Evaluating BLM Grazing Allotments
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Background

All Bureau of Land Management grazing allotments are periodically evaluated to assess rangeland health and evaluate the trend in rangeland condition and the influence grazing management has on the multiple rangeland resources associated with these allotments. Presently, the Burns District employs two methods of evaluating grazing allotments. The first strategy involves a one-time field assessment by an Interdisciplinary Team composed of various BLM resource specialists. This team completes an assessment based on observations of vegetation and soil conditions. The second, and most commonly used strategy, involves a formal allotment evaluation process. During this process, an Interdisciplinary Team composed of various resource specialists evaluates resource conditions and creates management recommendations for the allotment. The end product of this process is an allotment evaluation document which summarizes resource conditions and trend and makes recommendations for future grazing management and range improvements on the allotment. Typically, allotment evaluations occur every five to ten years depending on the resource concerns for a given allotment.

It is important to understand, an allotment evaluation differs from an Allotment Management Plan (AMP) because it is not a publicly reviewed National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document, therefore it cannot be used to directly implement changes to grazing management or range improvements. The evaluation process can identify if specific resources are in need of improvement and precipitates changes to grazing management through a new AMP. The purpose of this article is to provide insight into the allotment evaluation process and how it’s used to manage your BLM grazing allotments.

What is evaluated during this process?

The evaluation process incorporates all available monitoring data pertaining to the allotment. Typically, such data include upland and riparian transect and photo monitoring, water quality monitoring, utilization studies, actual use reports, precipitation records, wildlife and plant habitat surveys, noxious weed monitoring, cultural resource inventories, soil stability, special status plant and wildlife surveys, and wild horse use (if applicable).

Monitoring data (photos and transect) from key areas collected at the same spot overtime are compared to assess resource trend during the evaluation period. When viewed individually, these data provide little insight into the resources response to management. However, when all available data is compiled and analyzed together, these data begin to paint a picture of how management, climatic factors and disturbance are influencing rangeland resources on a given allotment.

In addition to analyzing condition and trend of these different rangeland attributes, grazing management is assessed to determine whether or not it’s achieving the Standards for Rangeland Health (Standards) and conforming to the Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management (Guidelines) mandated in the 1996 Revised Grazing Regulations. This set of Standards and Guidelines were developed to address the physical and biological conditions necessary to sustain healthy rangeland ecosystems. In general, these Standards consider rangeland function related to water capture and storage, nutrient cycling, energy flow, riparian health and water quality, and wildlife habitat. The Guidelines provide recommendations for grazing management geared towards achieving rangeland health standards.

Livestock carrying capacity (AUMs) and stocking rate are also calculated for each pasture within an allotment, using climate and utilization data and actual use records. Recommendations are then made to maintain or adjust Permitted Use (increase or decrease AUMs) based on these calculations and in conjunction with rangeland trend studies.

Why are allotment evaluations important?

Allotment evaluations provide a means for assessing whether current grazing management is achieving the Standards for Rangeland Health and conforming to the Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management. Whether or not grazing management is achieving these Standards and Guidelines dictates the level of NEPA analysis required when it comes time to renew your term grazing permit. For example, if grazing management is achieving all Standards and Guidelines, the BLM has Categorical Exclusion (CX) authority to process a permit renewal without further environmental analysis (excludes permit renewal from further NEPA analysis and is a much simpler process).

1Key Area: An area that is representative of the use, resource, or attributes being measured for a pasture, stream, allotment, etc.
Likewise, if grazing management is a causal factor for failing to achieve the Standards and Guidelines, additional environmental analysis (NEPA) is required which allows for public review and potential protest.

More importantly, an allotment evaluation serves as a tool to periodically summarize all monitoring data and assess whether or not allotment-specific resource objectives are being met. The evaluation process can identify areas where resource objectives are not being met and incorporate changes in grazing management or range improvements to move towards meeting such objectives. Furthermore, the evaluation process allows for periodic interdisciplinary review and alteration to existing allotment objectives based on resource conditions.

What role can permittees play in the allotment evaluation process?

Permittees can and should be involved in the allotment evaluation process in a variety of ways. Typically, the livestock operator has first hand knowledge of how their stock graze the allotment, know the areas of good feed and water, and hold sole responsibility for incorporating their BLM allotment into their overall ranch management. This information is critical when recommending changes to grazing management or identifying locations for new range improvements (i.e. water developments, fences, etc.).

Permittees should also keep accurate actual grazing use reports and are required to submit such reports to the BLM each year. This information is extremely valuable when analyzing pasture use (grazing dates and AUMs) and calculating pasture carrying capacity. Any additional monitoring (i.e. photo, horse counts, etc.) should be submitted with actual use records each year.

Permittees are encouraged to discuss (with their Range Con) how their allotment is doing, any changes that may be needed, and should participate in rangeland monitoring as time allows. At the very least, permittees should review the allotment evaluation with their respective Range Con to become familiar with allotment resource objectives and management actions needed to achieve such objectives.

If you have any questions regarding your grazing allotment, please feel free to contact us here at the Burns BLM.