

Decision Record
for the
Environmental Assessment and
Resource Management Plan Amendments
for
Fire/Fuels Management in Montana and the Dakotas

Prepared by:
Bureau of Land Management
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Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management proposes to improve implementation of the National Fire Plan and the 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; 2) provide general guidance for fire management needed to protect other resource values, and 3) revise RMP decisions that limit BLM's ability to conduct safe and efficient mechanical hazardous fuels treatments in the Judith-Valley-Phillips (JVP), Billings, Big Dry, Powder River, and West HiLine planning areas.

Copies of the *Fire and Fuels Management EA/RMP Amendment for BLM-Administered Lands in Montana and the Dakotas*, the corresponding Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), and this Decision Record (DR) are available at each of the BLM field offices in Montana and the Dakotas as well as on the BLM web site at www.mt.blm.gov.

Decision

I have decided to approve the proposed fire management zones and categories, guidance, direction, and plan amendments described as the Proposed Alternative (Alternative B) of the *Fire and Fuels Management EA/RMP Amendment for BLM-Administered Lands in Montana and the Dakotas*.

My decision is based on the analysis in the EA and corresponding case file. By selecting Alternative B, I approve amendments to the following RMPs: Big Dry, Billings, Garnet, Headwaters, Judith-Valley-Phillips, North Dakota, Powder River, South Dakota, and West HiLine.

These amendments include the following:

- **Fire management categorization:** All RMPs will be amended to adopt the categorization of fire management zones within each field office, as specified in Table 3 Montana/Dakotas Fire Management Zones and as shown in Maps 3-4 and 6-10 of the EA.

- **Guidance and direction to protect other resources during wildland fire suppression and fuels management projects:** Each RMP will be amended to adopt the direction listed in section 2.5.3.1 of the EA. This direction applies to aquatic species and habitat, and Threatened and Endangered Species, as well as cultural and paleontological resources, and visual resources. This direction would be followed unless doing so would compromise protection of human life or property or the protection of special species habitat. (Protective measures summarized in section 2.5.1.1 include direction that already exists from policy, laws, and regulations.)
- To protect Threatened or Endangered species, projects will comply with the most current guidance and direction from conservation strategies, USFWS Biological Opinions, RMP guidance, or guidance from section 2.5.3.1 of this EA. If there is proposed variance in the suggested guidelines for T&E species, fire personnel and appropriate biologists will confer with FWS to determine if the variances will trigger additional consultation efforts.
- Additional guidance included in Wildlife design features contained in Appendix B of the EA will be recommended when planning and implementing fire and fuels management projects.
- Recommendations concerning sanitation and storage of food items within potential distribution areas for grizzly bears as specified by the State Grizzly Bear Management Plans by the State of Montana will be considered.
- **Other specific RMP amendments:** Certain RMPs will be amended to improve implementation of the National Fire Plan and the Federal Wildland Fire Policy. These specific RMPs will be amended as specified in Appendix C. In summary, these include:
 - The Big Dry RMP will be amended to allow use of commercial timber harvest as a mechanical treatment.
 - The Powder River RMP will be amended to allow use of prescribed fire on more than 20 acres per year.
 - The Judith, Valley, Phillips, West HiLine, and Billings RMPs will be

amended to clarify that timber harvest for the purpose of fuels reduction would not count toward established Allowable Sale Quantities (ASQs) or annual cuts.

In reaching my decision, I also considered the broad levels of treatment identified in the EA. Prior to this analysis, many RMPs did not discuss treatment levels. The identification of impacts in this analysis was based on the following levels of treatment, predicted for the next 10 years:

- 299,000 acres of prescribed fire
- 158,000 acres of mechanical treatments
- 185,000 acres of chemical weed treatments

Alternatives Considered Including the Selected Alternative

Based on public involvement and interdisciplinary team analyses, the BLM developed one action alternative for consideration, in addition to the No Action alternative. These alternatives are summarized below. Full development of each alternative is found in Chapter 2.0 of the EA (Alternatives Including the Proposed Action).

Alternative A (No Action Alternative): Fire and fuels management would be based on existing RMP decisions, policies, guidance, laws, regulations, and initiatives. No fire management zones or categories would be identified. Lower levels of treatment would be anticipated. No additional guidance would be provided at the RMP level.

Alternative B (Proposed Fire and Fuels Management): Fire and fuels management will be guided by new RMP decisions, including fire management zones and categories for BLM lands and guidance and direction to protect other resource values. Specific RMP decisions that limit fuels treatment methods will be amended. This alternative includes an analysis of higher levels of treatments.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study (EA section 2.4):

- Using prescribed fire only to treat all hazardous fuels was not analyzed in detail because it would pose a very real danger in some areas where vegetation is beyond its natural fire cycle. It is also inconsistent with the Federal Wildland

Fire Policy and BLM guidance in H-1601-1 and IM 2002-034.

