

A Case Study In Cooperation

One range management professional reaffirms that cooperation works.

By Sherri S. Haver

Author's Note: It all started on August 21, 1997, when the US Department of Interior's Board of Appeals ruled that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must support their grazing permits with an adequate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) assessment that addresses site-specific effects of grazing on each permit. The land use plan must include a reasonable and informed discussion of balancing competing uses, including grazing, within the allotment.

The problem. Located in northwestern New Mexico, the eastern portion of the Navajo Nation Reservation, also called the Checkerboard, encompasses

1.1 million acres of grazing land. This land is under the jurisdiction and trust responsibility of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

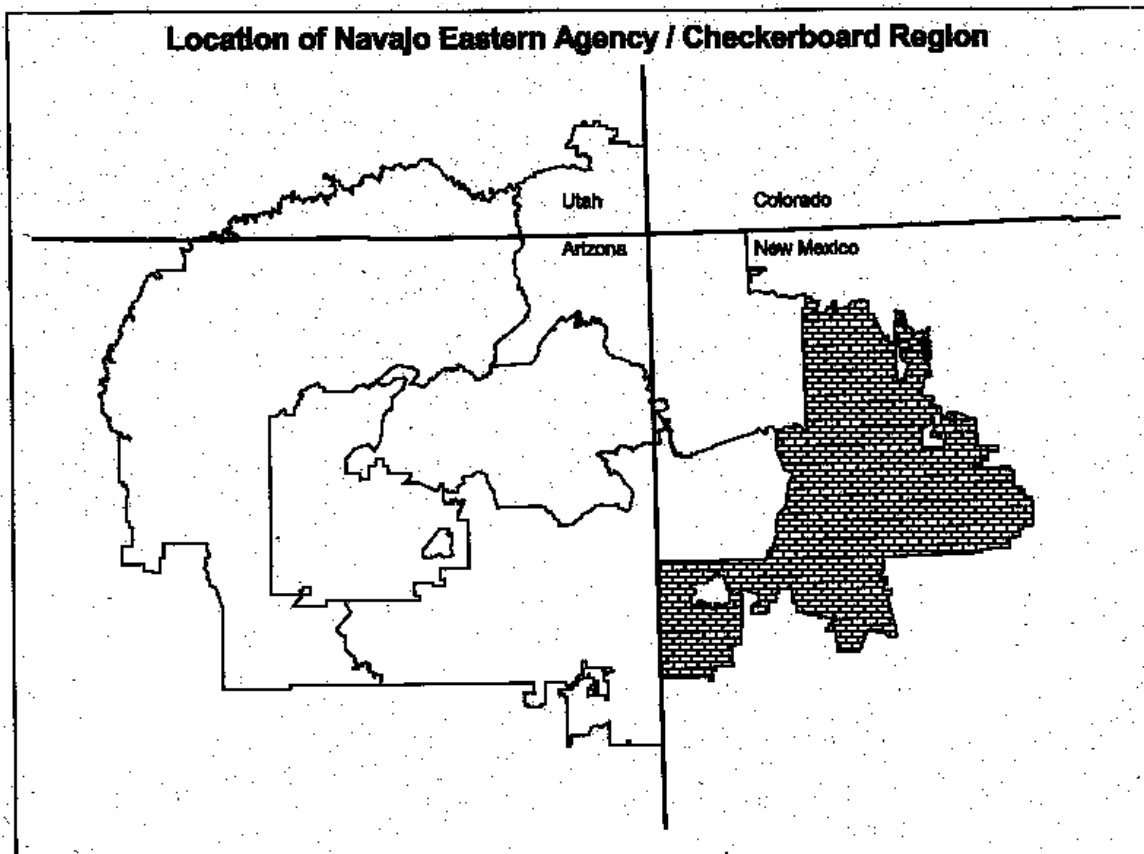
However, within these boundaries, there are eight separate land ownership categories, ranging from private, federal, state, to tribal lands. The checkered pattern of land holdings began in 1868 with the return of the remaining Navajos from Fort Sumner to their traditional lands.

During the next 140 years, numerous Executive Orders and Public Land Orders exchanged, bought, assigned and reassigned the land base while additional areas were homesteaded. These

actions created the Checkerboard as it looks today.

