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United States Department of the Interior



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OCT 09 2020

PUBLIC CONSULTATION FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA RENO GUND RANCH PROPOSED DROUGHT RESPONSE ACTIONS MOUNT LEWIS FIELD OFFICE

Dear Interested Public:

This public consultation letter describes the proposed action to authorize a grazing agreement for the 2021 grazing year that has been developed between BLM and University of Nevada, Reno (UNR Gund Ranch) to address drought conditions and mitigate impacts from drought.

The Grass Valley Allotment is situated between the Toiyabe and Simpson Park Mountain Ranges, with the Cortez Mountain Range as the northern boundary. The southern portion of the Allotment is located within Lander County, approximately 15 miles north-east of Austin, Nevada. The northern portion of the Allotment is located in both Lander and Eureka Counties, approximately 20 miles south-east of Crescent Valley, Nevada. There are approximately 288,618 acres administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) within the allotment.

The Grass Valley Allotment is located within Greater Sage-Grouse Priority Habitat Management area (PHMA), General Habitat Management Area (GHMA), and Other Habitat Management Area (OHMA). The Grass Valley Allotment contains a portion of the Callaghan and Rocky Hills Herd Management Areas (HMAs) on the west side of the Allotment, however management will not be modified by this proposed drought response action (DRA) in these HMAs. Significant riparian ecosystems and native intact rangeland within the Simpson Park Mountain Ranges occur within the Grass Valley Allotments.

In May 2020, the MLFO was notified by UNR's Gund Ranch manager, Jon Wilker, that drought conditions were being experienced throughout the pastures that UNR Gund Ranch operates. During a field visit in May 2020, visual observations by MLFO Range Staff indicated drought impacts, particularly in the mountain pastures (Pine Mountain and Moonshine). Additional drought monitoring was collected in August 2020, to confirm drought conditions were present throughout the growing season, with lack of water and vegetation with low vigor being the major concern. Due to lack of water availability, UNR Gund Ranch removed cattle from public lands early to prevent adverse impacts to riparian areas. Going into the 2021 grazing year, DRAs will be needed to address and prevent undesirable use patterns on the riparian systems.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor (droughtmonitor.unl.edu), as of September 29, 2020, 79% of the state of Nevada is experiencing severe drought, with the entirety of the Grass Valley allotment identified as extreme drought (See map below). Similarly, Vegetation Drought Response (vegdrv.unl.edu), as of October 4, 2020, confirms that Grass Valley allotment is experiencing severe to extreme drought conditions. PrISM climate group data demonstrates that compared to long-term data (1981-2010), monthly precipitation is on average 66% ($\pm 8.5\%$) less between October 2019 to August 2020 (Fig. 1). The Mount Lewis Field Office (MLFO) is proposing to implement DRAs analyzed in the Battle Mountain Drought Management Environmental Assessment (EA #DOI-BLM-NV-B0000-2012-0005-EA).

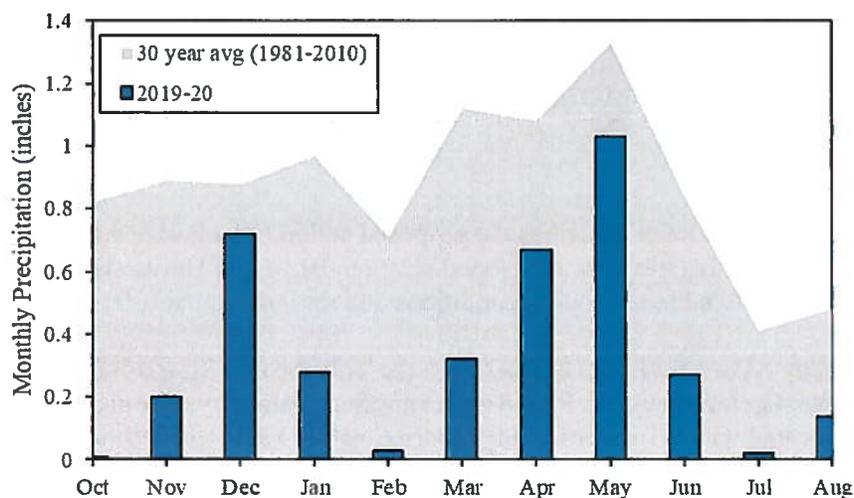


Figure 1. A comparison of 2019-2020 monthly precipitation levels to long-term averages (1981-2010) at UNR Gund Ranch. Data was derived from models produced by PRISM climate group, Oregon State University <http://prism.oregonstate.edu>, obtained July 29, 2020.

