximately 75 feet. Elevation ranges from 4,750 feet in the southeast corner to 4,560 feet in the north side of the proposed winter pasture. Aspect is mainly northeast facing. This area receives less than 10 inches of precipitation annually, most of which occurs in the winter in the form of snow.

This exchange of land would change the boundaries of the North Catlow, South Steens, and Blitzen Allotments. Because of these boundary changes, approximately 6 miles of existing wire fence would be removed by BLM after completion of the proposed fences and the fire rehabilitation seeding becomes established (see Map 2).

The purpose of this project is to create a winter use pasture for approximately 500 cattle for the months of January through March. The pasture would be approximately 17,920 acres; of which about 5,400 acres is part of fire rehabilitation seedings planted in 1999 and 2000. The proposed pasture would replace the Blitzen Allotment for winter forage for RCR. The need of the project is to improve livestock management in the new fire rehabilitation seedings and North Catlow Allotment in general. Incidental benefits include improved habitat for wildlife and additional sources of water in a dry area.

CHAPTER II. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to construct two fences; each fence would be approximately 6 miles long. These fences would connect with two existing fences to form the proposed winter pasture. Six miles of existing fence would be removed. These fences would be 4-strand wire fence. Four miles of 2-inch plastic pipeline would be buried 18 inches underground to deliver water for livestock and wildlife at two troughs. Each trough would be 30 feet in diameter and hold more than 10,000 gallons of water apiece. The water would be pumped downhill from a well to be drilled on private land located in T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Section 25, N½. The drilling, casing, pump, motor, and power generation equipment of the well or any trough installed on private land would be provided by RCR. The installation of the pipeline and troughs on public land would be completed by the BLM. Construction of the west fence would be done by RCR, BLM would supply the materials. The steel posts for the west fence would be recycled from the temporary fire rehabilitation fences built in 1998. The BLM would construct the new allotment boundary (east) fence. Maintenance of the well, fences, pipeline, and troughs would be the responsibility of RCR.

B. Use Existing Well Alternative

Under this alternative, fences would be constructed as in the proposed action. Five miles of pipeline from an existing well on private land owned by RCR (T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Section 34, NENW) would transfer pumped water uphill to two troughs (see Map 2).

The environmental consequences of the proposed alternative and this alternative are the same except for livestock grazing management. The differences in alternatives, except for livestock grazing management, will not be discussed any further in this document.

C. No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, land for creating a winter pasture would remain in the South Steens Allotment, and not be transferred to the North Catlow Allotment. All public land in the Blitzen Allotment, except for two sections on the west end, would still be transferred to RSR as specified in the Act. No winter pasture would be created for RCR to replace the Blitzen Allotment. No new water sources would be developed to benefit livestock or wildlife. Without new fences, livestock could graze the 1998 and 1999 fire rehabilitation seedings at times other than winter only.

CHAPTER III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Critical Elements

The following chart of critical elements indicates whether or not they are affected by the proposal. Critical elements not affected by the proposal will not be discussed further in this document.

| Critical Element | Affected | Not Affected |
|---|----------|--------------|
| Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) | | X |
| Air Quality | | X |
| Cultural Heritage | X | |
| Environmental Justice | | X |
| Prime or Unique Farmlands | | X |
| Floodplains | | X |
| Hazardous Materials | | X |
| Migratory Birds | X | |
| American Indian Religious Concerns | | X |
| Noxious Weeds | X | |
| Paleontology | | X |
| T&E Animals | | X |
| T&E Plants | | X |

| Critical Element | Affected | Not Affected |
|--|----------|--------------|
| Water Quality | | X |
| Wetlands and Riparian Zones | | X |
| Wild and Scenic Rivers | | X |
| Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) | | X |

1. Cultural Heritage

The general area of the proposed project is a rich archaeological zone. The proposed routes for the fences and pipeline pass over terrain that has a high probability for cultural site discovery. Recorded sites currently exist in T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Sections 23, 24, 25 and 36; and T. 35 S., R. 31 E., Sections 30 and 31. The potential for finding additional sites including those of significance is good.

2. Noxious Weeds

There are no known noxious weed sites in the affected area.

