



Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Announcement of Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity

Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or Refuge) announces a cooperative agriculture opportunity for livestock grazing with cattle on one unit, totaling up to 414 acres, for a period of up to five years. Estimated Animal Unit Months (AUMs) are 75-250. This is an initial estimate and actual AUMs, determined annually, may fall outside of this range. Grazing is proposed as a tool to manage vegetation within a targeted area of Refuge meadow. Grazing is proposed to reduce excessive vegetation biomass and improve structural diversity to improve habitat suitability for wildlife.

Description of the Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity Process

Instructions for Applying

To be considered, applicants should:

1. Review the Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity outlined in this notice of agricultural opportunity;
2. Complete, sign, and submit the bid sheet/application form (excluding the “Bid Information” section)

To be considered, applicants must submit the grazing bid sheet application form available on the Refuge website at [Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge | News | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#).

Alternatively, a hard copy of application documents can be obtained at the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge headquarters (305 Ruby Valley Road, Ruby Valley, NV 89833-9802).

Applications may be submitted by email to hilary_swarts@fws.gov, by mail, or in person at Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge headquarters. Applicants will be selected through an open and competitive process after the environmental compliance process is completed.

Special Use Permit

Following selection, the successful applicant will also be required to complete a Special Use Permit (SUP) application for commercial activities. Pending completion of environmental compliance, the successful applicant will be awarded the Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity and will receive an SUP for the current grazing season with the option, at the Service’s discretion, of extending for an additional four years.

Application Deadline

The deadline to apply for this cooperative agricultural opportunity is September 4, 2026 at 11:59 PM.

Contact Information

For more information or to schedule an in-person visit to the proposed grazing unit, interested applicants should contact Project Leader/Wildlife Refuge Manager, Hilary Swarts, by phone (775-779-2237) or via email (hilary_swarts@fws.gov).

Selection Process

The cooperator will be selected through an open, transparent, and competitive process, where applications will be scored and ranked based upon the objective criteria listed below. Applicants will be scored and ranked based on information provided in the bid sheet/application form. Please be sure to address the criteria listed below in your application. The Refuge will notify all applicants individually within 45 days after the closing of the opportunity notice or completion of environmental compliance.

Objective Ranking Criteria	Eligibility/Ranking Score
Currently a ranching cooperator on private land or a grazing lease holder on public lands similar to the unit described in this notice of opportunity.	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Ability to graze for the total length of time and recommended stocking rate or until target vegetation conditions are achieved.	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Ability to move livestock onto the management unit or remove them from the Refuge within two days' notice.	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Ability to install, operate, and maintain the necessary infrastructure to meet the needs of the grazing program described in this notice of opportunity (including hauling in water for cattle in the grazing unit).	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Currently possess the equipment and staff necessary to manage grazing operations and maintain and improve grazing infrastructure, or are willing to obtain necessary equipment (e.g., virtual fencing collars and towers).	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Ability to immediately respond to emergency situations, such as escaped livestock, water system failures, wildfires, or other circumstances affecting public or livestock health and safety.	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Ability to inspect livestock and infrastructure on a reoccurring basis, as described in this notice of opportunity.	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)
Experience managing livestock on federal or state lands for plant and wildlife habitat improvement.	• Less than 5 years (1 point) • 5 to 10 years (2 points) • More than 10 years (3 points)
Ability to meet all applicant requirements listed in this document.	• Yes (eligible) • No (not eligible)

Description of Cooperative Agricultural Opportunity

Location and purpose

Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge is located at the southern end of Ruby Valley in northeast Nevada. Ruby Lake Refuge supports a wide diversity of wildlife species and is strategically located along migration corridors serving both the Pacific and Central Flyways.

Fall grazing is proposed within a designated portion of meadow at Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge (Figure 1). As proposed, grazing is intended to reduce excessive vegetation biomass and improve structural diversity to improve habitat suitability for wildlife. The proposed grazing unit is located at the southern end of Refuge. Grazing would be permitted only within the meadow community. Aquatic habitats, riparian areas, and other sensitive locations (e.g., important wildlife areas) would be excluded from the grazing unit. These exclusions may be re-evaluated annually to protect Refuge resources.

Biological Objectives

Grazing is intended to improve habitat for wildlife in a limited area of Refuge meadow. A grazing program is designed to meet long-standing Refuge objectives related to wildlife habitat quality, including:

- Providing high-quality habitat for the production and/or maintenance of sensitive species, including sandhill cranes.
- Providing and enhancing feeding habitat for migratory waterfowl.
- Providing and enhancing feeding habitat needed for colonial nesting species and other waterbirds.
- Providing diverse, high-quality upland and wetland habitats for molting and migrating waterfowl.
- Protecting and enhancing important wildlife resources under principles of good land stewardship (with particular attention to limiting the spread of invasive species).