The BLM is responsible for approximately 23% of the land base and issues 40 permits to the Navajo Nation for grazing privileges on the intermingled BLM land. In turn, the Navajo Nation authorizes the BIA to issue grazing permits to individual Navajo permittees. These grazing permits include all land ownership types within their boundaries.

There are 945 BIA permits in the same area that the BLM permits cover, plus on the BIA permits, there are usually two to three grazing permittees per permit. Confused yet?



The idea. To write one Environmental Assessment (EA) that would cover the entire Checkerboard area, address all ownerships, obtain information from both Federal agencies and the Navajo Nation and get everyone to talk to each other and then work together.

This EA would be a broad brush document giving generalities, not specifics. The document would then serve as a base for future range improvement projects implemented on the Checkerboard. In these individual project EAs, site specific information would be presented.

Implementation. The BLM wanted to find someone knowledgeable about the area and BIA policies, who would work with individuals from all participating agencies and believes inter-agency cooperation isn't a pipe-dream.

Plus, the person must believe that agency boundaries, real and/or imagined, are not 'carved in granite' when it comes to management opportunities. It would be important for the person to think 'out-of-the-box' and believe that working together is a more efficient way of doing things.

Then, they must be able to convince others that the idea and product will work and will save them many hours, as well as dollars, of needless duplication in the future.

In the spring of 2000, I worked with the BLM, Farmington Field Office, Resource personnel to see if the Checkerboard Range EA project was an attainable goal. We thought it was an excellent idea to build a base document that could be used the next time someone needed to write an EA for a specific range project on the Checkerboard.

We believed the project would work and were willing to push for the project with the BIA and the Navajo Nation. This conviction provided the basis to do the job and to break through many agency and personal barriers. The BLM and BIA decided I would be a dual employee for several months to research and write an EA.

The results. The EA was written and passed all the necessary require-

ments. The grazing permits have been issued to the Navajo Nation. The BLM, BIA and Navajo Nation can now use this EA as a base document and tier to it when they do range projects within the area.

Time and money have been saved by cooperation and planning. Besides that, three separate governmental agencies have talked and cooperated. Not bad results for a few months work.

General conclusions from the process. 1) Compiling information on an area and the procedures involved vary only slightly from agency to agency. Every agency and government has files for reference, and competent professionals who know their area resources.

The best way to gather information from people or agencies, is to present yourself in person and explain your request. It helps to let them know how important their input is for the document. This should not be a difficult task. Often, more than one visit is necessary.

A little extra effort can produce excellent results and a good working relationship with other agencies and personnel. You should acknowledge active participants in the Consultation and Coordination or List of Participants sections of the EA.

2) My biggest challenge was convincing some of the BLM employees that this EA was to include the entire Checkerboard and not just the public domain (BLM) lands. I am not sure some were ever convinced they should consider impacts outside their agency area.

This is not a problem with just this BLM office. All agencies and organizations tend to be tunnel-visioned and protective of their turf.

Employees have been conditioned to look only to their boundaries because they have 'no business' considering how their policy effects other lands and the people who use them. They must protect 'their' lands from jurisdictional infringement by other agencies. The undermining of this contrived barrier is a very good feeling.

3) Maps are important in any EA.

Charts and tables work well. Again, these are found in all agencies and should be used for clarification.

It does not matter who the chart 'belongs' to, it contains information that needs to be presented for public knowledge and to support the document. Occasionally the boundaries will not match. These discrepancies should be corrected, either as part of the EA or afterwards.

4) The NEPA legislation allows for public protests and appeals on every EA completed. Protests and/or appeals to any EA are expected. A general EA will be no different. The process of answering protests or appeals remain the same regardless of the size and scope of as EA.

In our case, there was one protest letter from an environmental organization. It was a standard form letter they use on protests.

5) Above all else, it doesn't matter who gets the credit as long as the document is written and approved. This is one of the most difficult things to convince the agencies and supervisors to accept.

There will be a lead agency – in this case the BLM—but all parties should be acknowledged for their participation. Someone, usually the author of the document, will be designated as the responsible person to answer questions, protests, appeals about the document or accept the blame. But, that part of the responsibility is always there regardless of who writes the EA or the extent of the EA.

In the end, I reaffirmed that Cooperation really works!

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