

NOTICE OF FIELD MANAGERS DECISION

NINEMILE SPRINGS FUELS REDUCTION AND RESTORATION PROJECT EA#DOI-BLM-ID-1020-2011-0071-EA

DECISION

After careful consideration, it is my decision to implement specific elements of Alternative C- The Enhanced Watershed Protection and Restoration Alternative analyzed in the Ninemile Springs Fuels Reduction and Restoration Project Environmental Assessment (EA#DOI-BLM-ID-1020-2011-0071-EA).

Under this decision, the following elements of Alternative C would be approved:

- The reduction of hazardous fuels accumulations in 58 landscape units through the use of mechanical methods including chainsaws and other hand tools, mechanical equipment, and prescribed fire. A total of approximately 1,800 acres would be treated over a 15-year period. The design criteria presented in Section 2.4 and management restrictions presented in Appendix A of the EA would apply to these elements of the Alternative C.

In the Mid-elevation Shrub and Mountain Shrub cover types, the density of juniper would be reduced by creating irregularly shaped openings in stands across topographic contours and lopping and scattering junipers which are encroaching on shrub steppe communities.

In the Aspen/Maple/Mahogany vegetation communities, encroaching Douglas-fir and juniper under 30 inches diameter at breast height (dbh) would be removed. In aspen dominant areas, some mature aspen trees would be cut to stimulate aspen suckering.

In Dry Conifer and Aspen/Conifer cover types, approximately two-thirds of Douglas fir trees less than 12 inches dbh and approximately 20 trees per acre between 12 and 24 inches dbh would be removed. No trees larger than 30 dbh would be cut. The remaining trees would be limbed up to 6 feet from ground level. In addition to selective thinning, diseased and standing dead Douglas fir would be removed until a density of 5 to 7 stems per acre is reached.

- In order to facilitate access to the landscape units and provide a defensible fuel break, 1.76 miles of permanent road and 0.6 mile of temporary road would be constructed. The roads would be designed to meet BLM road standards as presented in Manual 9113 (BLM 1988b). The design criteria and Best Management Practices (BMPs) presented in Section 2.4 of the EA would apply to the construction of the roads.

Under this decision, the following elements of Alternative C would **not** be approved:

- In order to reduce the potential for erosion and off-site sedimentation, 1.61 miles (Phase 4) of the 2.21 miles of temporary road under this alternative would not be constructed.

Because of this decision, Alternative C will hereafter be referred to “as amended”.

RATIONALE

The implementation of Alternative C, as amended would provide protection to the Downey municipal watershed by reducing hazardous fuel accumulations and improving forest and shrub community health. Under this alternative, the following objectives which have been identified for the project area would be met:

Mid-elevation Shrub and Mountain Shrub cover type

- Decrease risk to public and firefighter health and safety and loss of property associated with uncontrollable wildland fire.
- Reduce the threat of crown fire while maintaining wildlife habitat.
- Restore and maintain shrub steppe community from encroaching juniper.
- Enhance species diversity and improve shrub community health and move vegetation towards Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC 1).

Aspen/Maple/Mahogany cover type

- Restore and maintain Aspen, Maple, and Mahogany vegetation type.
- Create live fuel breaks using existing aspen, maple, and mahogany stands. Stimulate aspen suckering by increasing available light and soil temperatures.
- Decrease canopy closure to reduce the possibility of crown fire.
- Decrease competition and maintain or improve stand health.
- In areas where aspen clones exist, increase aspen sucker density to 1,000 suckers per acre at a minimum within 2 years following prescribed burning on unit.

Dry Conifer and Aspen/Conifer cover type

- Move towards a desired future condition (DFC) consisting of 10 percent early successional, 60 percent mid-successional closed canopy, 20 percent late-successional open canopy, and 10 percent late-successional closed canopy mixture of forest stands across the landscape.

