



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Owyhee Field Office
20 First Avenue West
Marsing, Idaho 83639



In Reply Refer To: 1736 (ID 130)

June 10, 2008

Dear Interested Citizen:

The Owyhee Field Office is proposing two projects to maintain and restore sagebrush steppe habitat threatened by western juniper expansion within a portion of the 288,000 acre Juniper Mountain Landscape Restoration Strategy Area, located approximately 45 miles southeast of Jordan Valley, Oregon and about 75 miles south of Nampa, Idaho.

The first project would use chainsaws to remove denser, encroaching juniper on 3,659 acres within Pasture 1A of the Castlehead-Lambert Allotment. The second project would use chainsaws to remove scattered encroaching juniper near sage-grouse leks and adjacent nesting areas within 59,000 acres located primarily on the southeast portion of the Strategy Area.

These projects are in the initial design and scoping phases. An Environmental Assessment will be prepared for each project. The Owyhee Field Office would like to know what concerns or issues the public has about these proposed projects. Comments at this stage of the process will help with development of alternatives and analysis of environmental consequences.

Background:

The proposed projects stem from the *2006 Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-Grouse in Idaho* and the *2006 Juniper Mountain Landscape Restoration Strategy*. The statewide sage-grouse plan was developed collaboratively with county sage-grouse working groups and a diverse assemblage of agency, agricultural, conservation, and sportsman interests. It identifies juniper expansion as a threat to sage-grouse habitat within the proposed treatment areas, and provides objectives and management actions to maintain and restore sage-grouse habitat. The plan can be viewed at:

http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/grouse/conserve_plan/.

The 2006 Juniper Mountain Landscape Restoration Strategy was developed to maintain and restore the fire adapted shrub steppe and aspen communities which are gradually being lost to western juniper expansion in the 288,000 acre Juniper Mountain watershed. This plan can be viewed at:

<http://www.blm.gov/id/st/en/info/nepa.2.html>.

The strategy uses objectives from the 1999 Owyhee RMP, the 2001 National Fire Plan, Idaho Sage-Grouse Plan, current juniper related research from the University of Idaho, Oregon State University, and the Northern Great Basin Research Center, and issues brought forth by the public, BLM staff, and other agencies to develop a landscape level restoration strategy for maintaining and restoring the shrub-steppe, mahogany, and aspen communities

Potential juniper control treatments include a combination of prescribed fire, wildland fire use, cutting, and other mechanical treatments, that would be designed to create and maintain vegetative mosaics on the landscape to provide diverse ecological stages and associated habitats for a multitude of wildlife species.

Need for and Purpose of the Proposed Action: The proposed action is needed because:

- Western juniper continues to expand beyond its historic range into the shrub-steppe and aspen communities of the Owyhee Uplands.

- Conifer/juniper expansion is identified in the 2006 Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-Grouse in Idaho, and the 2004 (as amended) Owyhee County Sage-grouse Management Plan as a threat to sage-grouse habitat in the Owyhee Sage-grouse Planning Area.
- Controlling juniper will maintain existing shrub steppe habitats as well as allowing sites in advanced stages of juniper expansion to rehabilitate naturally to plant communities representative of pre-expansion composition.

The object of the proposed actions are to maintain habitat for sagebrush obligate species such as sage-grouse as well as other wildlife such as mule deer and elk by reducing seral juniper encroachment into sagebrush habitats.

The Proposed Actions:

Project 1: The proposed action consists of hand-cutting juniper and jackpot burning the debris within Pasture 1A of the Castlehead-Lambert Allotment. In the summer of 2007, the Tongue Fire burned approximately 1,011 acres within the pasture. The proposed cutting treatments would target the remaining 3,659 acres of unburned juniper within the pasture. No old growth juniper would be cut.

Jackpot burning would occur in the late fall, winter, or early spring when soils are frozen or moist to consume the fine fuels (such as the juniper needles and smaller branches) while minimizing damage to soils and plants from excessive heat, and to prevent fire spreading to non-target areas.

Project 2: The proposed action consists of hand cutting juniper trees within a 48,500 acre area adjacent to sage-grouse leks and nesting habitat. Studies suggest that most sage-grouse nests occur within a four mile radius of an active lek. These areas are depicted on the attached map. Most of the proposed project area consists of intact sage-steppe communities with scattered young juniper that can be easily treated by hand cutting. However, some of the area (less than 5%) is comprised of denser juniper in which some slash burning would be needed.

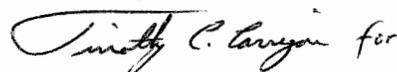
Issues associated with the proposed action: Similar past treatments have identified the following issues associated with the proposed actions: disturbance to sage-grouse while on their leks and nesting goshawks during cutting operations, noxious weed introduction, and the effects of slash burning on vegetation and soils. These potential issues and other relevant issues identified in the scoping process will be addressed in the EAs.

Commenting procedures: Maps of the proposed projects are found on the BLM web site listed above. Please direct your written comments to the following email address: juniper_cuts@blm.gov. If you do not have access to email, you may submit a letter to the Owyhee Field Office: 20 First Avenue West Marsing, Idaho 83639.

If you choose to comment you will be kept apprised of the development of these projects. Comments must be received by June 30 for consideration in development of alternatives or addressing any potential environmental effects.

Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,



Mark A. Lane
Owyhee Field Manager