

# Telegraph Fire

## Recreation and Wilderness Resource Assessment

### I. Objectives

- Inventory and assess the effects of fire and suppression actions and implications to recreation facilities, Wilderness Study Area (WSA), and Wild and Scenic River
- Specify emergency stabilization and rehabilitation measures to mitigate fire and suppression impacts
- Assess the effects of fire and suppression actions on recreation opportunities at risk
- Prescribe emergency stabilization and rehabilitation measures and/or monitoring

### II. Issues

- Fire impacts to recreation sites and facilities
- Potential threat from hazard trees in Merced River Recreation Area, Merced River Trail and North Fork Merced River Trail
- Potential damage to vegetation rehabilitation ,and increased erosion due to Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) Use
- Potential landslides may close access to Merced River Recreation Area

### III. Observations

#### A. Background

The purpose of the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) Recreation Assessment is to document the effects of the fire, suppression activities, and proposed rehabilitation work to the developed and dispersed recreation resources on the BLM administered lands associated with the Telegraph Fire. Almost all of the Merced River Special Recreation Area is within the burned area. There are three campgrounds, one visitor center, two private property inholdings (with homes), one government housing structure, and associated utilities within or adjacent to the burned area. The Telegraph Fire burned portions of the Merced River Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), Merced River Wilderness Study Area (WSA), Limestone Salamander ACEC, and Merced Wild and Scenic River (both Wild, and Recreational classifications).

#### B. Reconnaissance Methods and Results

On August 16, 2008, the BAER team assembled in Mariposa to begin the assessment process. The team was able to drive to many high points within and adjacent to the burn for overviews of the area. In addition, the team traveled into all of the major drainages to inspect the severity of the burn. The following drainages were explored extensively on foot: Sherlock Creek, Halls Gulch, North Fork Merced, and the main stem Merced River.

## C. Findings

### 1. Developed Recreation Area

*Briceburg Visitor Center and Day Use Area*-This area did not burn and was undamaged by the fire. The fire did not burn the south side of the Merced River in this area and therefore there are no anticipated issues at this location.

*Briceburg Bridge*- The bridge was unburned and unaffected.

*Briceburg Government Housing*-This structure was protected during suppression efforts. A hand line was created to back burn from and protect the triangular-shaped area underneath the first switchback of the Burma Grade. This successfully saved the two homes (one government and one private), water storage tanks, microwave telephone tower, electrical lines, public water tap, information kiosk, and newly drilled well. The only damage was to the water delivery pipes from the spring to the tanks; which were burned. This area is located directly below the Burma Grade/Bull Creek Road which leads up a very steep slope. It is anticipated that runoff and rockfall will increase at this location due to the absence of vegetation which was burned in the fire.

*McCabe Flat Campground*-Although the fire burned right up to the northern boundary of the campground, no damage was sustained in the campground or to any of the facilities. The viewshed is largely burned now.

*Willow Placer Campground*-The fire burned up to the campground road, but not into the campground itself. One speed limit sign was consumed. No other damage was sustained.

*Railroad Flat Campground*- The fire burned up to the campground road, but not into the campground itself. No other damage was sustained.

*Railroad Flat Boating Takeout*-No damage was observed. A potential issue here is that the Merced River Campground Access Road may be damaged or blocked due to rockfall/landslide. In which case, access to this take-out facility would be lost.

*Merced River Trail*-No damage was sustained to the trailhead, shade kiosk at Hall's Gulch, or the Hall's Gulch Bridge. Several trees have fallen over the trail and some hazard trees are still standing within reach of the trail.

*Merced River Campground Access Road*-Some rock and debris had fallen on the road when the fire was active and has been cleared. Immediate hazard trees have already been cleared. The road, and all three campgrounds are now open. Several additional hazard trees exist. This road is the only vehicle access to the residences (2 private, and one government), campgrounds and Merced River Trail. Prior to the fire, this road experienced rockfall/landslides each winter during storm events that resulted in short term road closures (up to a few weeks in heavy rain years). It is reasonably expected that the runoff will be greater and the rockfall more severe during the first few years following the fire.

## 2. Dispersed Recreation Areas

*Merced River Wilderness Study Area*-This unit is managed under the Interim Management Policy and guidelines For Lands under Wilderness Review H-8550-1 and is thus managed to the “nonimpairment Standard”. The origin of the fire was on or immediately adjacent to the WSA. Roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the WSA was burned. Many ways and routes exist within the WSA. Before the fire, these ways and routes were effectively armored by thick brush. Many routes were partially blocked by brush and others were completely covered and concealed by brush. Now virtually all ways and routes are completely free from brush and plainly visible. There is a significant threat that motor vehicles will enter the WSA, ride on existing routes, and go beyond the existing routes because there is no brush or other physical barriers. This could lead to the spread of noxious weeds and harm the recovery of native vegetation critical to maintaining non-impairment. Such use has already been noted in our field observations since the fire.