In order to address natural resource changes associated with drought conditions experienced this year and the potential for similar conditions next year, as well as concerns for Greater Sage-Grouse, and riparian ecosystems, temporary changes to the grazing permit terms and conditions are needed for UNR Gund Ranch. The MLFO proposes to modify the season of use within the UNR Gund Ranch's Use Areas within the Grass Valley Allotment to defer use of riparian systems in the mountain pastures (Pine Mountain and Moonshine) during the hot season (July 1st – September 30th). Furthermore, the ranch proposes to modify the season of use in its other three use areas, effectively shifting to consistent, dormant season grazing in the Cowboy Flat and Hot Springs use areas and dormant to early growth season grazing in the Walti use area. This proposed DRA will reduce adverse impacts to critical riparian resources as reduced vigor and period of growth in key forage species in upland communities pushes livestock into riparian areas.

The proposed DRA was developed in collaboration with the UNR Gund Ranch and the MLFO. As a result of this effort, a grazing application was submitted by UNR Gund Ranch and will implement drought response actions for resource protection and recovery, in conformance with BLM drought policy (BLM Handbook H-1730-1, IM 2013-094). The season of use associated with the proposed modifications are outside of the terms and conditions of UNR Gund Ranch's Term Grazing Permit, a grazing decision is required. A Determination of NEPA Adequacy

(DNA) to the Battle Mountain District Drought Management Environmental Assessment (EA #DOI-BLM-NV-B0000-2012-0005-EA) will be completed prior to the issuance of a Final Decision.

Proposed Drought Response Actions

1. Approve the 2021 Grazing Application submitted by the UNR Gund Ranch for the 2021 grazing season.
2. Temporarily modify the terms and conditions of the UNR Gund Ranch Term Grazing Permit. This proposed action will be effective grazing year 2021 and will remain in effect for the duration of drought plus one growing season.

From:

UNR Gund Ranch Cattle Rotation under the 2002 FMUD^{1/}

Pasture	AUMs	No. of Head	Even Years		Odd Years	
			Begin	End	Begin	End
Walti ^{2/}	88	86	5/1	5/31	5/1	5/31
Pine Mountain	405	411	6/1	6/30	7/1	8/15
Moonshine	622	411	7/1	8/15	6/1	6/30
Cowboy Flat	622	114	4/1	5/31	8/16	11/30
Hot Springs	1,311	411	10/1	1/5	10/1	1/5

^{1/} The main cattle herd is not turned out onto BLM ground until June 1 under the FMUD rotation.

^{2/} The Walti Pasture is used for a small herd of replacement heifers from year-to-year.

To:

UNR Gund Ranch Proposed Cattle Rotation

Pasture	AUMs (Not to Exceed)	Even Years		Odd Years	
		Begin	End	Begin	End
Walti ^{1/}	88	3/1	3/31	3/1	3/31
Pine Mountain ^{2/}	405	4/1	6/30	4/1	6/30
Moonshine ^{2/}	622	4/1	6/30	4/1	6/30
Cowboy Flat	622	9/15	1/1	9/15	1/1
Hot Springs	1,311	9/15	1/1	9/15	1/1

^{1/} The Walti Pasture is used for a small herd of replacement heifers from year-to-year.

^{2/} A minimum of 30 days deferment during the month of April would be given to each pasture on alternating years to provide adequate recovery time for forage species.

Other Terms & Conditions:

1. Actual livestock numbers and AUMs will be discussed and approved by the BLM's authorized officer prior to turnout dates.
2. The AUMs associated with each use area will not exceed the permitted AUMs.
3. Implement the following within season of use triggers for Walti, Pine Mountain, Moonshine, Cowboy Flat and Hot Springs pastures within the Grass Valley allotment and require that livestock be removed within 7 days from areas meeting the triggers:
 - Salt Desert Shrub - 25% utilization of key species
 - Sagebrush Grassland - 30% utilization of key species
 - Pinyon-Juniper Woodland - 30% utilization of key species
 - Mountain Shrub - 30% utilization of key species
 - Riparian Zones – Four inch stubble height of key riparian species

If triggers are met, livestock will be moved to the next location in the rotation or taken to private pasture. If livestock are moved to the next pasture in the rotation early, the scheduled dates will shift forward accordingly.

