

Chapter 1.0: Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Purpose of the Proposed Action

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes to improve its implementation of the National Fire Plan and 2001 Federal Fire Policy, by amending all Resource Management Plans (RMPs) in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, to update direction for fire and fuels management.

These amendments would: 1) provide consistent fire management direction by assigning fire management categories and broad levels of treatment as directed by BLM Handbook H-1601-1 (Nov. 22, 2000), Appendix C; 2) provide general guidance for fire management (including both fire suppression and fuels management) needed to protect other resource values, and 3) revise specific RMP decisions that currently limit BLM's ability to conduct safe and efficient mechanical hazardous fuels treatments in the Judith-Valley-Phillips (JVP), West HiLine, Billings; and Miles City Big Dry and Powder River planning areas.

The following BLM Montana/Dakotas RMPs would be amended: Big Dry, Billings, Garnet, Headwaters, Judith-Valley-Phillips, North Dakota, Powder River, South Dakota, and West HiLine.

The Dillon Management Framework Plan (MFP) would not be amended by this EA/plan amendment. The Dillon Field Office is currently working on the Dillon RMP/EIS, and fire and fuels management decisions will be made through that planning process.

Planning areas are displayed on Map 1.

1.2 Need for the Proposed Action

National fire management policy has evolved in response to the increased fatalities, property loss, local economic disruptions, and risk to ecosystems associated with increasingly catastrophic wildland fire seasons. The Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program (1995) was developed (and then updated) after severe fire seasons in 1994 and 2000. The 2000 fire season also prompted a report from the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, which eventually became the basis of the *National Fire Plan*.



The Grizzly Gulch fire, burning near Deadwood on 6/29/03. Credit Tom Warner, Warner Images.

The *National Fire Plan* and the *2001 Federal Fire Policy* both indicated that federal agencies must change their fire management practices to increase protection of human life and decrease natural resource and private property damage. Specifically, the *2001 Federal Fire Policy* established that the deteriorating condition of fire-adapted ecosystems is the result of fire exclusion, that the fire hazard in fire-adapted ecosystems is worse than previously thought, and that the extent of the fire hazard in the WUI was not fully recognized in 1995.

BLM planning documents have not kept pace with national fire and fuels management policies, nor do they reflect the condition of BLM-administered lands in terms of fuels (and associated risks to ecosystems and communities) in Montana and North and South Dakota.

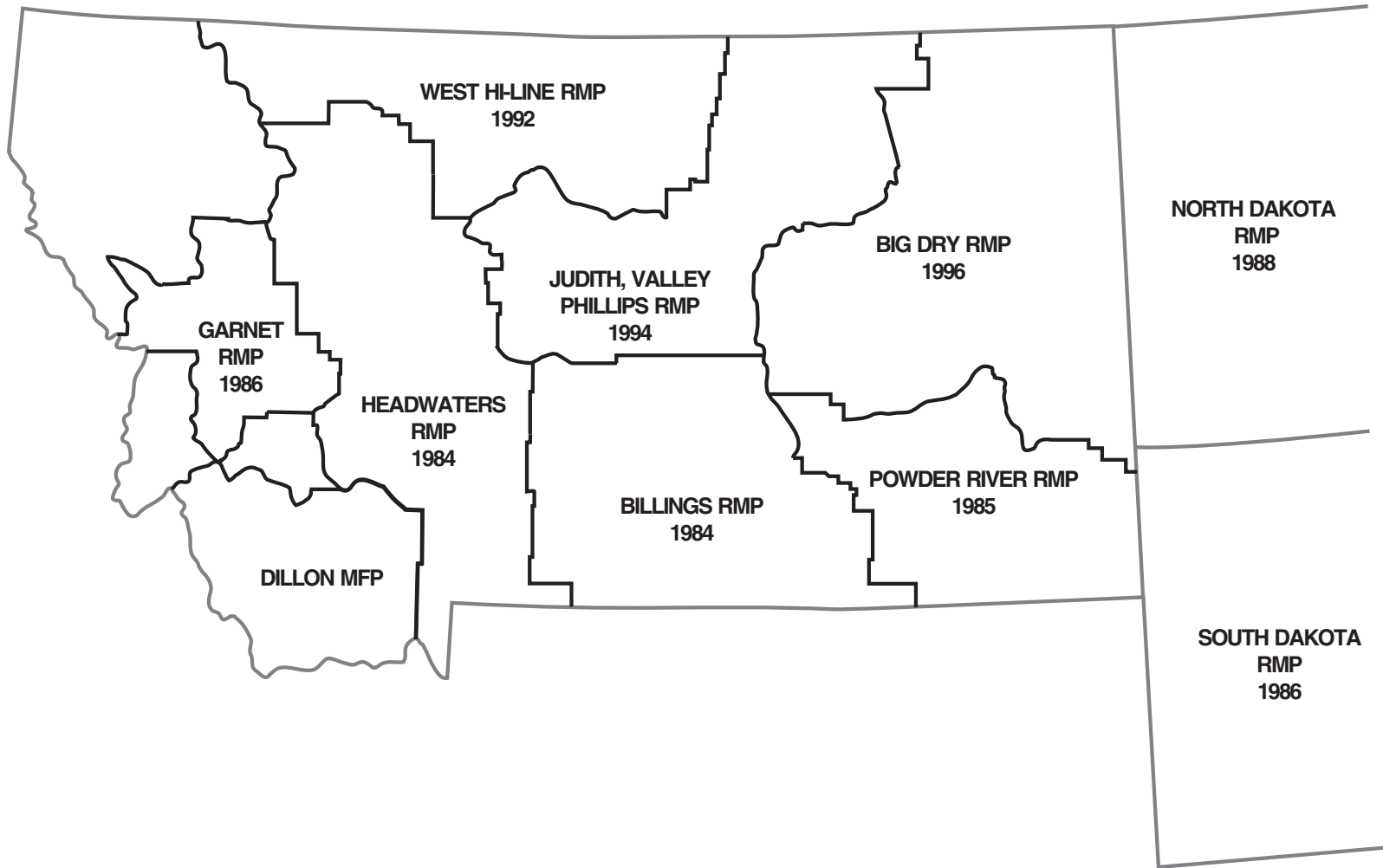
The *2001 Federal Fire Policy* referenced preliminary Condition Class data (finalized as Schmidt et al 2002) as a way of inferring risk to ecosystem sustainability and risk of uncharacteristic wildland fire behavior and effects (Hann 2002). According to coarse-scale spatial estimates for Montana and the Dakotas, past policies and activities have either moderately or significantly altered the fire regimes and frequencies on about 1.3 million of the 8.4 million acres of BLM-administered lands in the study area. The result is moderate to dramatic changes in fire size, intensity, severity, and/or landscape patterns. Based on estimates of vegetation condition, these 1.3 million BLM-administered acres need treatments to restore the historical fire regime.

