

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee
on National Parks and Public Lands,
Committee on Interior and Insular
Affairs, House of Representatives

May 1991

RANGELAND MANAGEMENT

Forest Service Not Performing Needed Monitoring of Grazing Allotments



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The Honorable Bruce F. Vento
Chairman, Subcommittee on National Parks
and Public Lands
Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In your April 12, 1990, letter you asked us to follow up on our June 1988 report on the condition of public rangeland.¹ The report stated that federal grazing allotments² may be threatened with damage because more domestic livestock—primarily cattle and sheep—were being permitted to graze than range managers believed the land could support. The report recommended that the Bureau of Land Management within the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture (1) ask their range managers to identify all allotments they believe to be overstocked or in declining condition and (2) concentrate monitoring and other range management activities on these lands.

In subsequent discussions with your office, we agreed to report separately on the progress of the Bureau and the Forest Service in implementing our recommendations. This report discusses the status of the Forest Service's efforts. We plan to report the results of our work on the Bureau's range monitoring later this year.

Results in Brief

Of the over 9,200 grazing allotments in the Forest Service's six western regions, range managers have identified almost 2,200, or nearly one out of every four, that they considered to be in a declining condition and/or overstocked. This recognition of the size and extent of the problem is a valuable first step toward improved rangeland management; however, much more remains to be done. In particular, the Forest Service has made little progress in conducting the follow-up monitoring necessary to identify improper grazing practices and devise corrective action.

¹Rangeland Management: More Emphasis Needed on Declining And Overstocked Grazing Allotments (GAO/RCED-88-80, June 10, 1988).

²Allotments are designated areas of land available for grazing specific numbers and kinds of livestock.

Our review of five district offices in four national forests confirmed that while the Forest Service is concentrating its limited resources on monitoring problem allotments, three out of four of these allotments were not being monitored. The Forest Service attributes its limited monitoring activity to staffing and budgetary constraints along with the demands of competing land management responsibilities. In this regard, Forest Service range management staff have declined about 30 percent in the last decade.

Background

The Forest Service manages 191 million acres of land, of which about 104 million acres are divided into 9,752 grazing allotments. Ninety-five percent of these allotments (9,217) are located in the Forest Service's six western regions, which geographically cover national forest lands from just beyond the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Each allotment includes lands that are suitable for grazing, such as grasslands and meadows, as well as lands not suitable for grazing, such as dense forests and steep mountainous terrains. The Service has classified approximately 50 million acres within the allotments as suitable for livestock grazing.

Grazing is allowed on an allotment under a 10-year renewable permit issued to one or more permittees. These permittees pay annual grazing fees based on the number of livestock grazed and the length of their stay on each allotment.

Under the Forest Service's structure, allotment management responsibility rests largely with the Service's approximately 700 range managers. Besides monitoring range conditions, these managers have other range program responsibilities such as processing grazing permits and billings, supervising the installation and maintenance of range improvements, and enforcing livestock trespass restrictions. In addition, range managers are frequently responsible for other programs such as wildlife, minerals, and recreation.

Under Forest Service policy, grazing practices on each allotment are detailed in individual management agreements called allotment management plans that are jointly agreed to by range managers and permittees. These plans describe allotment management goals and the actions needed to achieve them.

Forest Service range condition monitoring is a crucial step in the planning process because it helps establish allotment management goals and

provides baseline information needed to identify improper grazing practices and to devise specific corrective actions. Allotments are usually monitored shortly before and after scheduled livestock grazing. Monitoring studies generally measure the composition, production, and consumption of key plant species against desired standards and goals to determine the condition of the rangeland. Range managers select several actively grazed areas on an allotment as study sites. The monitoring activities at these sites generally include photographing soil and vegetation, recording the number of plants present for key species, and determining the percentage of annual new plant growth that has been consumed during the grazing season. The monitoring results are then used as a base for arriving at the livestock grazing levels to be authorized in the allotment management plans.

Grazing Allotments Considered Declining and Overstocked Have Been Identified

In response to our 1988 report, the Forest Service asked its range managers to identify which of the 9,217 allotments located in the agency's six western regions they believed were in a declining condition and/or overstocked. Overall, 2,183 grazing allotments, or 24 percent of the allotments in the six western regions, were placed in the declining and/or overstocked category. As shown in table 1, the allotments in the five district offices we visited mirrored the Service-wide condition. In these offices, range managers classified 29 percent of the allotments as declining and/or overstocked.

