

The Uncompahgre Rangeland Initiative Project

An Example of How to Make the National Environmental Policy Act More Efficient

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The work of federal land management agencies has been guided by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Federal agencies are required to develop a process of scientific study, referred to as an environmental analysis, that discloses environmental effects of any proposed action. Alternative solutions and their effects are documented in an environmental assessment. As the act has been interpreted and tested by the courts, the work required to implement the National Environmental Policy Act has exploded. Environmental Assessments of the 1990's often resemble environmental impact statements of the 1980's.

Federal range budgets have not kept pace with the expanding requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act. The disparity between funding and the amount of work required under the National Environmental Policy Act has proven to be one of the biggest challenges facing range people who work in the federal sector.

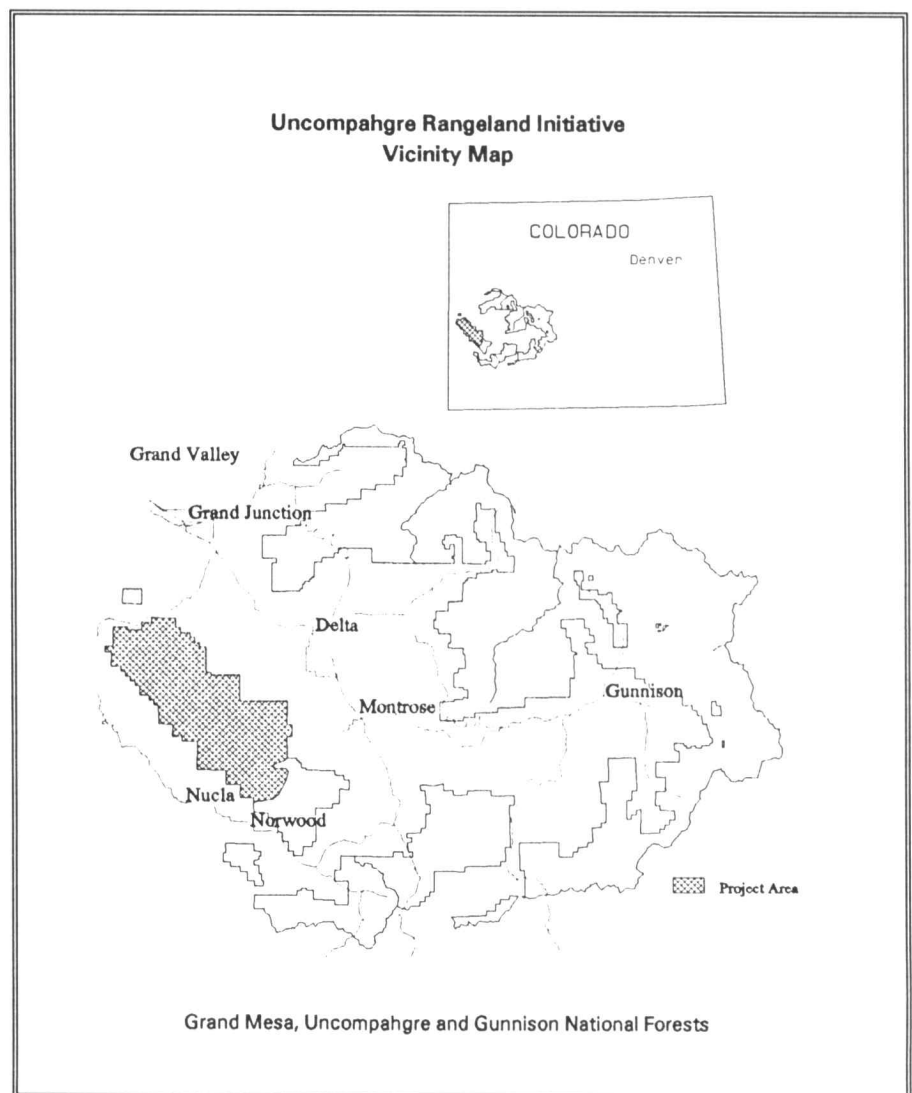
The Recission Act of 1995 (Public Law 104-19) became law on July 27, 1995. Section 504(a) of this act requires the US Forest Service to determine which of its allotments need an environmental analysis to support continuation of livestock grazing, develop a schedule for completing the analysis, and to adhere to the schedule. Thus, the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest was faced with developing a strategy for completing the required environmental analysis for 153 allotments by the year 2010. Allotments needing an environmental analysis and new management plans were scattered across the Forest.

