UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
BURNS DISTRICT OFFICE

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW AND APPROVAL

CX Number:DOI-BLM-OR-B060-2014-0006-CX **Date**: 11/25/2013
File Code (Project/Serial Number): Coyote Gap ESR Fire #HT88
Preparer: Autumn Toelle, Range Management Specialist **Applicant**: BLM
Title of Proposed Action: Coyote Gap Fire Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation Aerial Seeding

Description of Proposed Action and Project Design Elements (if applicable): The Coyote Gap Fire started the afternoon of August 7, 2013 in Harney County, Oregon, as a result of lightning associated with thunderstorms. The wildfire started approximately 22 air miles northwest of Fields, Oregon and began burning in grass (perennials and annuals) and brush (sagebrush and rabbitbrush) on BLM land. On the morning of August 8, 2013 an engine and two other crews were able to access the fire. It was determined that the previous evening's rainfall had knocked the fire out and there were few hot spots. The fire perimeter was mapped with acreage estimated at 739 acres on both BLM and Private property. The fire was contained at 1700 on August 8, 2013.

The Coyote Gap Fire burned through two allotments, one pasture in each, affecting only one permittee who is also one of the two private landowners. One hundred percent of the fire burned in Preliminary General Habitat (PGH) for sage-grouse, which is a BLM Special Status Species (SSS) and approximately 280 acres of it burned in pronghorn antelope winter range. All of the burned BLM-managed land is within the Basque Hills Wilderness Study Area (WSA). The fire is within an eleven inch precipitation zone. The fire burned through two general vegetation types, with the major type being big sagebrush/perennial bunchgrass (685 acres) located on top of the plateau, and the minor type being big sagebrush/annual grassland (16 acres), located in the drainage bottom, mainly on private land. Dominant species are Wyoming big sagebrush, bottlebrush squirreltail, Thurber's needlegrass, Indian ricegrass, and bluebunch wheatgrass. Cheatgrass is also scattered throughout the area as this was partially in a previous wildfire burn.

The BLM proposes to aerially seed 500 acres in the area (See Vicinity - Map 1 and Aerial Seeding – Map 2) threatened by invasive annual grasses. As this fire is completely within a WSA and the presence of large rocks, the use of ground disturbing activities (vehicle use, ATV use, chaining, drilling, etc...) are not options available for this rehabilitation effort. This area would be seeded to help stabilize the soils, reducing the for wind/water erosion on the site, as well as decrease opportunities for noxious and invasive species to become established. Seeding would be done utilizing fixed wing aircraft or helicopter (No-Trace Seeding). Seeding would occur in the early winter, which is the time research suggests would be most successful for the selected seeding species.

One seed mix would be used to help the site recover. The aerial seed mix consists of species selected for specific characteristics (from USDA Plants, 2012). The perennial plant species and seeding rate selected include: Bottlebrush squirreltail – Toejam at 11.76 lbs. /ac and Snake River wheatgrass at 8.26 lbs. /ac. Snake River Wheatgrass is native, very drought resistant, persistent, and adapted to stabilization of disturbed soils. Its drought tolerance, combined with extensive root systems and good seedling vigor, make this species ideal for reclamation in areas receiving 10 to 20 inches annual precipitation. Bottlebrush squirreltail is a short-lived native perennial grass which can act as an early-seral species by competing with and replacing annual weedy species following fire. Its ability to germinate in the late fall and very early spring, at a wide range of temperatures, adds to its capability to compete with cheatgrass. The other species that are common on the site are Indian ricegrass and Thurber's needlegrass. Seed availability and cost makes Thurber's needlegrass

unrealistic to use. Indian ricegrass is currently a relatively inexpensive seed; however, it does best when covered by 3/4" to 5" of soil (depth varies greatly depending throughout the research). While wind movement would be an expected result in some cover of these species, the success of seeding this species would still be limited, and the seeding rate would have to be increased to account for this. Therefore, this species was removed from the mix, despite it being the dominant species on the site.

