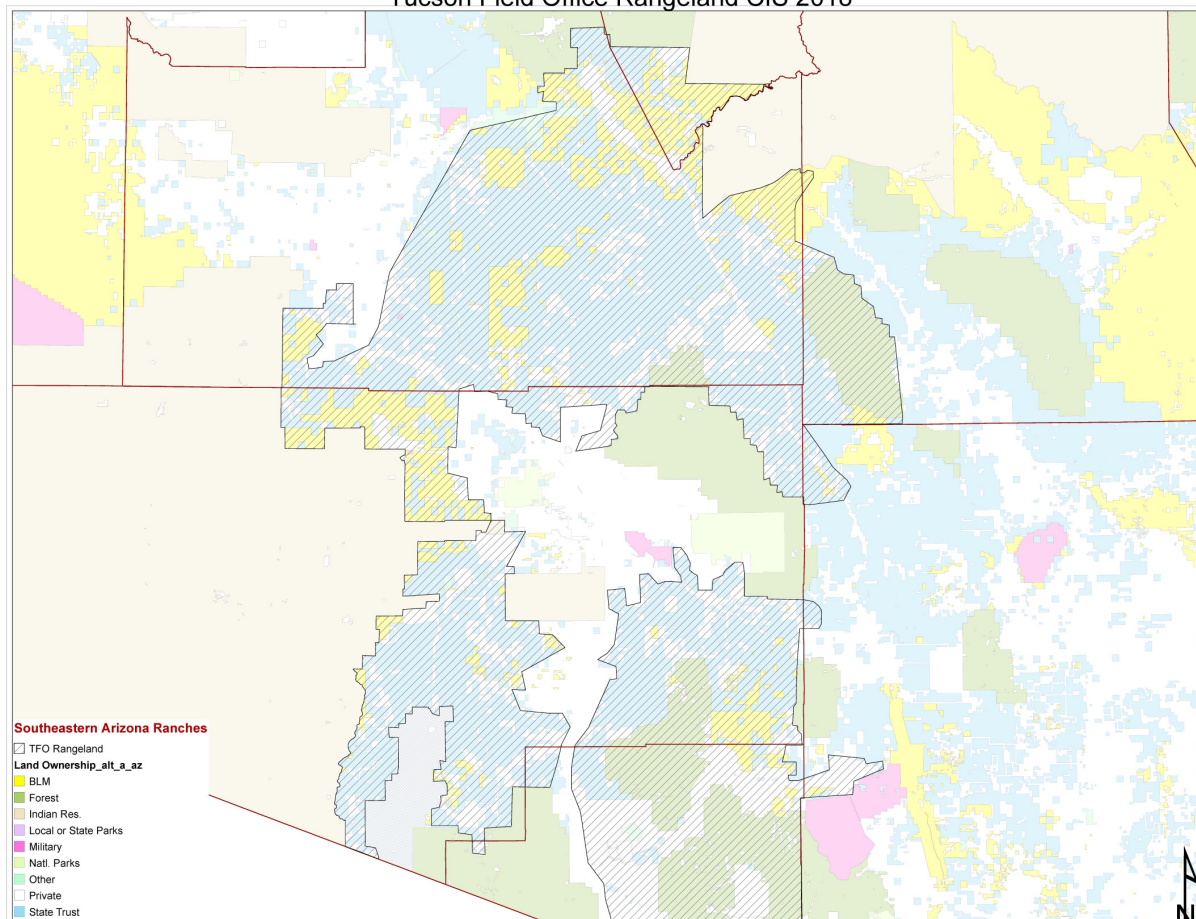


**TUCSON FIELD OFFICE RANGELAND WATER QUANTITY AND
DEGRADED PLANT CONDITION IMPROVEMENT IMPLEMENTATION
STRATEGY**

**PIMA, SANTA CRUZ AND PINAL COUNTY,
ARIZONA
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM
2018-2020**

Tucson Field Office Rangeland CIS 2018



Goal

The goal of this implementation strategy is to provide for greater water quantity for livestock and wildlife as well as to provide practices such as fencing and brush management to develop and maintain functioning prescribed grazing systems on these area ranches. Ranches average 25,000 acres with some as small as 5,000 acres and some as large as 130,000 acres. Given this size, providing and maintaining water supplies is critical. This goal will be reached through cooperative project development and implementation between landowners and local partners to maximize positive benefits and decrease negative impacts.