One approach would have been to examine the allotments one at a time. This is the way the US Forest Service has traditionally conducted business. If the time frame was used under the Rescission Act, 10 analyses must be completed per year. With current budgetary constraints in view of other

work priorities it would take the Forest more than 20 years to complete the environmental analyses required by the Recission Act. Forest Staff concluded that the work could not be completed on schedule by simply following a "business as usual" course of action. The idea of combining allotments and expanding the area of analysis surfaced in a Forest range staff meeting. This approach would make it possible to do one analysis on a broad landscape basis and meet the 15-year schedule established by Congress. The Uncompahgre Rangeland

Initiative Project was one such landscape and one of the first projects of this magnitude undertaken on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest.

The landscape evaluated by the Uncompahgre Rangeland Initiative project is a part of a vast area known as the Uncompahgre Plateau. This Plateau is located in western Colorado some 50 miles from the Utah border and stretches for more than 100 miles between the San Juan Mountains and Grand Valley (vicinity map). A pinyon pine and juniper woodland dominates



the landscape at lower elevations. A spruce-fir forest flourishes on top of the Uncompahgre. Vegetation in between includes communities of sagebrush, Gambel oakbrush, ponderosa pine and aspen. The highest elevation on the Plateau is 9,731 feet. By contrast the elevation for the Grand Valley which lies just north of the Uncompahgre Plateau is 4,858 feet. These lands support thriving populations of elk, mule deer, wild turkey, forest grouse, bear and coyote.

Lands at lower elevations are managed by two Bureau of Land Management districts; whereas, high elevations are cared for by the US Forest Service. The project area lies within the National Forest and contains 442,582 acres on the northern two-thirds of the Uncompahgre Plateau. Twenty one grazing allotments are included in the project area, and management of these are shared by the Norwood, Ouray and Grand Junction ranger districts.

One of the major uses of the project area is livestock grazing. Twenty eight ranch operations with headquarters in Delta, Montrose and Mesa counties graze 13,080 head of cattle and 101 horses on the area from June 1 to October 15. These operations harvest 75,093 animal unit months of forage from the project area. Additionally, 44 families obtain all or a portion of their income from these operations. Each of these families was potentially affected by any decision made as a result of the Uncompahgre environmental analysis.

Public contact was deemed essential. A written inquiry referred to as "scoping" was conducted on March 20, 1995, when the project began. Thirty five people responded to the inquiry. From the comments, a total of fifty seven issues were identified. Four were determined to be paramount to any grazing decision on the Uncompahgre. These included (1) rangeland health and productivity, (2) effects on wildlife habitat, (3) effects on the local economy, and (4) condition of aquatic and riparian ecosystems. Other issues identified in scoping could be mitigated by applying specified management practices, and still others did not apply to the decision at hand and were dismissed.



Canyons and Mesas of the Uncompahgre Plateau. Love and Kelso Mesas Escalante Canyon. Photo by Marlin Jenson.



Open park on the Uncompahgre Plateau. Heifer pasture on the Hereford Allotment. Photo by Marlin Jenson.

As with any environmental analysis the need for accurate information was critical. Range conservationists from across the Forest converged on the planning area to collect data in 1995 and 1996. Information was aimed at analyzing the four key issues. Working with grazing permittees, range conservations evaluated trend, forage canopy cover and production information. Wildlife biologists collected information on wildlife species, completed elk use surveys and compiled biological evaluations for threatened and endangered species. With the help of the Forest hydrologist, range conservationists selected a few streams to survey. Streams selected had conditions that were similar to those on other streams elsewhere in the planning area. Information about willow canopy cover, stream width versus depth and plant composition was gathered from the riparian habitats and used in the evaluation.