6 foot berm with brush (looking south)

The other side of same berm.

Notice the motorcycle track already in each photo.

*Merced Wild and Scenic River*-Approximately fourteen miles of the river corridor were burned: about 8 miles were burned on both sides of the river and an additional six miles were burned only on the north (river right) side of the river. Burn severity was generally less as you get closer to the river and riparian zone. The Merced River Campground Access Road effectively acted as a fuel break for long sections on the north side of the river. However, some spot fires did jump this road. The fire did burn the entire length of the Wild section downstream from the Mountain King Mine (private inholding near Railroad Flat that includes a significant portion of Quartz Mountain).

Some of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which the river was designated have been affected by the fire, or have significant probability to be affected. It is believed that the limestone salamanders would have survived the fire event, but increased erosion may degrade some of their habitat. No mitigation treatment have been identified that would have a high probability of success in protecting the habitat and the degradation of habitat is not foreseen to

be severe. The cultural resources related to mining, including the old flume system that provided power to the Mountain King Mine was partially burned. Water quality is another ORV that will likely be affected. The duration of this degradation is believed to be short term.

OHV use has been increasing over the past five years and abuse has already been documented within the WSA; i.e. hill climbs in the North Fork Merced and trespass into the Wild River. Evidence of OHV abuse was noticed during our BAER team field assessment. Tracks were leading up the previously-mentioned hill climbs, and tracks lead through a substantial brush-berm closure that was installed as part of the Suppression Rehab phase. It is reasonably foreseen that OHV use will proliferate throughout the burned area and specifically in the WSA. Many of the previously brushed-in routes are now opened up and highly visible. This could lead to an invasion of noxious weeds, which in turn, will damage the native vegetation which is a critical element for WSA designation. An OHV staging area is located on USFS administered land approximately four miles north of the WSA boundary. BLM is working with the Groveland Ranger district, concurrent to the BAER process, to close down the Date Flat staging area.

#### IV. Recommendations

1. **Improve drainage and reduce erosion on Burma Grade** to protect homes and infrastructure located on the railroad grade below (Merced River Campground Access Road). Increase the size of culverts where possible and where preservation of historically significant rockwork allows such improvement.
2. **Improve drainage and reduce erosion on the Merced River Campground Access Road** in orders to provide access to recreation facilities and homes located on this road. Increase culvert size and or add additional culvert(s). This road was originally built as the Yosemite Valley Railroad and is one of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which the Merced Wild and Scenic River was designated.
3. Increase the availability of **heavy equipment to clear rockfall** and, or landslides along the Merced River Campground Access Road. On normal years this road experiences some rockfall that results in temporary closures—averaging one to two occurrences per year. It can be assumed that the post-fire condition will increase the number and severity of such events by a factor of two or three times. Therefore, approximately three to six road blocking rockfall events are anticipated. This would be approximately 2-4 more events than we have experienced from pre-fire condition. It is recommended that funding be available to hire a local operator with equipment to perform such clearing when it is needed, or have the funding to bring the Folsom BLM equipment down to the Merced River Special Recreation Area more frequently than has previously been available.
4. Conduct a **thorough hazard tree analysis and remove all hazards** within the campgrounds, along the Merced River Campground Access Road, and along the Merced River Trail including the North Fork Trail. This will reduce the threat to human safety throughout the Merced River Special Recreation Area.
5. **Install barrier closures** and or fencing to prevent access and prohibit the use of motor vehicles off of the main designated roads: Bull Creek Road (Burma Grade), Shilling Ranch

Road (Buckhorn Fuel Break), and Telegraph Hill Road. Motorized use on the spur roads radiating from the main designated roads would cause erosion of soils and impede the recovery of the burned area; especially were the absence of brush will allow users to go off of the previously established routes (pre-fire condition was a “brush armored” route system where routes were narrow and brushy and did not provide reasonable off trail use). This will help reduce erosion of soils and increase recovery of native vegetation. Many of the ways and routes proposed to be closed lead into the Merced River WSA, one leads to the Wild section of the Merced Wild and Scenic River, and others lead to parts of the Limestone Salamander ACEC and North Fork Merced Wild and Scenic Study River, two lead to critical heritage sites. By prohibiting access to these routes, we will be minimizing the spread of Noxious Weeds and improving the recovery of native vegetation. See Physical Barrier Table.

a. Brush Barricade Specifications:

- i. Brush barricades are to be constructed adjacent to the designated roads in order to block access to the burned area on routes that are not designated for motorized travel; see Physical Barrier Table and Treatment Map. The ideal outcome is that these barricades of dead brush will cover and conceal undesignated routes, and provide an impenetrable barrier to motor vehicles. This treatment will prevent surface disturbance, route proliferation, soil erosion, and the spread of noxious weeds.
- ii. These barricades should be constructed of heavy brush and woody material compacted and woven together so that the public can not remove the brush to get through the barricade. Trees should be integrated into the mix if available near the site. The brush should fill the entire width of the route and extend into any live brush or skeletons that remain along the edges of the route. The brushy material should extend for at least fifty (20) feet along proposed route and be (8-10) feet in height. Heavy equipment should be uses to harvest, transport, place, and construct these barriers so that they will not easily be dismantled by the public. Suitable locations will be determined and marked in the field where brush can be harvested. If any brush is available from nearby dozer lines, it should be used prior to removing live brush.