Risk to communities has been projected in response to nationwide inquiries related to the *National Fire Plan* (i.e.

MAP 1

MONTANA/DAKOTAS

RMP/MFP BOUNDARIES



Communities at Risk published in the August 17, 2001 Federal Register). Montana/Dakotas BLM Field Office staff also completed in 1999 a survey on communities within 1/2 mile of fuels buildups on BLM lands. Of 79 priority communities identified as part of the 1999 survey, 67 had moderate to high escaped fire potential and/or moderate to high potential for loss of life or property. Since that survey was completed, wildland fire has occurred in or near six of the priority communities. Map 2 shows communities/areas at risk from wildland fire on public lands.

The proposed action was developed to respond to national policy and hazardous fuels conditions on BLM-administered lands in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

1.3 Goals

A change in fire management strategies is needed to:

- provide greater protection to human life
- reduce the risk and cost of severe wildland fires
- sustain the ecological health and function of fire-adapted grasslands, shrublands, and forestlands
- minimize the adverse effects of wildland fire suppression
- use fire and other fuels management methods to reduce hazardous fuels while meeting other resource objectives (e.g., restore degraded fish and wildlife habitat)

1.4 Scope of the Analysis

Fire/fuels management is considered in this analysis at the regional RMP level. The level of detail regarding proposed activities and potential effects will be appropriate to this first tier of BLM's land use planning process. This "big picture" view of the proposed action in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota includes a consideration of statewide land use plan management direction and guidance for fire suppression and treatments to reduce hazardous fuels. This analysis also considers the cumulative effects of BLM fire/fuels management activities.

This analysis considers effects of statewide guidance for wildland fire suppression as well as general effects of suppression activities.

Vegetation treatments and their environmental effects are analyzed at the programmatic level if their purpose is to reduce hazardous fuels. The effects of vegetation treatments that are not associated with fuels management have already been considered in BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs) for Montana and the Dakotas and in the 1991 BLM Vegetation Treatment EIS.

Specific information, effects, and activities associated with site-specific projects are not considered in this analysis.

Following this analysis, an updated Fire Management Plan (FMP) will be prepared by each field office. Local-level environmental analyses will be completed when individual projects are proposed. These analyses will study the most effective ways to apply the management direction provided by RMP-level plans to local and "on-the-ground" resource issues and values.

1.4.1 History of the Planning and Public Participation Process

The planning process began in September 1998, when BLM published a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare a NEPA document in the Federal Register.

The project leader sent 5,067 letters to potential interested parties identified by the Field Offices. The letters explained the planning process and asked for issues and/or a reply from those who wanted to remain on the mailing list.

The State Director sent a similar letter to 115 other federal, state, and local agencies.

The BLM Fire Management Officer sent a letter asking for issues and concerns from 48 fire wardens.

The BLM initiated contact with a number of different agencies, including:

- Northern Rockies Coordinating Representatives
- Forest Service
- MT Dept. of Fish, Wildlife, & Parks
- County Commissioners in counties where fuels reduction activities would likely take place.

BLM representatives attended meetings of the Montana Fire Wardens, Montana Associations of Counties, and Resource Advisory Council.

Approximately 700 persons, groups/organizations, and agency contacts wanted to remain on the mailing list. See section 1.4.3, Issues Studied in Detail, and 1.4.4, Issues Eliminated from Detailed Study, for a summary of public comments received as a result of initial mailings.

Congressional delegations were briefed at project initiation and in 2001.

The EA was released for public comment in August 2001. Following the end of the public comment period, the scope of the analysis was expanded to consider mechanical fuels treatments and chemical weed treatments, in response to public comment and internal policy direction (IM-2002-034).