A cooperative agricultural agreement is being pursued to reduce excessive vegetation biomass and improve structural diversity, including providing short stubble forage for wildlife, in a section of Refuge meadow. Grazing was described as a management action for the Refuge in an approved Habitat Management Plan for Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge; strategies, goals, and objectives have been adapted over time. Grazing is being assessed through an Environmental Assessment and Compatibility Determination, currently in draft.

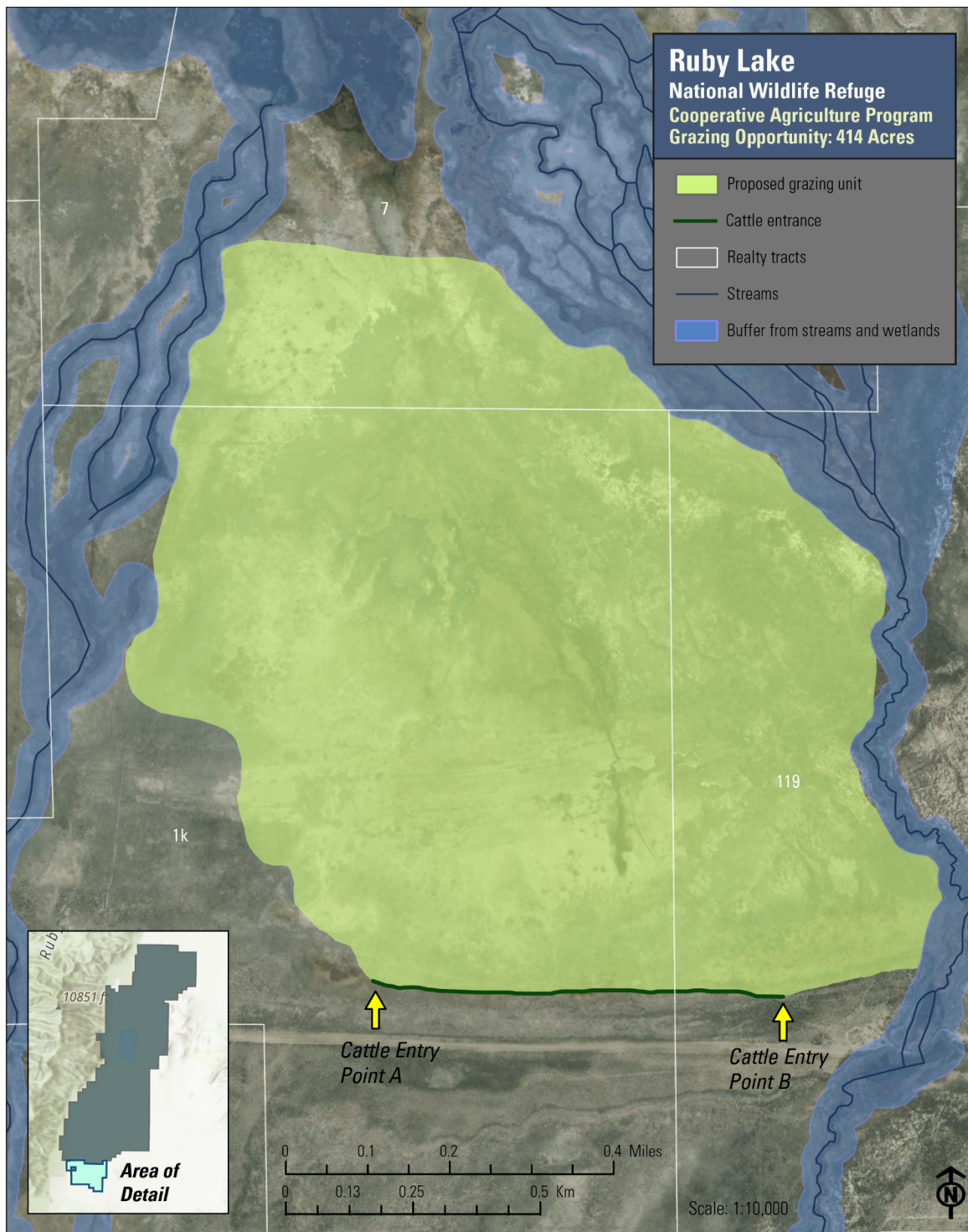


Figure 1. Proposed grazing unit on Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Habitat Goals

Grazing intensity and timing would be adapted, as needed, to support achievement of Refuge-wide habitat objectives, including improving perennial grasses and forbs and maintaining the status of annual grasses to achieve desired future habitat conditions (e.g., >15% perennial grass cover, ≥4 perennial grass species, >10% forb cover, ≥9 forb species, <5% annual grasses).