Overview

The entire Tucson Field Office (TFO) work area is approximately 4,570,903 acres. Land use in the area is dominated by cattle production in the uplands and agricultural production (livestock pasture) in the valley bottoms. Crop production dominates in Marana, northwest of Tucson and mainly along the Santa Cruz River north and south of Tucson and the Gila and San Pedro River floodplains. Private cropland makes up only about 10% of the ownership in the area. Large portions of the Santa Cruz River Watershed are included. This watershed has much of the developed area including the cities of Tucson, Nogales, Green Valley, Sahuarita and Marana. The Gila and San Pedro watersheds are also important to the area as water mitigation sources. All watersheds contribute as a primary ground water source for the cities of Tucson and Phoenix.

The majority of land under cattle production is private, public, State Trust and tribal ownership. This strategy focuses on implementation of conservation practices on approximately 3.9 million acres of rangeland within three Conservation Districts; Pima, Santa Cruz and Winkelman. The goal is to improve water quantity for livestock and wildlife and to enhance plant productivity through fencing and brush management. Working with land owners and other partners to improve water quantity on rangeland will enhance resource conditions through projects and education on best conservation practices.

The rangeland in the TFO supports populations of deer, javalina, antelope, and small game. It is home to sensitive species and endangered species such as pima pineapple cactus, cactus feriginous pummy owl, southwest willow flycatcher, and jaguar. Pima County, in fact, has identified 44 species of concern in their Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. Many areas are known for birdwatching, especially hummingbirds of which 5 species occur in this area. Ecotourism for birders is important mostly in the southern areas of Santa Cruz County.

The past 10-15 years have been especially droughthy in this part of the state and livestock and wildlife waters have been effected greatly. Most natural springs have gone completely dry, and over 50% of the perennial dirt ponds have not held any water for at least 10 years. Ponds that had been reliable for decades are now dry for 9 months or more and only fill during sporadic monsoonal summer rains. New, reliable sources of water for livestock and wildlife are the primary needs in order to keep the livestock operations functioning and to keep the rural economy and lifestyle viable.

This is the first year of this strategy. The TFO rangeland area was selected based on multiple factors including landowner interest, recent history of practice implementation, water quantity needs due to

droughth, general range condition, overlapping local partner priorities, current NRCS staffing and needed financial assistance for projects. Crop and irrigated pasture make up a small percent of the land. EQIP applications on these lands have been sparse and can be funded with Air Quality funding. Therefore, are not a priority here.

Objectives

The following measurable objectives are:

Acres of land treated:

Increase the acres of land serviced by reliable permanent water for wildlife and cattle by 100,000 acres by 2020.

Improved Grazing Rotations:

Implement new or improved prescribed grazing plans on 10 ranches by 2020.

Alternatives

1. No action – Allow assistance to landowners from other groups to continue without involvement from the NRCS.
2. Limit planning effort to smaller geographical areas (subwatersheds).
3. Include the entire area of the TFO rangeland in the planning area. (preferred alternative)

Alternative 3 was selected as the best option for achieving the goal. The Pima, Santa Cruz and Winkelman NRCDs have equal interest in this strategy based on the Local Work Group input in April of 2017. Resource Conservation Planning Program (RCPP) applications have to be focused on subwatershed areas, providing that level of project assessment and development. With the other partners open to work in the larger area the partners have the flexibility to address concerns where they occur, access different funding sources, and respond to landowner interest in a timely fashion.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) considerations

There are no out of the ordinary NEPA considerations that are known. Over 50% of the work area has been evaluated previously via BLM, USFS, Pima County Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan and NRCS project evaluations. All new projects will be evaluated as needed. Cultural Resource review will be done in compliance with NRCS policy for all undertakings, according to the National Historic Preservation Act. Survey for threatened and endangered plants will be conducted as needed where species are known to occur.