While the species selected to be seeded all have highest seeding success if they are covered by soil (1/2" or so), the fact that the fire is within a WSA and rocky, prevents seed covering actions from occurring. The selected species, and their seeding rates, have been set at a rate that best balances the cost of the seed with their ability to thrive on the site. While bottlebrush squirreltail is expensive, it is a mid-seral species that typically thrives on disturbed sites and it was the co-dominant species (along with Indian ricegrass) on the site prior to the fire occurring. Based on this, the IDT determined that this species should be the major component of the seed mix, at approximately 60%, with wheatgrass being the minor component (it was only sub-dominant on the site) at 40%. Since the use of natives is required due to the burned area being within a WSA, it was determined that at least two species needed to be in the mix in order to increase the chances for success if environmental conditions are less than favorable following seeding.

The seeding would help to increase ground cover rapidly and help to reduce erosion and establishment of invasive species. Failure to complete seeding operations would leave the burn area open to erosion and proliferation of invasive plants, decreasing the ability of the site to provide habitat for wildlife in the future. The ecological costs of not seeding would be expected to be an area dominated by cheatgrass into adjacent Wyoming big sagebrush sites that provide important habitat for sage-grouse. This would also result in ecological processes not functioning properly, a decrease in species diversity, and an increase in the risk of wildfire and shortened fire return interval. Aerially seeding the area during the winter would promote success due to the availability of moisture. Management changes would be sufficient to protect the seeding from livestock grazing.

Legal Description (attach Location Map): See attached maps for vicinity and specific project locations.

B. Conformance with Land Use Plan (LUP) (name):

Date Approved/Amended: The proposed treatments are in conformance with the Andrews/Steens Decision and Resource Management Plan (ROD/RMP), date approved August 2005, even though they are not specifically provided for, because it is clearly consistent with the following LUP goals. The proposed treatments would forward the RMP goals and objectives.

Vegetation: Andrews RMP (RMP-24): "Manage vegetation to achieve and maintain healthy watersheds."

Rangelands: Andrews RMP (RMP-30) – Goal 1: "Maintain, restore or improve the integrity of desirable vegetation communities including perennial, native, and desirable introduced plant species. Provide for their continued existence and normal function in nutrient, water, and energy cycles." Goal 2: "Manage rangeland habitats so that forage, water, cover, structure, and security necessary to meet the life history requirements of wildlife are available on public lands."

Noxious Weeds Inventory and Treatment: Andrews RMP (RMP 31) – Goal: "Control the introduction and proliferation of noxious weeds and reduce the extent and density of established populations to acceptable levels."

Soil Management: Andrews RMP (RMP-21) – Goal 1: "Manage soils on public lands to maintain, restore, or improve soil erosion classes, watershed health, and areas of fragile soils."

BLM Categorical Exclusion Reference (516 DM, Chapter 11): I.1 Emergency Stabilization which states, "Planned actions in response to wildfires, floods, weather events, earthquakes, or landslips that threaten public health or safety, property, and/or natural and cultural resources, and that are necessary to repair or improve lands unlikely to recover to a management-approved condition as a result of the event. Such activities shall be limited to: repair and installation of essential erosion control structures; replacement or repair of existing culverts, roads, trails, fences, and minor facilities; construction of protection fences; planting, seeding, and mulching; and removal of hazard trees, rocks, soil, and other mobile debris from, on, or along roads, trails, campgrounds, and watercourses. These activities:

a. Shall be completed within one year following the event;
b. Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides;
c. Shall not include the construction of new roads or other new permanent infrastructure;
d. Shall not exceed 4,200 acres; and
e. May include temporary roads which are defined as roads authorized by contract, permit, lease, other written authorization, or emergency operation not intended to be part of the BLM transportation system and not necessary for long-term resource management. Temporary roads shall be designed to standards appropriate for the intended uses, considering safety, cost of transportation, and impacts on land and resources; and
f. Shall require the treatment of temporary roads constructed or used so as to permit the reestablishment by artificial or natural means, or vegetative cover on the roadway and areas where the vegetative cover was disturbed by the construction or use of the road, as necessary to minimize erosion from the disturbed area. Such treatment shall be designed to reestablish vegetative cover as soon as practicable, but at least within 10 years after the termination of the contract."