3. Migratory Birds

The affected area is breeding habitat for migratory bird species such as western meadowlark, horned lark, loggerhead shrike, Brewer’s sparrow, sage sparrow, sage thrasher, and mourning dove.

B. Noncritical Elements

The following noncritical elements are discussed and analyzed in this document: Soils, Vegetation, Watershed, Wildlife, Livestock Grazing Management, Recreation, and Visual Resource Management (VRM).

1. Soils

The soils are alluvial sands to sandy loams in texture, deep to moderately deep with limited soil horizon development. Wind erosion hazard is moderate due to soil surface texture.

2. Vegetation

The proposed winter pasture was originally a Wyoming big sagebrush/bunchgrass site that is now in a lower seral stage due to repeated wildfires over the past 15 years. Rubber rabbitbrush has filled the niche of Wyoming big sagebrush. Cheatgrass has filled the niche of perennial bunchgrasses and forbs such as needleandthread grass, bottlebrush squirreltail, Indian ricegrass, and globe mallow.

In the fall of 1999, approximately 700 acres and in 2000 approximately 4,700 acres of the proposed winter pasture were seeded with a mixture of hycrest crested wheatgrass, Siberian wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, bottlebrush squirreltail, Lewis flax, and forage kochia although the area seeded in 1999 is established; the one seeded in 2000 is not yet.

No Special Status plant species are known to occur in the affected area.

3. Watershed

The proposed winter pasture, although in a low seral state, is stable without accelerated erosion in areas not recently burned. In recently seeded areas, the mix of species seeded should provide for the capture and release of precipitation and snowmelt preventing erosion.

4. Wildlife

The affected area is year-round habitat for pronghorn antelope. Much of the area is habitat for reptiles such as western diamondback rattlesnake and horned lizard as well as many small mammals. The site is considered late brood-rearing to winter habitat for sage grouse. No specific surveys have been conducted to determine season or amount of use. Sage grouse are known to use some parts of Catlow Valley during the winter only and other parts yearlong. There are no known sage grouse strutting grounds in this area. Raptors using the area include golden eagles, prairie falcons, ferruginous hawk (BLM sensitive species) and Swainson's hawk.

Bald eagle (Threatened species) and American peregrine falcon (State Endangered/BLM Sensitive species) are migrants that are rarely seen in this area.

5. Livestock Grazing Management

The proposed winter pasture lies within the boundaries of the North Catlow, Blitzen, and South Steens Allotments. Current grazing management in the affected area of the North Catlow Allotment includes an even year April 1 turnout of 400 cattle in the south end of the allotment. Late use (after July 15) occurs during odd years. Since 1990, RCR has used Blitzen Allotment during the winter on a temporary nonrenewable basis. The affected area of the South Steens Allotment is grazed during the winter each year.

BLM policy is to prohibit livestock grazing on new seedings until after the second growing season. This policy will be followed.

6. Recreation and Visual Resource Management

The Catlow Desert receives very little recreation use. The most frequent public use is for antelope hunting in the fall.

This land is in a VRM Class IV area which means any modifications of the viewshed may dominate; however, every attempt should be made to minimize the impact of these modifications through careful location, minimal disturbance, and repetition of the basic elements.

CHAPTER IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Proposed Action

Critical Elements

1. Cultural Heritage

Due to livestock trampling, damage to cultural resources could occur along fencelines and around troughs. The courses of the pipelines and fencelines, as well as the trough locations, would be flagged prior to construction. These locations would be surveyed by archaeologists to determine if cultural resources are present, and if avoidance measures would be necessary.

2. Noxious Weeds

Equipment used for pipe laying operations and trough construction would be based at BLM, Burns. To prevent introduction of noxious weed seed to the project area, this equipment would be cleaned of vegetative material (seed, debris, etc.) before working on-site.

Soils disturbed by pipe laying operations would be seeded to adaptive perennial grasses to deter establishment of noxious weeds.

Noxious weeds would be controlled in accordance with the Burns District Office Weed Management Plan.

3. Migratory Birds

“Bird boards” would be installed on troughs to permit birds and other small animals to escape.

Winter grazing would allow migratory birds, such as those listed previously, to nest undisturbed by livestock. Shrubs, grasses, and forbs that are ungrazed by livestock from April through December would provide optimum cover and diet for seed and insect eating birds.