Preferred Alternative and Proposed Actions

The solution is to involve landowners and conservation partners to reach the common goal. The solution will:

- promote partnership,
- build on existing strong relationships,
- assist landowners to achieve individual land management goals,
- spread the work load,
- promote access to multiple sources of funds and technical assistance
- improve the water quantity and degraded plant condition in the TFO Rangeland Area

Issues will be addressed on a site by site basis through the development of conservation plans for the properties of participating landowners. Project funding will be drawn from several sources.

Partner Funding and Support Sources:

The Pima, Santa Cruz and Winkelman Conservation Districts will begin focusing on the TFO rangeland area for 2018-2020 and assess progress at annual Local Work Group meetings. They will provide outreach via newsletters and workshops as needed. Santa Cruz NRCD provided 3 workshops in 2017 regarding this outreach.

USDA NRCS EQIP will be used where appropriate to treat concerns on eligible lands.

Arizona Land and Water Trust has secured an RCPP for the Babacomari and Sonoita Creek watersheds with funding through 2021 for projects that impact the Fort Huachuca area.

Arizona Game and Fish Department has been accepted for a full proposal for RCPP in 2017 for projects in the TFO rangeland area which impact antelope and grassland species habitat in the area.

US Fish and Wildlife Service has funding to assist in their Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to provide funding for water projects in the area.

USFS has periodic funding for fencing and other water developments on their lands. They conduct all NEPA related activities. The Nogales and Sierra Vista Ranger Districts work under the Coronado National Forest Plan. Funding is also available for urban interface forested lands.

BLM has periodic funding for fencing, brush management and water developments on their lands through their Range Betterment Fund. They utilize the Empire Ranch Planning Group to update the Resource Management Plan for the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. The Lower San Pedro Watershed Initiative coalition is in the area as well. NRCS and other partners coordinate on these updates and partnerships.

Altar Valley Conservation Alliance has private funding sources including grants, private donations and in kind services to improve the make range improvements.

Other funding sources and partners to that have assisted in the past and/or potential for the future include Salt River Project, Bureau of Reclamation, Arizona State Forestry and Fire Division, ASARCO, ADEQ, and Resolution Copper Company.

Applicable NRCS conservation practices that may be used:

Watering Facility
Pipeline
Well
Pump
Water Harvesting Catchment
Spring Development
Fence
Prescribed Grazing
Brush Management

Implementation of practices under this strategy begins in 2018, and continues for three years. Each year, through community involvement, interest will be assessed to be certain that the need and desire for this type of technical and financial assessment is still present. If there is still a need, the strategy could be extended beyond a three year span. Based on an average contract cost of \$40,000, the strategy seeks to fund 10 contracts the first year, and 10 each succeeding year, for a total financial investment from NRCS of about \$1,200,000. The request for the first year is \$400,000.

Evaluation and Accomplishments

NRCS funding is subject to approvals at the Area and State level. Progress reporting will follow standard NRCS guidelines and requirements. Annual Contract Reviews are required by NRCS. Long term monitoring is used by the TFO on most ranches to assess plant productivity and cover which includes livestock actual use and precipitation data which ranchers provide. Reports are generated for each rancher. A summery report will be provided to the Local Work Group and NRCS State Range Specialist for his annual reporting. Monitoring of on the ground progress and status reviews will be completed by the partners as required by the funding entity and sufficient enough to determine success and efficacy of the treatments.

This is the first year of this strategy. Currently, we have 7 applicants for the program for 2018. Total financial requests are not known yet. We have 2 applicants for RCPP ALWT funding for 2018 as well.

This strategy will be reassessed in late 2018 to ascertain if the 3 year plan is still viable and revised as appropriate based on funding and applications for assistance received.