Information on the economies of Grand Junction, Montrose and Delta counties was accumulated and analyzed by an economist. The change in the number of jobs (especially agricultural jobs) and cost of operation were used to measure impacts of each alternative on the local economy.

As the information was collected, it was summarized in a project file. Besides the biological and economic data, the file contained a summary of the management situation for each allotment, photographs (both past and present), a record of how each of the 57 issues were treated and specialist's reports. One of the team goals was to produce a quality Assessment. So the team adopted the motto: "a good project file results in a quality assessment." A site specific analysis for each allotment was the basis of all conclusions highlighted in the environmental assessment.

The value of the project file became clear during the 30-day public review of the Environmental Assessment. Eighteen people read the Assessment and raised questions to which the document did not respond. Even though the answers to these questions were not in the Assessment, they were in the project file. Responses were simple because the project file was well organized and contained an abundance of information pertaining to the

four key issues. Supplemental information was extracted from the project file and provided to those with questions. As a result all concerns were satisfied and the project moved forward.

Using the information collected and the four key issues identified during the inquiries three alternatives were developed. Evaluation of these alternatives provided the basis for the analysis outlined in the Assessment. The proposed action was one choice that was evaluated. It recognized a need to improve resource conditions on portions of the landscape. The proposed action called for implementation of the best management practices science had to offer (Table I). These practices included grazing pastures for no more than 20 days during periods of fast growth, a standard that was developed locally. Changing the dates of use in each pasture from one year to the next, and only grazing a pasture once during a yearly cycle are also included. Such practices are closely linked with meeting the needs of plants that sustain and support livestock grazing.

The combining of eleven-2,000 acre allotments was a particularly useful part of the proposed action. This action resulted in five larger allotments containing 40,000 to 50,000 acres

each. Trial combinations had been tested in the early 1990s and proved to be practical. Herds of cattle were combined into one large herd on the new allotment, and the amount of time plants were exposed to grazing was shortened. Consequently, plants would have more time during the growing season to recover from the effects of livestock grazing.

One alternative to the proposed action would not have changed management practices. Under this "no action" alternative, trend of vegetation and soil conditions on 40 percent of the landscape would continue to decline. Trend of range condition on the other 60 percent of the landscape would be split between no measurable change and improving.

A third alternative to the proposed action would eventually lead to no livestock grazing on the landscape. Under this alternative livestock grazing would be phased out as grazing permits expire and the landscape would be devoted exclusively to other purposes.

During the course of the analysis a grazing permit assigned to the Hereford/Love Mesa allotment was given back to the government. The Hereford/Love Mesa allotment is located near the center of the Uncompahgre planning area (grazing allot-

Table I.
Overview of Proposed Action

- Provides for 69,985 animal unit months of cattle grazing.
- Makes five combinations that included 11 of 21 allotments.
- Provides for the preparation of 15 new allotment management plans that capitalize on existing improvements.
- Provides for quick moves from one pasture to the next during periods of rapid plant growth.
- Provides for each pasture to be grazed once during the summer grazing season.
- Allowable use on uplands is no more than 50 percent of current years growth.
- Livestock are cleaned from pastures within five days of the date of a move.
- A four inch stubble height will be left on tall sedges in spring use pastures.
- A four to six inch stubble height will be left on tall sedges in summer and fall use pastures.
- The proposed action applied several management requirements for locating salt, range improvements, and threatened and endangered species and coordination with personnel who work for the Bureau of Land Management.
- Range improvements:

78 water developments	26 miles of fence
13 miles of fence removal	1,800 acres of prescribed burning
1 corral	4.5 miles of stock trail
17 erosion control structures	1 cattleguard
2 water catchments	

Winter Scenes