4. This decision will remain in effect for the duration of drought plus one additional growing season.

Rationale

Water sources on the Pine Mountain and Moonshine pastures, within the Grass Valley allotment, are prone to producing little water or becoming dry completely by mid-summer under moderate drought conditions. Particularly during a severe or extreme drought, water may not be available for any part of the grazing duration on these pastures. Current management authorizes grazing from 6/1-6/30 and 7/1-8/15 with the order of grazing alternating every other year. Additionally, to allow for breeding on private grounds, the UNR Gund Ranch typically moves their cattle from the mountain pastures by June 30th to private pastures. This is a practice that they implemented during a previous drought decision and have continued to employ. The extended period of time their cattle are spending on private pastures in the spring and late summer comes at a financial cost and negatively impacts their private land resources.

The UNR Gund Ranch has applied for this DRA for the duration of drought and one additional growing season and for their grazing rotation to be changed to 4/1-6/30 for the Pine Mountain and Moonshine Pastures. Alternating every year, either the Moonshine or Pine Mountain Pastures will be deferred for a minimum of 30 days in April. Removing livestock from the mountain pastures 45 days earlier than permitted will allow for beneficial growing season deferment in sensitive riparian systems. Furthermore, the ranch proposes to modify the season of use in its other three use areas, effectively shifting to consistent, dormant season grazing in the

Cowboy Flat and Hot Springs use areas and dormant to early growth season grazing in the Walti use area.

In addition to remote sensing, field observations by MLFO and UNR Gund Ranch found drought conditions within the Grass Valley Allotment to be present, particularly within the Pine Mountain and Moonshine pastures. Not only is water scarcity an issue in these pastures, vegetation appears to have low vigor. Most bunchgrasses observed in the mountain pastures seemed to only be moderately grazed. According to the ranch manager, Jon Wilker, 2020 is the driest year he has seen those pastures in over a decade. He also informed MLFO staff that many of the water sources within the mountain pastures can typically support cattle into the hot season, but this season they have either stopped producing water by mid to late spring or did not produce water at all.

Proper use of range forage allows plants to survive dry periods, recover quickly and provide cover to protect soil and promote water infiltration (Hanselka and White 1986). The degree to which drought impairs the range depends on the intensity, frequency, and timing of grazing (Howery 1999). To survive, perennial plants must accumulate both above-ground (shoot growth) and below-ground (root growth) biomass through the process of photosynthesis, transpiration, and respiration (Howery 1999). Excessive removal of above-ground biomass during the growing season (such as through overgrazing) reduces root growth. A healthy root system is paramount in the growth of any range plant, especially during dry years, when competition for nutrients is most severe (Bedell and Ganskopp 1980).

Seasonal deferment of livestock grazing from growing season to fall dormancy allows greater distribution and uniformity of use on the range, due to the similarity of forage quality among mature plants (Bailey 2005, DelCurto et al. 1999). When cattle use is deferred to the fall, cattle spend more time in upland plant communities and less time grazing riparian plant communities (Parsons et al. 2003). Fall grazing allows less targeted grazing on riparian plant species and upland plant species in close proximity to riparian systems.

This letter serves as the opportunity for the interested public, partners, and state, local, and tribal governments to provide comments on proposed drought response actions that will be implemented within the Grass Valley Allotment. Please submit any comments in writing to the above address by November 7, 2020 (30 days from the date posted on this letter). If you have any questions, please contact Rhett Anderson, Rangeland Management Specialist at (775) 635-4193 or email at rmanderson@blm.gov.