Within the grazing unit, the following limitations are applicable:

- Native perennial grasses would be left at no less than a four-inch stubble height.
- Stocking rates would be determined annually by considering the guideline for appropriate utilization to “take half and leave half”, or to utilize 50% of annual forage production, including both forage consumed and damage caused by trampling, loafing, and other livestock-related factors.

Applicant Requirements

- Cooperator should have experience managing livestock for plant and wildlife habitat improvement. Cooperator would monitor vegetation conditions to ensure that grazing limits are not exceeded.
- Cooperator would use virtual fencing to confine cattle to the proposed grazing unit. Collaboration with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is encouraged, and cost-share programs are available. Supplemental, temporary fencing may be approved at the discretion of Refuge staff.
- Cooperator should have base property close enough to the Refuge to be available to respond in emergency situations.
- Cooperator would be available to check livestock every third day, at a minimum, or more frequently, at the Refuge Manager’s discretion.
- Cooperator would be financially and logistically responsible for installation and maintenance of grazing infrastructure, and removal of grazing infrastructure following the grazing season.
- Cooperator would put livestock used in the Refuge grazing program on weed-free feed for at least 72 hours prior to letting them on the Refuge, and would clean all vehicles, machinery, and other equipment of non-native plant and animal matter prior to arrival on the Refuge.
- Cooperator would haul in and provide water and watering facilities for grazing cattle. Pumping water from onsite streams and springs will not be permitted.
- Cooperator would have sufficient liability insurance, as outlined in this announcement.

Acres

Up to 414 acres will be available for grazing within the designated grazing unit, dependent annually on resource conditions and needs. The grazing unit may be adjusted as needed based on biological, administrative, or other factors.

The estimated target AUM range is 75-250. This will be refined annually, based on current conditions, and the actual AUMs may fall outside of the estimated range.

Period of Performance

The period of performance will be for one year, with an option to extend, at the Service's discretion, to a maximum of five years, per the Service's Cooperative Agricultural Use Policy (620 FW 2). Pending environmental compliance completion, the CAA may be awarded in 2026, with an end date of no later than December 31, 2031.

Lease Pricing

The initial rate specified in the CAA will be \$6.25 per Animal Unit Month (AUM). Initial AUE values are outlined in the table, below. Since lease pricing is set for this opportunity, please do not complete the "Bid Information" section in the bid sheet/application form.

Animal Unit Class	Animal Unit Equivalent (AUE)
Cow, dry	1.00
Cow, with calf	1.00
Bull, mature	1.35
Cattle, one year old	0.60
Cattle, two year old	0.80

The animal and class categories and associated animal unit equivalent (AUE) values are modified from Grazing Handbook - A Guide for Resource Managers in Coastal California (Sotoyome RCD, nd) and Estimating Initial Stocking Rates (Ogle and Brazee, 2009).

Annual Grazing Period

Grazing will be permitted from August 1 to December 31, at the discretion of Refuge staff. Refuge staff will determine annually whether grazing will be permitted in any given year, based on resource conditions, and other biological and administrative factors. If grazing will be permitted, Refuge staff will determine exact start and end dates for grazing, based on biological and other administrative factors. If suitable conditions are not present to support grazing or if it is determined that grazing would cause adverse impacts, the Refuge Manager may use their discretion to alter or suspend grazing until suitable conditions are present for the use to resume. The permitted date range for grazing would be communicated annually to the cooperator by the Refuge Project Leader/Wildlife Refuge Manager.

Annual Billing Period

The Refuge Manager will meet with the cooperator annually in January for reconciliation of billing.

Liability Insurance Requirements

The cooperator will be required to comply with applicable Federal and State workers' compensation and occupational disease statutes. If occupational diseases are not compensable under those statutes, they shall be covered under the employer's liability section of the insurance policy, except when contract operations are so commingled with a contractor's commercial operations that it would not be practical to require this coverage. Employer's liability coverage as shown in the table, below, shall be required, except in States with exclusive or monopolistic funds that do not permit workers' compensation to be written by private carriers.