Noncritical Elements

1. Soils

The soils in the affected area are prone to wind erosion. Minor erosion could result in the soils disturbed during the pipe laying operation. Cross-country vehicle operation during all phases of fence building, pipe laying, and trough installation could cause soil compaction. Soils around the trough locations and along fencelines would be prone to compaction by livestock

Soils disturbed by pipe laying operations would be seeded to adaptive perennial grasses to minimize wind erosion. Compaction caused by cross-country vehicle operation would be minimized by using the same routes and driving closely parallel to fencelines. Compaction by livestock around water troughs would be minimized by using concrete and coarse rock skirts around the troughs.

2. Vegetation

Some short-term disturbance to the vegetation would occur along the fencelines and pipeline during construction. Soils disturbed during pipeline laying operations would be seeded with naturalized species such as crested wheatgrass or forage kochia. This naturalized vegetation would provide a perennial vegetation cover for soil protection.

The construction of the proposed winter pasture boundary fences would protect the fire rehabilitation seeding, planted in December 2000, from grazing livestock.

3. Watershed

The proposed winter pasture should have a net positive affect on the watershed. The vegetation would not be grazed during the growing season allowing the vegetation to grow to its maximum height. Winter grazing would result in more surface litter during the growing season, creating a microclimate of more shading. Shading reduces the precipitation/evaporation ratio making more soil moisture available to plants during the growing season for a greater period of time.

4. Wildlife

The proposed 12 miles of fences would impede but not prohibit movement by antelope, as animals would be able to move through the fence. The impacts of the fences on antelope would be mitigated by wire spacing allowing a 16-inch space from ground to bottom wire and assuring the bottom strand is smooth. The proposed removal of 6 miles of existing fence would reduce the net increase of wire fence in the area to 6 miles.

Winter grazing would permit lateral and vertical cover for sage grouse to grow without disturbance from livestock from April through December. This could improve late brood-rearing through winter habitat.

The proposed action would affect wildlife by providing new water sources in the affected area of Catlow Valley. "Birdboards" would give birds and small mammals a way to escape from drowning in the proposed troughs.

5. Livestock Grazing Management

The proposed fences would confine livestock grazing to the newly-created winter pasture. Livestock would graze approximately 5,400 acres of fire rehabilitation seeding and 10,920 acres of native range during the period of January through March.

Those sections of fence that would be removed after completion of the new allotment boundary fence would remain in place until the Beatys Butte fire rehabilitation seeding is established.

6. Recreation and Visual Resource Management

The proposed fences would include gates across existing roads. Access for recreation would not be affected.

Visual impacts would be minimized by using green steel posts in the fences (no white tops).

B. Use Existing Well Alternative

The difference between this alternative and the proposed alternative is the proposed location of the troughs and number of miles of pipeline necessary to achieve proper management of the new fire rehabilitation seedings (see Map 2).

1. Livestock Grazing Management

Five miles of pipeline are required with this alternative and the surface elevation of the trough at the end of the water line is 50 feet above the surface elevation at the well. Maintenance costs would be higher with this alternative.

With this alternative, if the power source or pump in the well breaks down there would be no backup well to deliver water to livestock. There would be no well and trough on private land in the fire rehabilitation seeding in T. 35 S., R. 30 E., Section 25. Livestock distribution would not be as wide, management would be impaired.

C. No Action Alternative

Critical Elements

1. Cultural Heritage

There would be no additional effects to cultural resources in the seeded areas of the North Catlow, Blitzen, and South Steens Allotments. There would be no effects on native, nonseeded areas.

2. Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds could be established in the fire rehabilitation seeding if no fences were built to control livestock grazing to winter only. Spring and summer grazing over a long period of time could reduce competition by perennial grasses allowing noxious weeds to become established or more widespread.

3. Migratory Birds

Under the no action alternative, no new sources of water would be available for migratory birds. Livestock would continue to graze in the North Catlow Allotment portion of the affected area every other year during the nesting season. This may lower the success of shrub nesting birds due to less cover, less available nest building material, and more disturbance from livestock grazing.

Noncritical Elements

1. Soils

There would be a minor net increase in wind erosion of soils under this alternative because livestock would continue to graze in the North Catlow Allotment during the growing season on even years and during the dry season on odd years. Soil compaction would be greater with grazing during the spring wet season in that allotment.