- Convert up to 50 percent of late successional forest acres within the project area to early and middle successional forest acres during the life of the project.
- Reduce standing diseased and standing dead Douglas-fir while maintaining wildlife habitat (i.e., snag recruitment).
- Reduce threat of crown fire while maintaining wildlife habitat.
- Decrease total fuel loading to a maximum of 28 tons per acre.
- Create live fuel breaks using existing aspen stands. Stimulate aspen suckering by increasing available light and soil temperatures.
- In areas where aspen clones exist, increase aspen sucker density to 1,000 suckers per acre at a minimum within 2 years following prescribed burning on unit.

Land Use Plan Conformance

The activities proposed under Alternative C, as amended are consistent with the objectives, goals, and intent of the *Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment* and associated EIS (FMDA; BLM 2008b), which amended the Pocatello Resource Management Plan (RMP; BLM 1988a). The FMDA provides the overall fire and fuels management direction for BLM-administered lands within the project area.

The FMDA identifies mechanical, chemical, and prescribed fire as options for treatment states that landscape-level projects and treatments should be developed in conjunction with community participation and the development of stakeholder partnerships where practical and appropriate. The FMDA recognizes that fuel accumulations in vegetation types with historically frequent fire regimes (e.g., aspen/conifer, dry conifer) are at risk of losing key ecological components due to lack of fire.

Direction in the FMDA emphasizes the conservation and restoration of sagebrush steppe while replicating historical disturbance and succession patterns in vegetation types with historically frequent fire regimes. The plan adopts the goals and priorities set in the Cohesive Strategy and the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy. These goals include: improving fire prevention and suppression; reducing hazardous fuels; restoring fire-adapted ecosystems; and promoting community assistance.

Specific goals identified in the FMDA that are applicable to this alternative include:

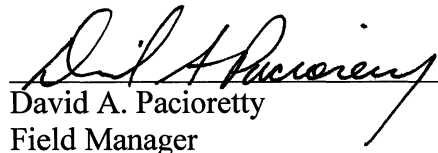
- Goal/Objective 1 - Make progress toward desired future condition (DFC) in the low-elevation shrub, mid-elevation shrub, and juniper vegetation types. Use chemical, mechanical, seeding, and prescribed fire treatments as appropriate to achieve DFC. Strategically place treatments on a landscape scale to prevent fire from spreading into important sagebrush steppe habitat or WUI (BLM 2008: 2-30).
- Goal/Objective 4 - Make progress toward DFC in historically frequent fire regimes (aspen/conifer, dry conifer, mid-elevation shrub encroached by juniper, and mountain

shrub) by increasing wildland fire use and prescribed fire to create a fire regime within the historical range of variability. Use mechanical and chemical treatments to prepare areas in FRCC 2 and FRCC 3 for prescribed fire use (BLM 2008: 2-31).

In addition to meeting the objectives for the project area and conforming to current management direction, this alternative meets the purpose and need for action as presented in Section 1.2 of the EA. Moreover, the analysis presented in the EA and the accompanying Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) make clear that the implementation of this alternative with associated design criteria and management restrictions identified in Appendix A would not result in significant impacts to the human environment and therefore an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Appeals: Refer to attached Form 1842-1

Approved by:



David A. Pacioretty
Field Manager
Pocatello Field Office

1-17-2012
Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

NINEMILE SPRINGS FUELS REDUCTION AND RESTORATION PROJECT EA#DOI-BLM-ID-1020-2011-0071-EA

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

I have reviewed the Environmental Assessment, EA#DOI-BLM-ID-1020-2011-0071-EA, including the explanation and resolution of any potentially significant environmental impacts. I have determined that Alternative C- The Enhanced Watershed Protection and Restoration Alternative, as amended will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Implementing regulations for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (40CFR 1508.27) provide criteria for determining the significance of effects. 'Significant', as used in NEPA, requires consideration of both context and intensity. The bold and italicized text are repeated from 40CFR 1508.27 for completeness and an explanation follows for relevance to the decision.

(a) Context. This requirement means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant (40 CFR 1508.27):

This project is a site-specific action that by itself does not have international, national, region-wide, or statewide importance. The analysis has shown that the project significance is local in nature and that the vegetative treatments will have no significant impact on existing resource values.

