

Draft Compatibility Determination

Title

Draft Compatibility Determination for Prescribed Grazing at Cokeville Meadows
National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Use Category

Agriculture

Refuge Use Type

Grazing

Refuge

Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Purpose and Establishing and Acquisition Authorities

- “...for the conservation of the wetlands of the Nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions...” 16 U.S.C. § 3901(b) (Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986)
- “...for conservation purposes” 7 U.S.C. § 2002 (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act) “...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds...” (Migratory Bird Conservation Act, as amended [16 U.S.C. 715-715d, 715e, 715f-715r])
- “...for the development, advancement, management, conservation and protection of fish and wildlife resources...for the benefit of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services...” (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, as amended [16 U.S.C. 742a-742j, not including 742d-l])

Cokeville Meadows NWR was established in 1993-94 after public comment and process. Initial refuge establishment was pushed by Wyoming Game and Fish Department, especially after surveys done in mid to late 1980s that documented large numbers of breeding waterfowl in the Bear River valley. Majority of the land was in private ownership and has been acquired from willing sellers to date. In January 2017 Wyoming State legislature passed an amendment to Wyoming statute 23-1-106, regarding the acreage of the migratory bird refuge in the Bear River Area, that reduced the acres the refuge could acquire with the state’s consent to lands owned prior to January 1, 2017, which consisted of approximately seven thousand (7,000) acres (Wyoming statute 23-1-106).

Refuge Purpose

“to preserve and protect wetland riparian habitat for its migratory waterfowl and other migratory bird values; for resident big game, small game, furbearers and upland game birds; for public educational and interpretive values; and for public recreational values.” (USFWS 1990)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (Pub. L. 105-57, 111 Stat. 1252).

Description of Use

Is this an existing use?

Yes

- This compatibility determination reviews and replaces the 2014 compatibility determination for the use of prescribed grazing at Cokeville Meadows NWR.
- This use is being reevaluated because policy requires commercial uses be reevaluated every 10 years (603 FW 2.6N).
- Prescribed grazing has been conducted on the refuge since at least 2004, likely longer. The use was evaluated in conjunction with the Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge Proposal, Final Environmental Impact Statement, published in June of 1992 and found to be compatible.
- Prescribed grazing is consistent with the 2014 Cokeville Meadows NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan and the Finding of No Significant Impact from March of 2014.

What is the use?

Grazing (Cooperative) – The feeding on vegetation by domestic livestock, this includes trailing and watering of livestock. Prescribed grazing is a tool for habitat restoration and management on lands owned in fee title or managed through agreement by the National Wildlife Refuge System. This is a refuge management economic use (603 FW 2.6 N.).

Is the use a priority public use?

No

Where would the use be conducted?

Prescribed grazing will be used on approximately 5,000 acres of flood irrigated wet meadow habitat on Cokeville Meadows NWR. Un-irrigated areas, uplands, will be rotated and rested. Most irrigated areas have been manipulated and have a native understory with Garrisons creeping foxtail overstory that was inter-seeded prior to refuge acquisition. Many of the areas are also hayed or portions farmed and might only occasionally have grazing or will only be trailed over. Cattle may be pushed across areas of the refuge to avoid hauling and honor historic agreements that allowed trailing across areas of the refuge. Temporary corrals or loading chutes may be used areas identified with refuge manager. Much of the refuge has been farmed, previously disturbed or inter-seeded with tame (nonnative) grasses. Prescribed grazing would be used to achieve specific habitat objectives in certain areas. The use of grazing ideally will fill the role of historic bison use on the landscape.

When would the use be conducted?

Grazing would occur at various times on the different tracts, according to the prescription developed to achieve desired habitat results. Some units will utilize deferred grazing system with short term, high intensity grazing in spring or summer; while in other units, winter or fall grazing might be the better tool to achieve habitat goals.

How would the use be conducted?