Table 1: Allotments Categorized as Declining And/Or Overstocked at District Offices Visited

District office (forest)	Total allotments	Declining/overstocked allotments	Percentage declining/overstocked
Carson (Toiyabe)	36	18	50
Emmett (Boise)	20	2	10
McCall (Payette)	40	17	43
Council (Payette)	14	2	14
Ashland (Custer)	47	6	13
Total	157	45	29

Source: GAO's tabulation of range managers' responses.

In identifying declining and/or overstocked allotments, the range managers based their decisions on their professional judgment because existing Forest Service range monitoring data were not sufficient for such assessments. Allotments with vegetation, soil, and water resource problems caused by improper livestock grazing were categorized as declining and/or overstocked. Also, allotments where conditions were

generally satisfactory but where problems in key areas, such as riparian areas,³ existed or grazing was believed to conflict with other resource values, such as wildlife or recreation, were included in that category.

In addition to identifying its declining and/or overstocked allotments, range managers at the five district offices had developed schedules for performing subsequent allotment monitoring that generally gave priority to the allotments in this category.

Many Declining And/ Or Overstocked Allotments Are Not Monitored

Once problem allotments have been identified, monitoring studies are the next critical step if improper grazing practices are to be identified and corrected. If not corrected, range conditions can further deteriorate, resulting in declining stream conditions and groundwater tables, unnaturally high soil erosion, and loss of native vegetation.

While recognizing the importance of monitoring studies, Forest Service headquarters range management officials said that district offices do little monitoring and do not centrally report on what monitoring is accomplished. Without information on the number of allotments being monitored Forest Service-wide, we could not document the precise extent of the Forest Service's overall performance. At the five district offices, however, we found that only 13 percent (21 of 157) of all the allotments were being monitored. While priority attention was given to allotments classified as declining and/or overstocked, even among these allotments only 24 percent (11 of 45) were being monitored.

Staff Constraints Have Limited Monitoring Efforts

Forest Service managers attribute the delay in monitoring declining and/or overstocked allotments to staff reductions and the need to spread available resources among competing responsibilities. Nationally, the number of Forest Service range managers decreased from over 1,000 to under 700, or by more than 30 percent, between fiscal years 1979 and 1990. According to range managers at four of the five district offices, they did not have sufficient time to meet all of their program responsibilities.

For example, the sole range manager at a district office we visited was responsible for managing 36 grazing allotments totaling 269,000 acres scattered over a 50-mile stretch of national forest lands. According to

³Riparian areas are heavily vegetated areas along the banks of rivers and streams and around springs, bogs, lakes, and ponds.

the range manager, her time was divided about equally between range and wildlife management, and she is monitoring only four allotments because she does not have the time to monitor any more. Among the 32 allotments not being monitored, 17 are categorized as declining and/or overstocked.

Emergency situations, such as fires and insect infestations, also reduce the time available for monitoring. For example, a range manager at one district office we visited had to defer monitoring because he was the only staff member licensed for pesticide spraying.

Conclusions

The Forest Service has taken the initial step toward addressing unsatisfactory range conditions by identifying declining and/or overstocked allotments but has made little progress implementing a program to monitor range conditions on allotments. Given existing range staff constraints, it could be a number of years before many allotments identified as declining and/or overstocked are monitored. Until range condition monitoring data are collected and analyzed and the resulting management decisions acted upon, range conditions on problem allotments can be expected to remain in unsatisfactory condition or to further decline.

Agency Comments

We obtained oral comments on a draft of this report from officials of the Department of Agriculture, who agreed that this report was factually accurate and that the conclusions were sound.

Scope and Methodology

While Forest Service range managers have identified those grazing allotments they believe to be in a declining condition and/or overstocked, we found that summary data were not available on the extent of range condition monitoring on the allotments. According to Forest Service headquarters range program officials, little monitoring was being conducted. Therefore, in conducting our work we focused on the monitoring being done at several selected Forest Service offices.

We interviewed and obtained information from range program officials at Forest Service headquarters and four national forests. Within these forests we visited five district offices with large grazing programs in Idaho, Montana, and Nevada. The district offices were not randomly selected, but Forest Service headquarters and regional officials told us these offices represent a good cross section view of the Service's monitoring efforts. At the district offices, we examined allotment, permit,

and monitoring files and records and interviewed district office range managers administering the grazing program. We conducted our review from June 1990 to April 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees; the Chief, Forest Service; and the Secretary of Agriculture. We will also make copies available to others on request.

Please contact me at (202) 275-7756 if you or your staff have any questions concerning the report. Other major contributors are listed in appendix I.

Sincerely yours,



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