2. Vegetation

Vegetation in the North Catlow Allotment would be grazed during the growing season during even years, and during the hottest time of the year (after July 15) during odd years. As a result there would be less ground cover by vegetation and litter during the warmest times of the year in the affected area of this allotment.

3. Watershed

This alternative would have a minor negative effect on watershed. The current grazing system used in the North Catlow Allotment would result in less ground cover from vegetation and litter. Less ground cover would reduce the amount of available soil moisture during the growing season.

4. Wildlife

Under this alternative there would be no change in the amount of fence in the affected area. There would be no additional water sources for wildlife with the no action alternative.

5. Livestock Grazing Management

The Act authorized transfer of ownership of public land in the affected area of the Blitzen and South Steens Allotments except for the public land that lies west of the proposed east fence. Under this alternative, the new allotment boundary fence would not be built. Public land described as T. 35 S., R.30 E., Sections 1, 12, 13, 24, 26 and 36; totaling 3,840 acres would be accessible from private land acquired by RSR. This land would be managed however RSR decides to manage their newly-acquired private land.

There would be no change in the management of the affected area within the North Catlow Allotment. The affected area would be grazed by livestock after April 1 on even years and grazed after July 15 on odd years.

No winter pasture would be created, no new water sources would be developed in the area of the Beatys Butte Fire Rehabilitation Seeding, management would not be improved.

6. Recreation and Visual Resource Management

This alternative would have a minor positive affect on visual resources because there would be no contrast caused by more fence and troughs to the visual resource.

CHAPTER V. CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

All resources discussed in the Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences sections are evaluated for cumulative impacts.

A. Critical Elements

1. Cultural Heritage

As a result of enactment of any proposed actions or alternatives, there would be no increased cumulative impacts on this resource.

2. Noxious Weeds

Ground disturbance as a result of construction of the proposed projects could have potential to create favorable conditions for the invasion of noxious weeds and other undesirable plants. Survey for, and treatment of, infestations before project construction and yearly monitoring of these project sites would reduce the possible spread of noxious weeds and therefore reduce cumulative impacts. As a result of implementation of the Burns District weed management program, it is anticipated there would be no increase in the cumulative effects as a result of the proposed action and alternatives.

3 Migratory Birds

As a result of enactment of any proposed actions or alternatives, there would be no increased cumulative impacts on this resource.

B. Noncritical Elements

1. Soils

Due to improvements in rangeland health through implementation of the proposed actions, soil stabilization and decrease in erosion would cumulatively affect soil resources.

2. Vegetation

Improved livestock management, due to fencing and water well and pipeline, could cumulatively impact vegetation by improving or maintaining rangeland health. There would be some localized impacts around water troughs but upland vegetation and fire rehabilitation seeding condition could improve.

3. Watershed

As a result of any proposed actions or alternatives there would be no increased cumulative impacts on this resource.

4. Wildlife

The cumulative impacts of the projects on wildlife would result from an overall increase of 6 miles of fence. As a result of the proposed well, pipeline, and troughs, there would be an increase in the amount of water for wildlife. An increase in the amount of cover for wildlife during the spring, summer, and fall would result from the winter grazing treatment the proposed winter pasture would receive.

5. Livestock Grazing Management

Livestock management would benefit from implementation of the proposed projects including establishment and sustainable use of replacement winter forage. New water sources would be beneficial to livestock operations by allowing for improved distribution of the livestock. Fencing would allow better control of livestock which would aid in proper use and deferment of different areas. This would help in maintaining healthy rangelands and the productivity of the area. Implementation of the proposed action could cumulatively contribute to improved conditions for livestock.

6. Recreation and Visual Resource Management

As a result of enactment of any proposed actions or alternatives there would be no increased cumulative impacts of this resource.

CHAPTER VI. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND RESPONSES TO COMMENTS

CHAPTER VII. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Pete Frost, National Wildlife Federation
Honorable Steve Grasty, Harney County Judge
Jim Lemos, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
Gary Miller, Rock Creek Ranch, Inc.
Dan Sanders, Roaring Springs Ranch, Inc.

CHAPTER VIII. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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