The use would be conducted according to approved habitat management plans to meet specific wildlife and/or habitat objectives. Use could occur during any season depending on the specific objectives to be achieved. Prescriptive grazing would be administered through issuance of a special use permit or cooperative agriculture agreement. Permittees would be selected using the criteria identified in the Refuge Manual or updated policy 620 FW 2. Habitat management plans or annual plans of operations or permit addendums would identify season of use, number of animals and length of time to achieve the management objectives. Grazing AUMs would not likely exceed 8000 per year, some of which occurs in habitat units that are also hayed or include portions that are farmed. Winter grazing likely would be the best fit to accomplish habitat goals in most of the units. During winters with unusual snow depths, plans for feeding locally sourced hay might have to be implemented to ensure the habitat prescription can still be completed. Permittees will pay fees based on local market rates as determined by annual USDA Agricultural Statistics or surveys of local prices. Permittees may also complete habitat improvement projects such as fence repair, maintenance, inter-seeding native vegetation or control of noxious weeds or other mutually agreed upon projects in exchange for a portion of the grazing fee. Monitoring effectiveness of grazing treatments will help determine effectiveness and

fine tune grazing prescriptions in each unit to best accomplish unit goals for desired habitat.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

The use of prescribed grazing is being reevaluated to continue on Cokeville Meadows NWR because the renewal period of 10 years is nearly up (603 FW 2.11 H). The use of prescribed grazing is a management tool that helps maintain productivity of the refuge's wet meadows habitats. Grazed areas are generally native vegetation intermixed with Garrison creeping foxtail, which is a nonnative grass, and areas of thick cattails and bulrush. In areas that are irrigated, naturally or through a series of man-made ditches and levees, the undisturbed vegetation can become so thick that productivity declines and habitat conditions deteriorate. Wetlands require periodic disturbance to maintain productivity, grazing helps to open the canopy to sunlight and warmth earlier in spring to create areas where invertebrates, vegetation and amphibians are jump started in the spring to provide food for migratory birds using the area as a stopover during migration as well as migratory birds that will use the area for nesting and brood-rearing. Open areas are critical to reduce chytrid fungus, which thrives in shaded cool areas with dense vegetation, to help maintain healthy amphibian populations, mainly leopard frogs and Boreal chorus frogs. Prescriptive livestock grazing will function as an ecological substitute for the roll that bison historically played in the area.

Availability of Resources

Each year, staff administration time is estimated to require 9-15 hours for coordination, billing, permitting, monitoring, and permit sale package preparation per management unit. Total time spent is 2-3 weeks per year, and that time requirement would be less during years 2-5 if we issue multi-year SUPs or CAAs, up to 5 years. Less than 10% of one full time employee's time, will be spent administering the prescribed grazing program. Off-setting revenue will also be collected in rental fees; revenue collected will first be subject to fund PILT payments to the county and approximately 80% that is retained by the station will be used to improve habitat conditions, pay maintenance costs associated with the grazing unit and to maintain necessary infrastructure on the refuge.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Determine what resources may be impacted:

The effects and impacts of the proposed use to refuge resources, whether adverse or beneficial, are those that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close

causal relationship to the proposed use. This CD includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when the impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an “affected resource.”

Wildlife and aquatic species, habitat, vegetation, soil, water quality, refuge management and operations, socioeconomics, visitor use, and experience will not be more than negligibly impacted by the action (or potentially positively impacted, in the case of wildlife habitat and vegetation response) and have been dismissed from further analyses.

Potential impacts of a proposed use on the refuge's purpose and the Refuge System mission

Prescribed grazing management is intended to be utilized to meet habitat and species-specific goals and objectives identified in the 2014 Cokeville Meadows NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan. This management action is intended to maintain and enhance habitat conditions for the benefit of a wide variety of wildlife that utilize the Refuge. Minimal negative impacts are expected by using this tool. Trampling of areas may occur around watering areas or supplement blocks or tubs, though no more than what may have occurred with large numbers of bison. Electric or temporary fences are used to keep livestock away from sensitive areas. While the presence of livestock would be disturbing to some wildlife species and some public users, the benefits of this habitat management tool are felt to outweigh these negative impacts pursuant to findings in the 1992 Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge Proposal, Lincoln County, Wyoming: Final Environmental Impact Statement.

The use of prescribed grazing will result in short-term disturbances and long-term benefits to both resident and migratory wildlife using the refuge. Short-term effects include direct displacement of wildlife due to disturbance from livestock use and disturbance from permittee checking on or moving livestock. Areas grazed will also have a temporary loss of cover, however grazed areas can be used for feeding and loafing areas. Wildlife will find food on previously flooded and hayed areas, in frogs, snails, aquatic invertebrates, new vegetation regrowth, etc. - especially if irrigation water can be re-applied. Establishing more desirable and productive habitat for nesting, escape cover, and especially feeding are longer-term benefits resulting from using prescribed grazing. Prescribed grazing will annually provide stop-over habitats or brood rearing feeding areas for resident and migrating wildlife, especially waterfowl and waterbirds. Resulting stopover habitat with resting areas and food sources would offset negative effects from short term of haying activities.