- Re-categorization of wilderness study areas (WSAs) was suggested in public comments. In response, the category of one fire management zone (containing three WSAs) was changed. Other fire management zones were too small, contained moderate to heavy fuel loads, were located too close to other ownerships, and had high potential for fires to cause undesired impacts.
- Treating all BLM-administered lands in Condition Class 2 and 3 within a decade was not analyzed in detail because it would cause unacceptable resource conflicts and was beyond anticipated capability to implement within a 10 year period.

Rationale for the Decision

I selected Alternative B because it meets the following elements of the purpose (section 1.1 of the EA) of this proposed action:

- improves implementation of national policy,
- provides consistent fire management direction,
- protects resources during fire suppression and fuels management projects, and
- updates RMP decisions that limit fuels treatments.

It also better meets the goals of providing greater protection to human life, reducing risk and cost of severe wildfires, sustaining the health and function of fire-adapted ecosystems, minimizing adverse effects of fire suppression, and reducing hazardous fuels while meeting other resource objectives. See section 1.3 of the EA.

Based on the analysis of the potential impacts contained in the EA and careful consideration of public and agency comments, I have determined that neither the 14 critical elements nor the other resources analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EA will be significantly affected by Alternative B.

Alternative B will not affect the production, transmission, or conservation of energy. It will not cause an adverse energy impact.

Resolution of Issues

Some issues (see section 1.4.3 of the EA) identified early in the process were addressed

directly by specifying where fire is not desired, where it might be likely to cause negative effects, and where it might be desired to help manage ecosystems. The types and amounts of fuels treatments that could be reasonably anticipated over the next decade and potential effects on resources are also identified.

An estimated 1.3 million acres of BLM administered lands have moderately or significantly altered fire regimes and frequencies that cause dramatic changes in fire size, intensity, severity, and or landscape patterns. Alternative B identifies where fire is not desired and where it is likely to cause negative effects as well as where fire may be desired to manage ecosystems.

Alternative B identifies the types and amounts of fuels treatments that could be reasonably anticipated over the next decade and the effects on resources that might be caused by the types and amounts of treatments. The revised EA also addresses issues raised in public comments. Some comments were addressed by the management direction provided in section 2.5.3.1 of the EA. Other comments, such as the concern about sage grouse habitat, were addressed by specifying anticipated types and levels of activity in Chapter 2 and impacts of those activities in Chapter 3.

Summary of Agency and Public Participation

The EA process was announced in letters sent to over 5,000 potentially interested parties, 115 agencies, and 48 fire wardens. About 750 individuals, agencies, and organizations expressed a desire to remain on the mailing list.

During the development of the EA, BLM representatives provided briefings to other agencies, county commissioners, groups, and organizations across Montana and the Dakotas. The EA was released in August 2001. The BLM received 31 letters with comments. Five letters were from agencies, 22 were from individuals, and six were from interest groups and other organizations. Comments on the initial EA addressed NEPA adequacy; fuels management; and environmental effects on wilderness, vegetation, sagebrush ecosystems and sage grouse habitat, and other wildlife. The scope of analysis was expanded to consider mechanical fuels treatments and chemical weed treatments in

response to public comment and internal policy direction.

The revised EA was made available for public review and comment in May 2003. Four additional comments were received; three from agencies and one from industry. Comments and responses to these comments are summarized in Chapter 4.0 of the EA.

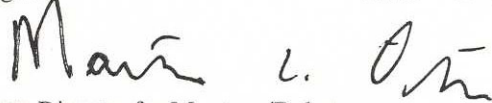
Implementation

Upon signing this Decision Record, all RMPs will be amended to incorporate the fire management zone categorizations, the level of treatments, and the appropriate guidance and direction to protect other resources. Specific amendments for the Big Dry, Powder River, Judith, Valley, Phillips, West HiLine, and Billings RMPs as described above will also be implemented.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

I based my finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on the information contained in the Fire/Fuels Management Plan Environmental Assessment/Plan Amendment for Montana and the Dakotas. The FONSI was attached to the EA for review during the public comment period from May 9 – June 9, 2003. No additional significant impacts or issues were raised by the public during the public comment period (May 9 - June 9, 2003), during the Governors' consistency reviews (July-August, 2003), or during the protest period (July 31-August 30, 2003). An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) does not need to be prepared.

Signed:



Date: 09/26/03

State Director for Montana/Dakotas,
Bureau of Land Management