The cooperator shall have coverage for bodily injury and property damage liability covering the operation of all automobiles used in connection with performing the contract. The amount of liability coverage on other policies shall be commensurate with any legal requirements of the locality and sufficient to meet normal and customary claims.

Type	Amount
Workers' compensation (employer's liability coverage)	\$100,000
General bodily injury liability, per occurrence	\$500,000
Automobile liability, per person	\$200,000
Automobile liability, per occurrence for bodily injury	\$500,000
Automobile liability, per occurrence for property damage	\$20,000

Refuge Background Information

Refuge Information

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended 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.”

Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge, located in northeastern Nevada along migration corridors serving both the Pacific and Central Flyways, was established in 1939 “...for use as...a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” (Executive Order 7923, July 2, 1939). Additional refuge purposes, established through expansion of the refuge, include:

“... for use as inviolate sanctuaries for migratory birds...” 16 U.S.C. § 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929)

“... for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” 16 U.S.C.715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, as amended)

"...to provide for the management, protection, development, and enhancement of public lands..." (Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 U.S.C. 1716), as amended.

Land Use History

The Western Shoshone, Northern Paiute, and Goshute have ties to Ruby Valley. These groups occupied much of central and eastern Nevada and western Utah prior to settlement by Euro-Americans. Historic sites on the Refuge reflect past land use, and include the Pony Express/Overland Stage Station, Fort Ruby, and the Bressman cabin. Grazing has occurred on Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge for many years, both before and after Refuge establishment, but has not occurred on the Refuge since 2021.

Climate and Weather

Most of Ruby Valley has a mid-latitude desert and steppe climate, generally characterizing the Great Basin, dominated by tropical air masses in the summer and continental polar air masses in winter. In summer, afternoon thunderstorms are common. The Ruby Mountains create a severe rain shadow and precipitation abruptly decreases to the east where the Refuge lies.

Most precipitation is received as snow from November through April, and precipitation is generally evenly distributed during these months as about 1.3 inches of rain equivalent per month. Mean annual snowfall is about 50 inches. Snowfall (start of snow accumulation) begins as early as late September, but generally does not start to accumulate substantially until November. Wetlands in the Refuge generally freeze during early November and ice melts usually by mid-March.

Management Units

The proposed grazing unit consists of approximately 414 acres of Refuge meadow (Figure 1). The grazing unit is bounded to the south by a landing strip (no longer in use). A buffer on the southern end of the grazing unit has been established to protect sagebrush habitat and sensitive vegetation. On all other sides, the grazing unit is bounded by springs, streams, and wetlands. A buffer of at least 100 feet from either side of any known spring, stream, or wetland has been established. There is currently no public use permitted within the grazing unit.

Fall grazing is proposed in dry meadow; however, areas of wet meadow are located adjacent to the proposed grazing unit. Both wet and dry meadow communities have saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*), fiddleleaf hawksbeard (*Crepis runcinata*), and mountain rush (*Juncus arcticus*). The dry meadow has more forbs and sedges including common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), western boraxweed (*Nitrophila occidentalis*), clustered field sedge (*Carex praegracilis*) and seaside arrowgrass (*Triglochin maritime*) and more species overall compared to the wet meadow community. The proposed grazing unit is currently densely vegetated.

Meadows within the southern portion of the Refuge, including where grazing has been proposed, have very little invasive species cover. Most invasive vegetation on the Refuge occurs near established roadways and near the Refuge headquarters. Primary invasive species on the Refuge are cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) and crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*). Therefore, livestock would be required to be placed on weed-free feed for 72 hours prior to grazing.

Equis-Kolda association soils dominate the interior valley portions of southern part of the Refuge, including the project area. These soils are generally poorly to very poorly drained and composed of fine particles. These soils are moderately susceptible to erosion by rainfall and runoff.

There is no water infrastructure or access to natural water features available within the proposed grazing unit. Therefore, cooperators would be responsible for installing and maintaining water infrastructure, hauling water to the grazing unit, and removing all infrastructure at the end of each grazing season.

Virtual fencing towers would be installed in coordination with Refuge staff. While virtual fencing is to be the primary means of containing cattle within the grazing unit, supplemental temporary fencing may be authorized at the discretion of Refuge staff to protect sensitive resources.