Short-term impacts

Short-term effects include direct displacement of wildlife due to disturbance from livestock use and disturbance from permittee checking on or moving livestock. Areas grazed will also have a temporary loss of cover, however the grazed areas can also be used for feeding by various wildlife species. Wildlife will find food on previously flooded and hayed areas, in frogs, snails, aquatic invertebrates, new vegetation regrowth, etc. - especially if irrigation water can be re-applied. Increased sedimentation and nutrient loads may affect water quality due to instream watering of livestock or large runoff events. This affect should be temporary and balanced out through the filtration the wetlands provide and groundwater recharge.

Long-term impacts

Improved habitat conditions for wildlife, especially migratory and resident bird species, to include improved target habitats for priority species is expected. Fine tuning management to help identify unforeseen impacts will be achieved through monitoring and adjusting habitat treatments in SUPs and CAAs.

Public Review and Comment

The draft compatibility determination will be available for public review and comment for (30) days from 8/30/2023 to 9/30/2023. The public will be made aware of this opportunity to comment through (postings at local Post Office. A hard copy of this document will be posted at Refuge Headquarters, Seedskafee NWR Visitor Center. It will be made available electronically on the refuge website www.fws.gov/refuge/cokeville_meadows. Concerns expressed during the public comment period will be addressed in the final Compatibility Determination.

Determination

Yes, prescribed grazing is compatible.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure

Compatibility

1. Coordination with Refuge manager to ensure proper response to annual conditions is considered with stocking rates and season of use.

Justification

The use of prescribed grazing would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the refuge, the use of prescribed grazing would contribute to the fulfillment of the NWRS mission and especially to the purposes of the refuge. The use of prescribed grazing would not conflict with, but would contribute to, maintaining the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of the refuge.

Habitat conditions would deteriorate without the use of a full range of management tools. Prescriptive grazing is a tool that will help manage flood irrigated areas and wet meadow habitats to continue to provide high quality areas for stopover, resting and refueling for resident and migrating wildlife. Prescribed grazing is a tool that also will help keep Garrison creeping foxtail in check and maintain the understory of native vegetation. Grazing in sedge and grass communities will support or improve the health and vigor of vegetation and keep the area as open wet meadows or grasslands for use by sandhill cranes, shorebirds, ducks, geese and other marsh species. Continued irrigation of wet meadows provides foraging, nesting, or resting areas for geese, ducks, cranes, sage-grouse, bitterns, soras, Virginia rails, white-faced ibis, black necked stilts, avocets and other migratory birds. Other species that will be directly helped include deer, elk, pronghorn, and amphibian species. Continued use of the water supply will keep water rights for the refuge valid, which are critical to maintain the wetland habitats on the refuge.

The stipulations outlined above would help ensure that the use of prescribed grazing is compatible at Cokeville Meadows NWR. Prescribed grazing, as outlined in this compatibility determination, would not conflict with the national policy to maintain the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of the refuge. Based on available science and best professional judgement, the Service has determined that the use of prescribed grazing at Cokeville Meadows NWR, in accordance with the stipulations provided here, would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purpose of Cokeville Meadows NWR. Rather, appropriate and compatible prescribed grazing would be a use of Cokeville Meadows NWR through which the public can develop an appreciation for wildlife and wild lands.