6. **Obliterate some routes** (or portions of routes) that provide access to archeology sites, already show heavy erosion, or were previously choked with brush. This treatment will be used in conjunction with the above barrier/closure treatment to increase its effectiveness in preventing erosion of soil and promote post-fire recovery of native vegetation. This treatment is in conformance with the current Sierra Resource Management Plan which limits motorized use to designated routes (Bull Creek Road (Burma Grade), Shilling Ranch Road (Buckhorn Fuel Break), and Telegraph Hill Road). See Physical Barrier Table and Treatment Map.

a. Rip Route Specification:

- i. Use dozer to rip up the roadbed of routes that are not designated for motorized travel. The purpose of this is to loosen the soil compaction so that native vegetation will regrow and recover within the burned area. Identified routes will be ripped a minimum of 200 feet from the intersection of the main designated road, some routes may be ripped their entire length; see Physical Barrier Table and Treatment Map
7. **Install signs** stating that the area is closed to motorized travel at all closures (see #5 above). Additional signs may need to be placed at locations where no suitable closure can be designed. See Physical Barrier Table and Treatment Map.
8. **Monitor and patrol** the burn area for three years to ensure treatments are successful and to show BLM management presence. This will require the creation of a term position or two seasonal employees in order to cover the full year-round need. The duties of the position would include the following: monitor closures for OHV trespass, monitor noxious weeds, monitor for livestock in trespass, monitor drainage treatments (culverts and mulching), and perform repairs or modification to treatments.

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BLM case # CA-018-S-TM-08/14

## Physical Barrier Table

### Locations where physical closures are proposed under the ES program

	<b>Location (see map)</b>	<b>Photo log</b>	<b>Name and treatment recommendations</b>
1	237050 m E 4166561 m N	0408-0410	Top of Burma Grade; build brush barricade and rip road
2	237223 m E 4168180 m N	N/A	Borrow Pit right-hand dead-end; fall gray pines, build brush barricade and rip road
3	237330 m E 4168366 m N	0411-0415	Upper Borrow Pit (closure is contingent on other closures to the north); brush barricade and rip road
4	237235 m E 4168239 m N	0416-0417	Borrow Pit shortcut; build brush barricade and fall knob cone pines
5	237832 m E 4168049 m N	0420-0422	New culvert road; install new culvert with tank trap, rip road, and build brush barricade
6	236216 m E 4168850 m N	4023-4024	Side hill re-contour; rip road, and build brush barricade
7	236196 m E 4168936 m N or 236160 m E 4169121 m N	4025-4029	Ponderosa Way split (near archaeological site); cover site with brush, rip and install water bars on steep OHV route
9	237864 m E 4169468 m N or 237806 m E 4169309 m N	4032-4033	Jenkins Hill Rd to Borrow Pit at BLM boundary; build brush barricade and rip road
10	238926 m E 4169967 m N	4034-4036	Bull Creek Rd to Jenkins Hill Rd spur; build brush barricade and rip road
12	235568 m E 4171092 m E	4041-4043	Bull Creek Rd to Black Mountain at Ponderosa Way (south of intersection leading down to mine); build brush barricade and rip road
13	762351 m E 4170604 m N	4044-4045	Quartz Mountain; build brush barricade (already mostly done by Dan Lusby) and rebuild 300 ft of wire fence (posts already in place)
16	760194 m E 4170760 m N	4049-4058	East Side Priority Trail; install gate for mining claimant, fall trees, and build brush barricade; may need 400 ft of wire fencing
18	760046 m E 4171009 m N	4061	Fireplace Spur; re-contour and build berm and build brush barricade
19	759999 m E 4171047 m N	0458-0463	Cut Switchback new fuel break; add brush and fall trees

20	760030 m E 4171043 m N	0464-0465	Ogella Road along the North Forth; build brush barricade and fall trees
21	759204 m E 4171251 m N	0469-0471	Upper Ogella Road; rip road and build brush barricade
23	758120 m E 4169591 m N	?	Landing Strip; add to the existing brush barricade
24	758120 m E 4169200 m N	?	Brush Wall; fall tree and add brush to existing brush barricade built by Dan Lusby during fire suppression phase
25	See map	N/A	Schroeder Mine road; Install gate
26	See map	N/A	Permit Mine driveway; build brush barricade
27	See map	N/A	Mosher Road; rebuild gate if not rebuilt by private landowner