Categorical Exclusion Determination and Decision Record

FUEL HAZARD REDUCTION IN THE WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE

Right Fork Sardine Creek

OR115-09-04

Description of Proposed Action

The Butte Falls Resource Area of the Medford District BLM (Bureau of Land Management) proposes to reduce the vertical continuity of hazardous fuels (ladder fuels), which allows fire to carry from the surface fuels into the crowns of trees and shrubs, while retaining diverse species composition. All work would be completed manually by understory thinning, handpiling and burning, or chipping or removing slash with follow-up underburning for maintaining treatment areas.

The objective is to decrease the likelihood of high intensity fire behavior which can potentially damage natural resources, private land, homes, and threaten the safety of individuals and firefighters. The project would lessen the potential damage from a wildfire initiated within or adjacent to the project areas, and would increase tactical opportunities for firefighters to limit fire spread and damage to residential homes during a wildfire event. This action would begin in fiscal year 2009.

Understory Thinning

Thinning the understory vegetation would reduce the vertical continuity or the ladder fuel component which contributes to the initiation of higher intensity fires and the movement of a surface fire up into the crowns of overstory canopy. Vegetation proposed to be removed includes noncommercial (less than 8 inches diameter at breast height [dbh]) conifer trees, hardwoods, and shrubs.

Thinning of the understory vegetation would be accomplished manually. All conifers and hardwoods greater than 8 inches dbh would be reserved. Sugar pine, silk tassel, ninebark, hazel, mountain mahogany, and riparian species (e.g., maple, alder, willow, ash, and yew wood) would be reserved.

Proposed treatment prescription:

1. Cut conifers and hardwoods greater than 1 foot tall and less than 8 inches dbh to a 25-foot by 25-foot spacing.
2. Cut shrub species greater than 1 foot tall and less than 10 inches in diameter at 1 foot above ground level to 45-foot by 45-foot spacing.
3. Prune 6 to 14 inch dbh conifers up to 10 feet above ground level.
4. Handpile and Pile Burn - Slashed material 1 to 8 inches in diameter and greater than 2 feet in length would be hand piled, covered, and burned. Burning would be conducted after significant precipitation has occurred to limit creeping between piles and to

minimize the potential of escape and damage to residual stands. Hand pile burning would start after October 15 and continue to March 1.

5. Maintenance Thinning and Underburning - Maintenance thinning by hand or fire would occur 5 to 8 years following the initial treatments. Treatment could include cutting hardwood and shrub species sprouts greater than 18 inches high and less than 2 inches in diameter to the 2 most dominate stems. Follow-up underburning would occur in the spring or fall.

Location of Proposed Action

The project area is located on approximately 985 acres of timber and brushlands adjacent to National Fire Plan projects on private land currently being treated to reduce hazardous fuels (see Table 1 and maps for locations). This project would occur in the Evans Creek and Rogue River-Gold Hill 5th field watersheds. This work has been coordinated with private land owners and the Seven Basins Watershed Council.

Table 1: Project Location and Acres

Unit Number	Legal	Acres
Right Fork Sardine Creek 15-1	T35S-R3W-Sec.15	22
Right Fork Sardine Creek 20-1	T35S-R3W-Sec.20	49
Right Fork Sardine Creek 21-1	T35S-R3W-Sec.21	344
Right Fork Sardine Creek 29-1	T35S-R3W-Sec.29	341
Evans Sardine 3-1	T35S-R3W-Sec.3	27
Evans Sardine 3-2	T35S-R3W-Sec.3	18
Evans Sardine 3-3	T35S-R3W-Sec.3	56
Evans Sardine 3-4	T35S-R3W-Sec.3	13
Evans Sardine 10-1	T35S-R3W-Sec.10	35
Evans Sardine 10-2	T35S-R3W-Sec.10	32
Evans Sardine 35-1	T34S-R3W-Sec.35	48

This project is a collaborative effort between Medford BLM, Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), and residents of Sardine Creek Road in an effort to improve community awareness of wildfire issues and to reduce fire and safety risks to individuals, local communities, and wildland firefighters.

Plan Conformance Review

The Bureau of Land Management did not scope this proposal and the public was not involved in its development. This proposal is consistent with policy directed by the following:

- *Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement* and *Record of Decision for Amendments to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (Northwest Forest Plan FSEIS, 1994 and ROD, 1994);

- *Final-Medford District Proposed Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* and *Record of Decision* (EIS, 1994 and RMP/ROD, 1995);
- *Record of Decision To Remove the Survey and Manage Mitigation Measure Standards and Guidelines from the Bureau of Land Management Resource Management Plans Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl* (USDI 2007); and
- *Medford District Integrated Weed Management Plan Environmental Assessment* (1998) and tiered to the *Final-Northwest Area Noxious Weed Control Program Environmental Impact Statement* (EIS, 1985).

The proposed action is in conformance with the direction given for the management of public lands in the Medford District by the Oregon and California Lands Act of 1937, Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, Endangered Species Act of 1973, Clean Water Act of 1987, Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 (as amended 1986 and 1996), Clean Air Act of 1990 (as amended), and Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979.

This proposal is consistent with management direction in the Medford District Resource Management Plan that directs the BLM to "Coordinate fire management activities in rural interface areas with local governments, agencies, and landowners" (USDI 1995, p.89).

Project Design Features (PDF)

Project Design Features are included in this project to reduce potential impacts to natural and cultural resources and to ensure the proposed vegetation and fuel reduction treatments are consistent with resource management objectives.