Sincerely,



Jon D. Sherve
Field Manager
Mount Lewis Field Office

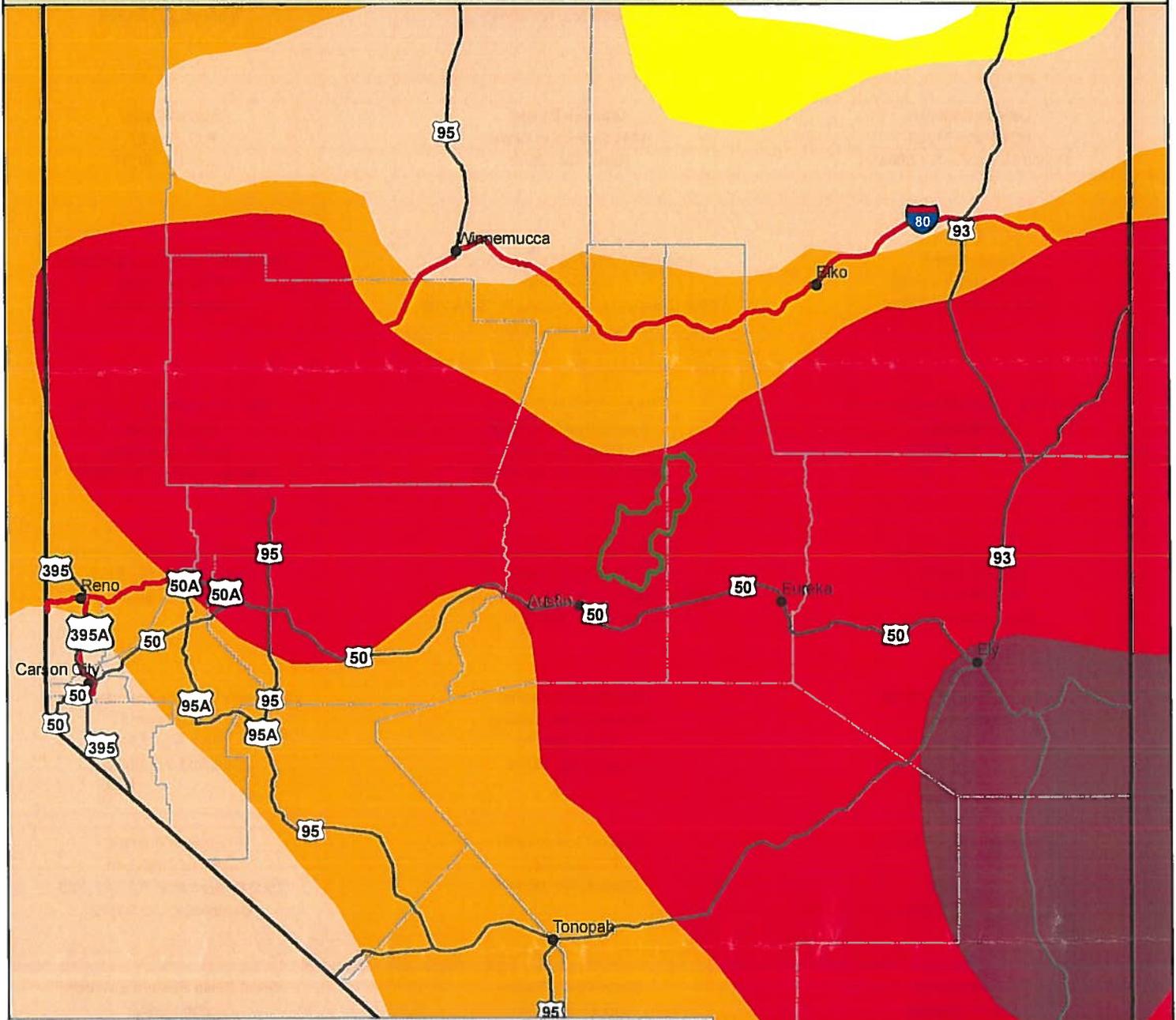
cc:

State Director, Nevada (NV-930)

Enclosures:

US Drought Monitor Map

List of Interested Public



US Drought Monitor - 9/29/2020
 Grass Valley Allotment

Legend

- Cities & Towns
- US Highways
- Interstates
- ▭ State Boundary
- ▭ Grass Valley Allotment
- ▭ County Boundary

U.S. Drought Monitor Intensity

- Yellow: D0 Abnormally Dry
- Light Orange: D1 Moderate Drought
- Orange: D2 Severe Drought
- Red: D3 Extreme Drought
- Dark Red: D4 Exceptional Drought

Developed by the National Drought Mitigation Center (NDMC), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data. This product was developed through digital means and may be updated without notification.

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