Grazing would be implemented within this unit, ensuring that:

- No more than 50% of vegetation is utilized
- Native grasses are not grazed below 4-inch stubble height
- Desired vegetation characteristics are maintained

Special Conditions

The selected applicant will be required to sign and verify that they will abide to the following Special Conditions of Use for grazing on the designated management unit:

- **Cooperative Agricultural Agreement:** Livestock operators would be authorized to graze on the Refuge through issuance of a Cooperative Agricultural Agreement. Renewals would be contingent upon compliance with stipulations identified by the Refuge, general and special conditions of the special use permit, and the results of monitoring data demonstrating the value of the grazing program for target habitats and wildlife.
- **Protection of Cultural Resources:** In accordance with the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 470aa), the disturbance of archaeological or historical sites, and the removal of artifacts are prohibited. The excavation, disturbance, collection, or purchase of historical, ethnological, or archaeological specimens or artifacts, or mementos from the Refuge is prohibited. Livestock operators would not disturb and are prohibited from collecting and removing archaeological or historic artifacts, abiotic or biological specimens or samples, or mementos from the Refuge.
- **Limits on Grazing Timeframe:** Generally, livestock operators would be authorized to graze on the Refuge from August 1 through December 31 through the prescribed grazing program. The Refuge Manager would reserve the right to alter the dates that grazing is initiated and terminated, alter the area in which grazing would be permitted in any given year, or to not issue grazing permits during some years based upon biological needs, precipitation levels/drought, wildfire-related concerns, staffing levels, or at the discretion of the Refuge Manager.
- **Prevent Spread of Invasive Plants:** Livestock operators would be required, at the discretion of the Refuge Manager, to put livestock used in the Refuge grazing program on weed-free feed for at least 72 hours prior to letting them on the Refuge. Additionally, prior to arrival on the Refuge, livestock operators would be required, at the discretion of the Refuge Manager, to clean all vehicles, machinery, and other equipment of non-native plant and animal matter.
- **Speed Limit:** While on the Refuge, personnel would be required to travel no more than 35 mph (unless otherwise posted), including movement of grazing-related equipment.

- **Virtual Fencing:** Livestock operators would ensure that grazing livestock are appropriately confined to identified areas/pastures using virtual fencing. Some temporary fencing may be authorized at the discretion of Refuge staff. Operators would be responsible for ensuring that livestock are not allowed to roam across the Refuge or onto neighboring lands outside of the identified grazing area, nor are able to access sensitive streams and springs. Operators would be responsible for locating and removing livestock that stray from identified grazing areas (elsewhere on the Refuge or on adjacent lands) within 24 hours of notification by Refuge staff and for properly monitoring and maintaining virtual and temporary fencing. Operators would be responsible for removing temporary fencing at the end of each grazing season.
- **Livestock Monitoring:** Livestock would be checked by the operator every third day at a minimum or more frequently, at the Refuge Manager's discretion.
- **Grazing Limitations:** No more than 50% of available forage would be utilized, including both forage consumed and damage caused by trampling, loafing, and other livestock-related factors. Plants, especially native perennial grasses, would be grazed leaving at least a four-inch stubble height. Operators would be responsible for monitoring vegetation conditions during the grazing season to ensure that these limitations are not exceeded.
- **Fertilizers, Pesticides, and Biological Controls:** Livestock operators would be prohibited from applying fertilizers, pesticides (including fungicides, herbicides, and insecticides), or biological controls on Refuge lands or waters. If, during the Refuge grazing period, there is a substantial outbreak of flies or other livestock pests, ranchers would be responsible for providing all information necessary to submit an accurate and complete pesticide use proposal (PUP) to the Service for consideration. Control actions would be prohibited until the Service approves the PUP. If the PUP is approved, the operator would be responsible for documenting the amount of active ingredient applied and acres treated, and any other required information, and would report this information to the Service by specified deadlines. The operator would be responsible for obtaining and maintaining all necessary certifications required for pesticide application.
- **Predator-Control:** Livestock operators would be prohibited from conducting predator-control activities on the Refuge.
- **Animal Limitations:** Livestock operators would be prohibited from bringing other animals and pets onto the Refuge, with the exception of dogs and horses used in managing livestock; guard animals; and legitimate, leashed guide/service animals. All other pets must remain contained in a vehicle.
- **Water Resources Protection:** Livestock use would not be permitted within at least 100 feet on either side of a known water body or wetland, to protect water quality and riparian resources. Cooperators would haul in water and watering facilities for cattle, and pumping from onsite water sources would not be permitted.
- **Access to Grazing Unit:** All cattle, vehicles, and equipment would be required to remain on existing roadways (i.e., Ruby Valley Road) until reaching the southwest corner of the grazing unit. Cooperators would be required to lead cattle onto the grazing unit between

designated access points along the southern border of the grazing unit (Figure 1). Additional specific access requirements would be communicated by Refuge staff.