(b) Intensity. This requirement refers to the severity of impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following are considered in evaluating intensity (40 CFR 1508.27).

(1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

Alternative C, as amended, will protect the Downey municipal water supply, homes, ranches, and farms adjacent to the project area, along with important wildlife habitat from large, high intensity wildland fire, as well as improve and maintain forest and rangeland health. High fuel loads within and surrounding the project area have created conditions that would support the development of high-intensity wildland fires which could have severe resource and human health and safety impacts.

The implementation of this alternative would also be associated with short-term adverse impacts including the production of smoke, exhaust emissions and fugitive dust, the

displacement of migratory birds and other wildlife species due to equipment noise and general human presence, and an increase in erosion potential associated with access road construction and equipment use. Impacts would be minimized through the use of design criteria, Best Management Practices (BMPs) as described and analyzed in the EA and management restrictions presented in Appendix A.

(2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

Alternative C, as amended would benefit public safety by reducing the likelihood of a high intensity wildfire that could threaten the Lava Ranch subdivision, a short distance to the north of the project area, and isolated homes and ranches in the vicinity.

The implementation of this alternative could also protect public health by reducing the risk of adverse effects to the municipal water supply of the City of Downey. A high intensity wildfire in the project area has the potential to input sediments and nutrients into the water supply, possibly rendering it nonpotable for an extended period of time.

(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

No significant effects would occur to unique geographic characteristics of the area, cultural or historical resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers. A substantial portion of the project area are located within the Ninemile Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) which was designated by BLM to provide protection to water sources within its boundary for the municipal needs of the City of Downey. Alternative C, as amended would provide protection to the resources for which the ACEC was designated.

(4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

During the external scoping process, concerns we expressed with regard to the potential environmental effects of implementing Alternative C as presented in the draft EA. In response to those concerns, BLM revised the draft document and altered the proposed decision as reflected above. On this basis, BLM does not consider the effects on the quality of the human environment to be highly controversial.

(5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

There are no predicted effects on the human environment that are considered to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. Alternative C, as amended is not unique or unusual. The BLM has experience implementing similar fuels reduction projects in similar areas, including the construction of access roads in steep terrain, and understands

the environmental consequences of these actions. The environmental effects to the human environment are fully analyzed in the EA with a high degree of certainty.

- (6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The implementation of this proposed decision would not trigger other actions, nor is it a part of a larger action envisioned for the project area or elsewhere. The PFO has conducted numerous fuels reduction projects and nothing in the analysis indicates that this proposal is appreciably different and is therefore not precedent setting. Any future fuels reduction proposals would be subject to a separate and independent environmental analysis as mandated under NEPA.

- (7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

The cumulative analysis presented in the EA disclosed that the environmental impacts associated with the implementation of Alternative C, as amended would not result in significant cumulative impacts when considered in light of impacts associated with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

- (8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

The standard BLM stipulation covering cultural resources would be included and would provide protection for any cultural resources identified in the project area. The BLM archaeologist would consult with the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) regarding the HRHP (National Register of Historic Places) status of any cultural resources identified, including findings of effect. The BLM would avoid NRHP-eligible historic properties during project implementation, mitigating any potential adverse impacts.

- (9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat that has been determined under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended*

The implementation of the Alternative C, as amended would not affect any endangered or threatened species because it has been determined that no such species or their habitat exist within the project area.

Although the lower elevations of the project area were likely within the historical range of sage-grouse habitat, there is no mapped sage-grouse habitat or leks identified in the project area and no sage-grouse have been observed.

- (9) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The analysis in the EA shows that the alternatives are consistent with Federal, State, and local laws or requirements imposed for protection of the environment.

I find that implementing Alternative C, as amended does not constitute a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment in either context or intensity. I have made this determination after considering both positive and negative effects, as well as the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of this action and reasonably foreseeable future actions. I have found that the context of the environmental impacts of this decision is limited to the local area and I have also determined that the severity of these impacts is not significant.

Approved by:



David A. Pacioretty
Field Manager
Pocatello Field Office

1-17-2012
Date