Signature of Determination

Refuge Manager Signature and Date

Signature of Concurrence

Assistant Regional Director Signature and Date

Mandatory Reevaluation Date

2033

Literature Cited/References

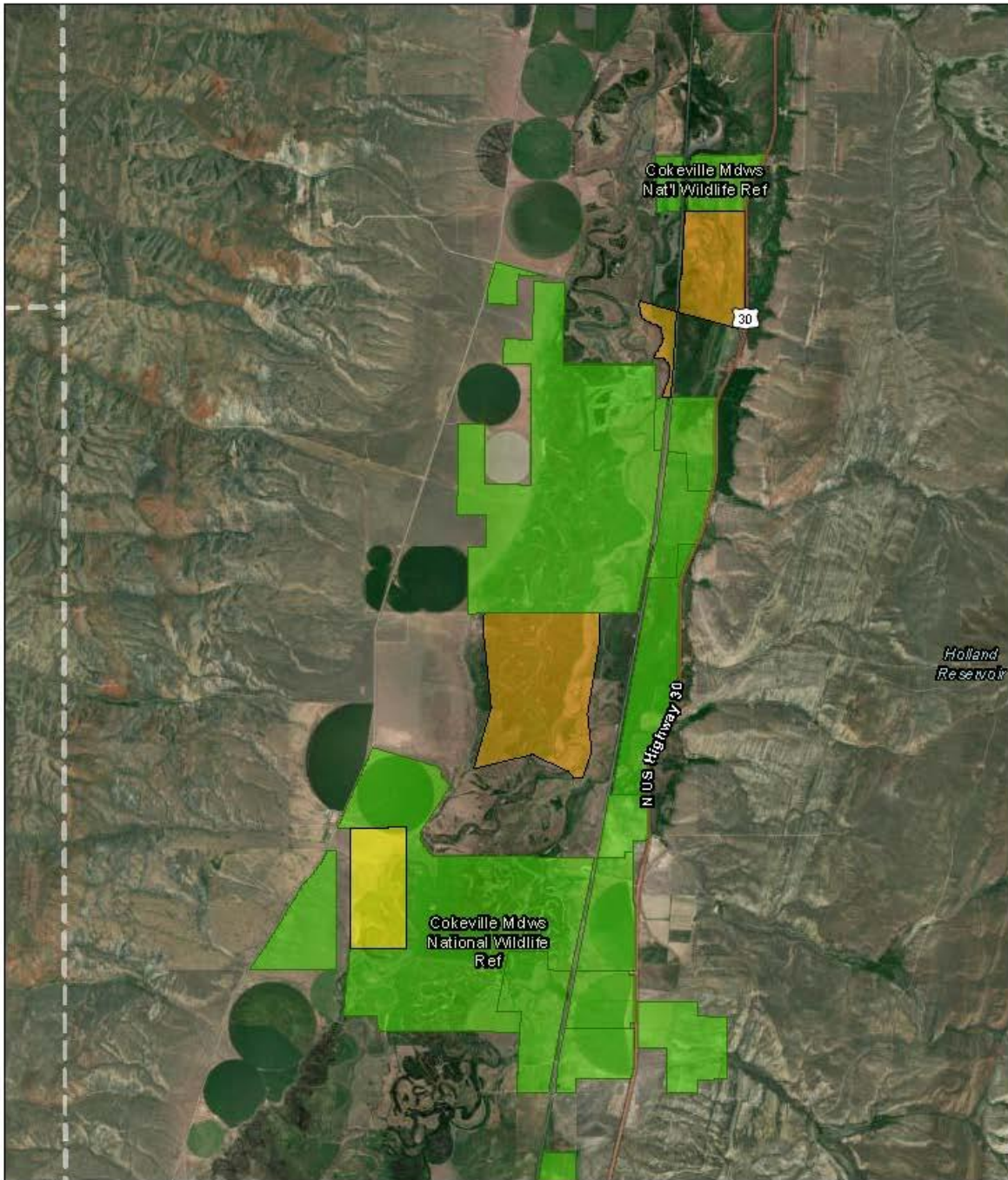
USFWS. 1990. Proposed Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Lincoln County, Wyoming: Draft Environmental Impact Statement. DOI, Lakewood, CO.

USFWS. 1992. Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge Proposal, Lincoln County, Wyoming: Final Environmental Impact Statement. DOI, Lakewood, CO.

USFWS. 2014. Comprehensive Conservation Plan - Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Wyoming. DOI, Lakewood, CO.

Figure 1

Cokeville Meadows Base



8/1/2023

FWS National Realty Tracts

- Fee
- Easement
- Lease

World Imagery

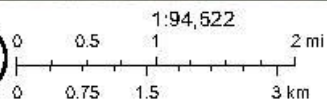
Low Resolution 15m Imagery

High Resolution 60cm Imagery

High Resolution 30cm Imagery

Citations

19m Resolution Metadata



Earthstar Geographics, Lincoln County, WY, Utah Geospatial Resource Center, Esri, HERE, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc., METI/ NASA, USGS, Bureau of Land Management, EPA, NPS, USDA