

Conflict Resolution at Work

The Situation

Critical habitat designations for the endangered salmon, steelhead and bull trout have increased the pressure to monitor riparian areas. Public land grazers throughout the Pacific Northwest are affected by this increased need to know how we are managing these riparian areas. Producers and agency personnel along the Salmon River corridor and its tributaries in Custer County have worked very hard in a cooperative manner to meet the guidelines established by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in their efforts to save these listed species. Little did we know that the collaboration and communication that was occurring here was not happening elsewhere. Nor did we know that progress towards saving these species was not uniformly occurring in all areas.

Our first indication that things were not going smoothly came with the Biological Opinions issued by NMFS and USFWS for salmon, steelhead and bull trout. The Biological Opinions directed the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to develop a mechanism to improve their monitoring accountability and oversight of riparian areas. The need for such a mechanism arose from the lack of meaningful data, data in a form that could be interpreted, or no data at all for the regulatory agencies to determine if progress toward re-establishing these threatened or endangered species was occurring.

Guidance was to be provided by an Interagency Implementation Team (IIT). The goals established were 1) to improve monitoring efforts and increase efficiency; 2) to ensure that the level of monitoring is commensurate with the level of on-the-ground activities; and 3) to provide feedback on the effects of activities (primarily grazing) on the riparian areas.

The implementation module, the first of three to be developed to meet these goals, was designed to provide a consistent protocol for land management agencies to collect and report results of short-term (annual) monitoring on grazing allotments. The module was intended to more efficiently meet monitoring requirements and provide scientifically credible results while minimizing additional workloads.

Our Response

Reviewing an in-house copy of the Grazing Implementation Monitoring Module raised several concerns. Among those concerns expressed were: 1) permittees were mandated to monitor their own allotments; 2) communication between the permittee and the land manager was not to occur; 3) the checklist was "black and white," with no latitude for flexibility by on-the-ground personnel; and 4) the process was aimed at those areas in noncompliance to the detriment of those areas doing a good job. To address these concerns and to develop an alternative to the proposed six-step process, invitations were sent to key individuals.

Twenty six individuals, representing a broad spectrum of interests, including ranchers, county government, the Challis Experimental Stewardship Program, Morgan Creek, Squaw Creek and East Fork Grazing Associations, the Idaho Department of Agriculture, the Salmon-Challis National Forest, the Challis and Lemhi Resource Areas of the BLM, the Custer and Lemhi Soil Conservation Districts, the Idaho Wool Growers Association, the Idaho Cattle Association, the Lemhi Land Use Planning Committee, the Model Watershed Project, the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Custer County Extension, NMFS and USFWS attended. During the meeting, our initial concerns and observations were confirmed by the regulatory agency representatives present. It was also determined that the efforts being put forth in our area exceeded those being sought in the proposed six-step module. Further, it was felt that the proposal would be an added burden, not a minimization of workloads for both the agency personnel and permittees.

Also of concern was the additional cost to the permittee for the “mandatory” monitoring. The estimated time to accomplish the monitoring is a minimum of three days per allotment with most permittees having both FS and BLM allotments. Combined, there are approximately 320 allotments in the Salmon-Challis Forest and Challis and Lemhi Resource Areas of BLM. At an estimated minimum cost of \$50.00 per day, this amounts to \$48,000.00 in additional expense! When this is expanded to all the allotments covered by these biological opinions (essentially all of Idaho, Washington, Oregon and part of Montana), the additional expense really begins to mount.

Achievements

Not being satisfied with offering criticism without offering a solution, the group developed an alternative six-step proposal. The alternative was designed to meet the needs of the regulatory agencies, maintain open communications between the land managers and permittees, remove the mandatory monitoring requirement, and provide the needed accountability. Our alternative was submitted to the Chair of the Interagency Implementation Team and was adopted almost word for word! I am sure we were not the only ones making comments or offering alternative suggestions, but we will take at least some of the credit for offering a solution that furthers cooperation, collaboration and communication between the public land manager, the regulatory agencies and the permittee.

The Future

The requirement for mandatory monitoring by the permittee on all grazing allotments as a condition of the permit is only a matter of time. Forest Service regulations currently call for permittee monitoring to be a part of all permit renewals. As a 10-year permit expires and is subsequently renewed, permittee monitoring of their allotments will become a condition of their permit. Our efforts bought some time to educate the federal land grazer before mandatory monitoring requirements are enacted.

For More Information

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