DOI Categorical Exclusion Reference (516 DM 2, Appendix 1): None

Screening for Exceptions: The following extraordinary circumstances (516 DM 2, Appendix 2) may apply to individual actions within the categorical exceptions. The indicated specialist recommends the proposed action does *not*:

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES DOCUMENTATION
2.1 Have significant impacts on public health or safety.
Specialist (Print Name and Title): John Petty, Health and Safety Specialist Signature and Date: 12/31/13
Rationale: No significant impact on public health or safety.
2.2 Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990); flood plains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.
Migratory Birds Specialist (Print Name and Title): Andrew Daniels, Wildlife Specialist Signature and Date: 121301 2013
Rationale: Aerial seeding of grass species would benefit grassland species of migratory birds while maintaining desirable grass communities that would compete with undesirable invasive grasses. Maintenance of desirable grasses could allow for the reestablishment of Wyoming big sagebrush in the future which would benefit sagebrush dependent bird species. There would be no effects to migratory birds from this action since migratory birds that use this area for breeding, nesting and fledging would be gone when the seeding is completed.

Historic and Cultural Resources
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Scott Thomas, District Archaeologist
Signature and Date: Scott Thomas 11/26/13

Rationale: As aerial seeding does not include any on-the-ground disturbance, no cultural or historic resources would be affected by this project.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern/Research Natural Areas
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Caryn Burri, NRS-Botany
Signature and Date: 11-27-13

Rationale: There are no ACECs or RNAs within the proposed project area.

Water Resources/Flood Plains
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Daryl Bingham, Fisheries Biologist
Signature and Date: 26 NOV 2013

Rationale: There are no known perennial waters located within or near the proposed seeding area. The project area is not in a flood plain.

Soils, Biological Soil Crust, Prime Farmlands
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Caryn Burri, NRS-Botany
Signature and Date: 11-27-13

Rationale: Aerial seeding would cause no disturbance to soils or biological soil crusts. However, seeding would establish desirable vegetation that would stabilize the soils and allow biological soil crusts to re-establish and/or expand while preventing the expansion of non-desirable non-native, invasive grasses.

Recreation/ Visual Resources
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Eric Haakenson, Recreation Specialist
Signature and Date: Eric Haakenson 11-26-13

Rationale:
Recreation - Access to this area for recreation is limited due to private land and primitive roads that are normally impassible by vehicles during the wet winter months. The seeding operation should not have an effect on recreation.
Visual Resource - The VRM Class for this project area is VRM 1 and the intention is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. The aerial seeding of these areas would not directly affect the existing character of the landscape. However, the seeding would prevent non-desirable, non-native invasive grasses from establishing, and this would help maintain the integrity of the landscape.

Wilderness/Wild and Scenic River Resources
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Tom Wilcox, Wilderness Specialist
Signature and Date: 11-26-2013

Rationale: The entire project area is within the Basque Hills WSA. The aerial seeding of these areas would not directly affect the existing character of the landscape as there would be no on-the-ground disturbance and the proposed action meets the non-impairment mandate required by FLPMA. However, the seeding would prevent non-desirable, non-native invasive grasses from establishing, and this would help maintain the integrity of the landscape and preserve existing wilderness characteristics. There is no wilderness, WSR resources, or Lands with Wilderness Characteristics within the proposed project area.

2.3 Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA Section 102(2) (E)].

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Signature and Date: Holly Orr 11/26/13

Rationale: There are no known highly controversial environmental effects or unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources as aerial seeding would not cause any ground disturbance.

2.4 Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Signature and Date: Holly Orr 11/26/13

Rationale: There are no known highly uncertain or potentially significant environmental effects or unique or unknown environmental risks associated with aerial seeding as it would not cause any ground disturbance.

2.5 Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Signature and Date: Holly Orr 11/26/13

Rationale: Implementation would not establish precedence for future actions or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental risks. The BLM routinely seeds areas burned by wildfire to reduce soil erosion and invasion by annual grasses such as cheatgrass.

2.6 Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects.

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Signature and Date: Holly Orr 11/26/13

Rationale: Implementation would not have any known direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant effects as aerial seeding would not cause any ground disturbance.

2.7 Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or office.

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Scott Thomas, District Archaeologist
Signature and Date: Scott Thomas 11-26-13

Rationale: National Register eligible or listed historic properties would be affected by this project.

2.8 Have significant impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed, on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated Critical Habitat for these species.

Endangered or Threatened Species-Fauna
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Andrew Daniels, Wildlife Biologist
Signature and Date: Andrew A Daniels 12/30/2013

Rationale: There are no known federally listed Endangered or Threatened species or designated Critical Habitat in this project area. Greater Sage-Grouse, a BLM Special Status Species and species currently proposed to be listed as threatened or endangered, habitat does exist within the project area. However, since the project area has burned, it does not provide the habitat components (specifically big sagebrush) that are needed by Greater Sage-Grouse for winter habitat. Therefore, it is not expected that Greater Sage-Grouse would be located in the project area when aerial seeding occurs, and therefore they would not be affected.

Aerial seeding of grass species would improve habitat by maintaining desirable grass communities that would compete with undesirable invasive grasses. Maintenance of desirable grasses could allow for the reestablishment of Wyoming big sagebrush in the future which is a required habitat component for Greater Sage-Grouse.

Endangered or Threatened Species-Aquatic
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Daryl Bingham, Fisheries Biologist
Signature and Date: 26 NOV 2013

Rationale: There is no Aquatic Threatened or Endangered or special status species or critical habitat in the project area.

Endangered or Threatened Species-Flora
Specialist (Print Name and Title): Caryn Burri, NRS-Botany
Signature and Date: 11-27-13

Rationale: There are no documented T&E or special status species or critical habitat within the project area.

2.9 Violate a Federal law, or a State, local, or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Signature and Date: 11/26/13

Rationale: Implementation would not violate any known law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment as aerial seeding would not cause any surface disturbance.

2.10 Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (Executive Order 12898).

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Signature and Date: 11/26/13

Rationale: Implementation would not have a disproportionately high or adverse effect on low income or minority populations as such populations do not exist within the project area.

2.11 Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites (Executive Order 13007).

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Scott Thomas, District Archaeologist
Signature and Date: 11/26/13

Rationale: Access to and integrity of Indian sacred sites would not be affected by this project.

2.12 Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or nonnative invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and Executive Order 13112).

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Lesley Richman, Weed Specialist
Signature and Date: Lesley Richman 11/26/2013

Rationale: Noxious weeds are known to occur in close proximity to the project area and annual grasses are found within it. Plans are underway to conduct weed monitoring and treatment during 2014 (covered under the 1998 Burns District Noxious Weed Management Program EA OR-020-98-05). As there won't be any ground disturbance, there would not be any additional areas for weed establishment. However, aerial seeding

of grass species would limit sites available for weeds and would maintain desirable grass communities that would compete with undesirable invasive grasses.

Additional review (As determined by the Authorized Officer): None

RMP conformance and CX review confirmation:

Specialist (Print Name and Title): Holly Orr, Planning and Environmental Coordinator

Signature: Holly Orr Date: 1/2/14

Management Determination: Based upon review of this proposal, I have determined the Proposed Action is in conformance with the LUP, qualifies as a categorical exclusion and does not require further NEPA analysis.

Authorized Officer (Print Name and Title): Rhonda Karges, Andrews/Steens Field Manager

Signature: Rhonda Karges Date: 1/2/14

Decision: It is my decision to implement the Proposed Action as described above.

Authority: Authority for this decision is found under 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 4190.1 (a), "...when BLM determines that vegetation, soil, or other resources on the public lands are ... at immediate risk of erosion or other damage due to wildlife, BLM may make a rangeland wildfire management decision effective immediately or on a date established in the decision. The effective date is date of authorized officer's signature. Wildfire management includes but is not limited to: ... (2) Projects to stabilize and rehabilitate lands affected by wildfire."

Appeal Procedures: This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA), Office of the Secretary, in accordance with regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and Form 1842-1. If an appeal is filed, your notice of appeal should be received by the Burns District Office, 28910 Highway 20 West, Hines, Oregon 97738, within 30 days of receipt of the decision. The appellant has the burden of showing the decision appealed is in error.

A copy of the appeal, statement of reasons, and all other supporting documents should also be sent to the Regional Solicitor, Pacific Northwest Region, U.S. Department of the Interior, 805 SW Broadway, Portland, Oregon 97205. If the notice of appeal did not include a statement of reasons for the appeal, it must be sent to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of Hearings and Appeals, 801 North Quincy Street, Arlington, Virginia 22203. It is suggested appeals be sent certified mail, return receipt requested.

Request for Stay

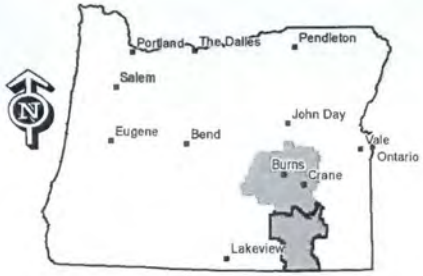
Should you wish to file a motion for stay pending the outcome of an appeal of this decision, you must show sufficient justification based on the following standards under 43 CFR 4.21:

- The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied.
- The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits.
- The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted.
- Whether or not the public interest favors granting the stay.

As noted above, the motion for stay must be filed in the office of the authorized officer.

Signature: Rhonda Karges Date: 1/2/2014
Andrews/Steens Field Manager

Coyote Gap Fire
Andrews Resource Area
Vicinity Map



Legend

- Andrews Resource Area Boundary
- Coyote_Gap_Fire_Peremiter
- Highways
- Paved Road
- Non-Paved Improved Road
- Natural/Unknown Road Surface

Note: No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability or completeness of these data for individual or aggregate use with other data. Original data was compiled from various sources and may be updated without notification.

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Burns District, Oregon

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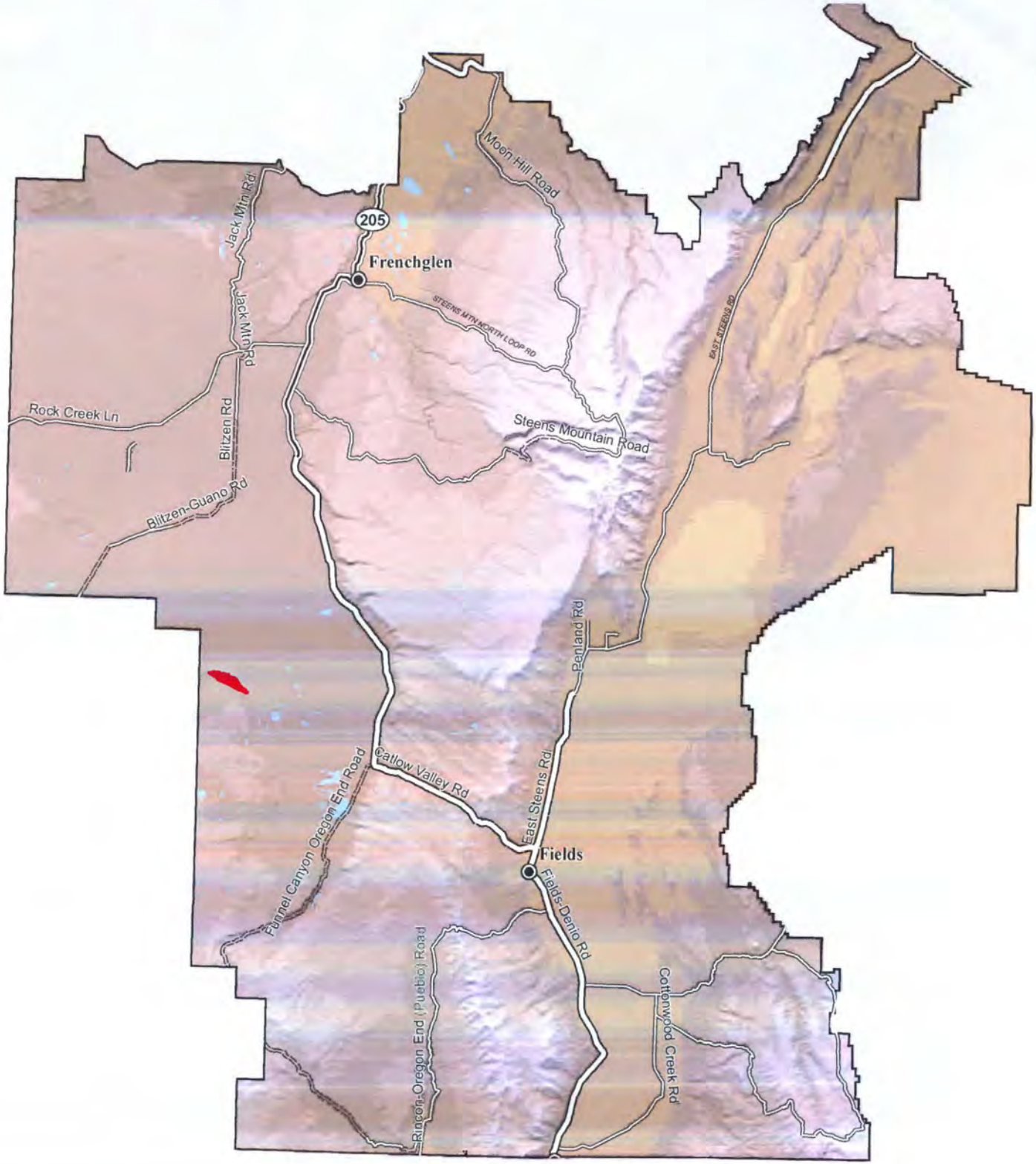
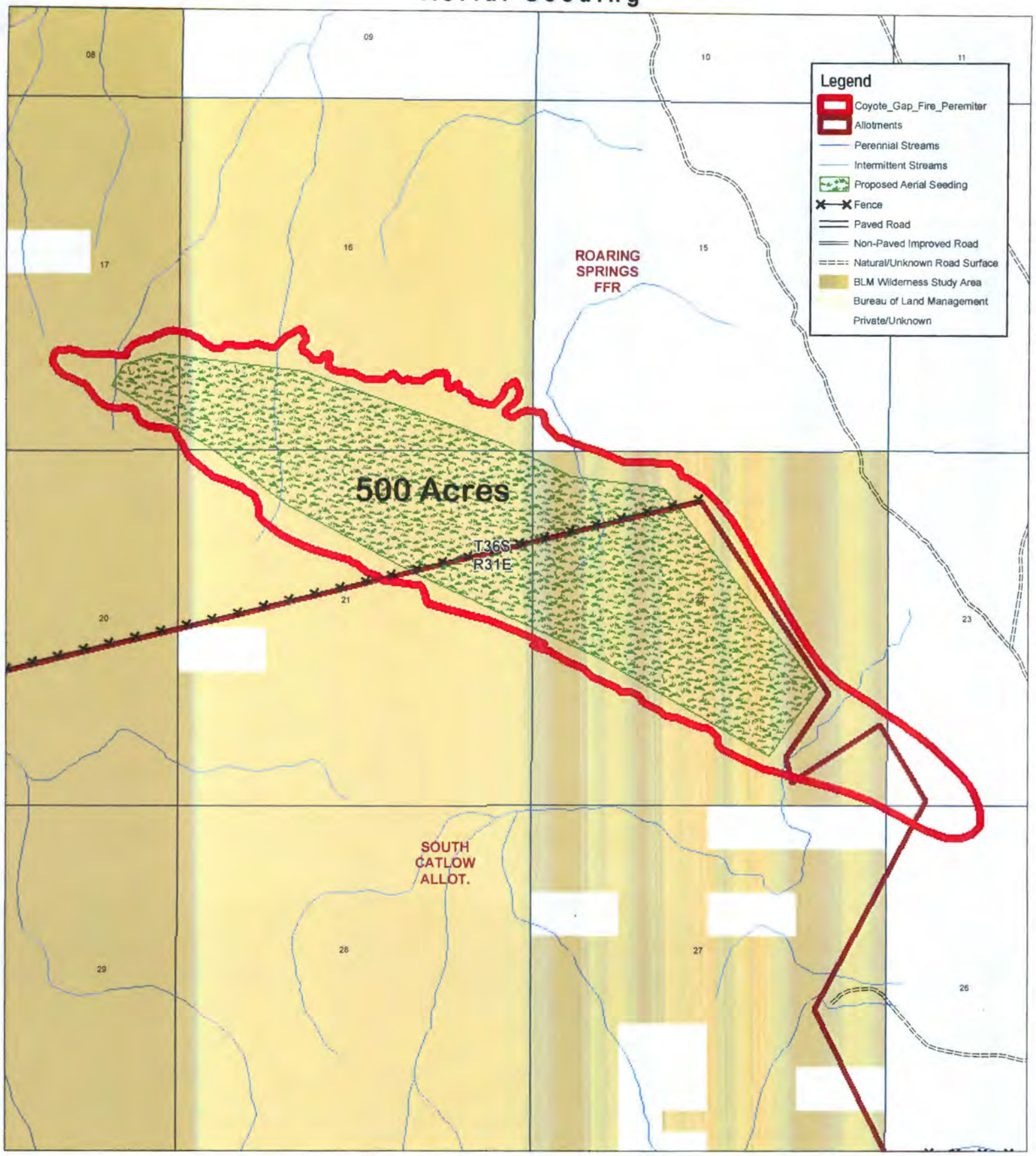


Coyote Gap Fire
Aerial Seeding



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Burns District, Oregon

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