Riparian Reserves

- To ensure existing shade levels along streams are maintained, vegetation treatment will not occur within 50 feet of fish-bearing and perennial streams and within 25 feet of intermittent streams.
- Hand piles will not be placed or burned within 50 feet of fish-bearing and perennial streams and within 25 feet of intermittent streams. Piles will not be placed in channel bottoms.
- Fuels will not be treated within inner gorge slopes 35 percent or greater along all streams.

Wildlife and Botany

- Special status species wildlife sites will be buffered according to the management recommendations for that species in effect at the time of treatment. Buffer size and strategy will be dependent on site-specific conditions, proposed treatments and species involved. Fuels treatment could take place within these buffers if the species or specific habitat characteristics are not adversely impacted.
- Special status plant sites will be buffered according to management recommendations for that species in effect at the time of treatment. Buffer sizes will be dependent on site-

specific conditions, proposed treatments, and species involved. Understory burning may occur through some vascular plant sites during plant dormancy.

- Restricted activities from March 1 to June 30 within 0.25 miles of known northern spotted owl nests. If it is determined the owls are not nesting within 0.25 miles of a fuels hazard reduction unit, the restriction would be waived.

Cultural Resources

- A cultural resource site (Mudspring Mine – BLM Site Number OR110-1018) in T35S, R3W, section 21 will be avoided by all project-related activities. The cultural site is located along BLM road #35-3-21.0 and is just outside the project area.
- Fuels reduction activities will not be implemented in fuels unit number 29-1 (T35S, R3W, section 29) until cultural surveys have been completed.
- Site-specific protection and mitigating measures will be implemented to preserve the integrity of all existing and discovered cultural and national historic sites and will be completed in consultation with a BLM cultural specialist.

Vegetation/Fuel Treatment

Manual Treatments

- Approximately 10 percent of each unit will be left untreated. This will include untreated riparian buffers and special status plant and wildlife buffers.

Prescribed Burning

- All prescribed burn units would have an approved prescribed fire plan prior to ignition and in compliance with *Prescribed Fire Handbook H-9214-1* (IM No. OF&A 2002-027). The prescribed burn plan would contain measurable objectives, a predetermined prescription, and contingency plan to be implemented in the event of an escape.
- To prevent fire escapes and to minimize damage to residual vegetation/trees, burning conditions would be monitored closely.
- Prescribed burning will comply with Oregon Department of Forestry's Smoke Management Plan. Smoke emission control could also include conducting mop-up as soon as possible after ignition is complete, and covering hand piles to permit burning during the rainy season.

Categorical Exclusion Determination

This proposed action qualifies as a categorical exclusion as provided in United States Department of the Interior Departmental Manual 516 DM 11.9, D(10) which allows for the following:

Vegetation management activities, such as seeding, planting, invasive plant removal, installation of erosion control devices (e.g., mats/straw/chips), and mechanical treatments, such as crushing,

piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, mowing, and prescribed fire when the activity is necessary for the management of vegetation on public lands. Such activities:

a. *Shall not exceed 4,500 acres per prescribed fire project and 1,000 acres for other vegetation management projects;*
b. *Shall not be conducted in Wilderness areas or Wilderness Study Areas;*
c. *Shall not include the use of herbicides, pesticides, biological treatments or the construction of new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure;*
d. *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*
e. *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.*

Before any action described in the list of categorical exclusions may be used, the "extraordinary circumstances," included in 516 DM 2, Appendix 2, must be reviewed for applicability. After review, the BLM determined no extraordinary circumstances exist that would cause the proposed action to have a significant environmental effect. The action will not require additional analysis.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this project, contact Al Mason, Fuels Management Specialist, at (541) 618-2391.

NEPA Categorical Exclusion Review

Proposed Action:

The BLM proposes to reduce ladder fuels by manual and prescribed fire treatment of understory vegetation including understory thinning, hand piling, chipping, burning, and removal of the resulting slash on 985 acres of BLM land.

Department of the Interior Manual 516 2.3.A(3) provides for a review of the following criteria for categorical exclusion to determine if exceptions apply to the proposed action based on actions which may:

1. *Have significant impacts on public health or safety.*

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial RW Remarks:

2. *Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resource; 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); floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.*

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial [illegible] Remarks:

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

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial RW Remarks:

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

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial RW Remarks:

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

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial RW Remarks:

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

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial SLS Remarks:

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.*

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial [illegible] Remarks: see cultural survey report OR110-06-11

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.*

   Plants ☐ Yes ☒ No Initial MW Remarks:
   Animals ☐ Yes ☒ No Initial LH Remarks:
   Fish ☐ Yes ☒ No Initial SK Remarks:

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

   ☐ Yes ☒ No
   Initial RW Remarks:

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

    ☐ Yes ☒ No
    Initial RW Remarks:

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).*

    ☐ Yes ☒ No
    Initial [illegible] Remarks:

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).*

    ☐ Yes ☒ No
    Initial MW Remarks: no noxious weed populations documented in the units

Decision

It is my decision to allow the manual and prescribed fire treatment of understory vegetation including understory thinning, hand piling, chipping, burning, and removal of the resulting slash on 985 acres of BLM land. This action will reduce the vertical continuity of hazardous fuels (ladder fuels), which allow fire to carry from the surface fuels into the crowns of trees and/or shrubs, while retaining species composition and diversity.

Decision Rationale

The proposed action has been reviewed by Butte Falls Resource Area staff and appropriate Project Design Features, as specified above, will be incorporated into the proposal. Based on the attached NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) Categorical Exclusion Review, I have determined the proposed action involves no significant impact to the human environment and no further environmental analysis is required.

David J. Hughes — 12/04/08
Date

David J. Hughes
Acting Field Manager
Butte Falls Resource Area

Administrative Remedy

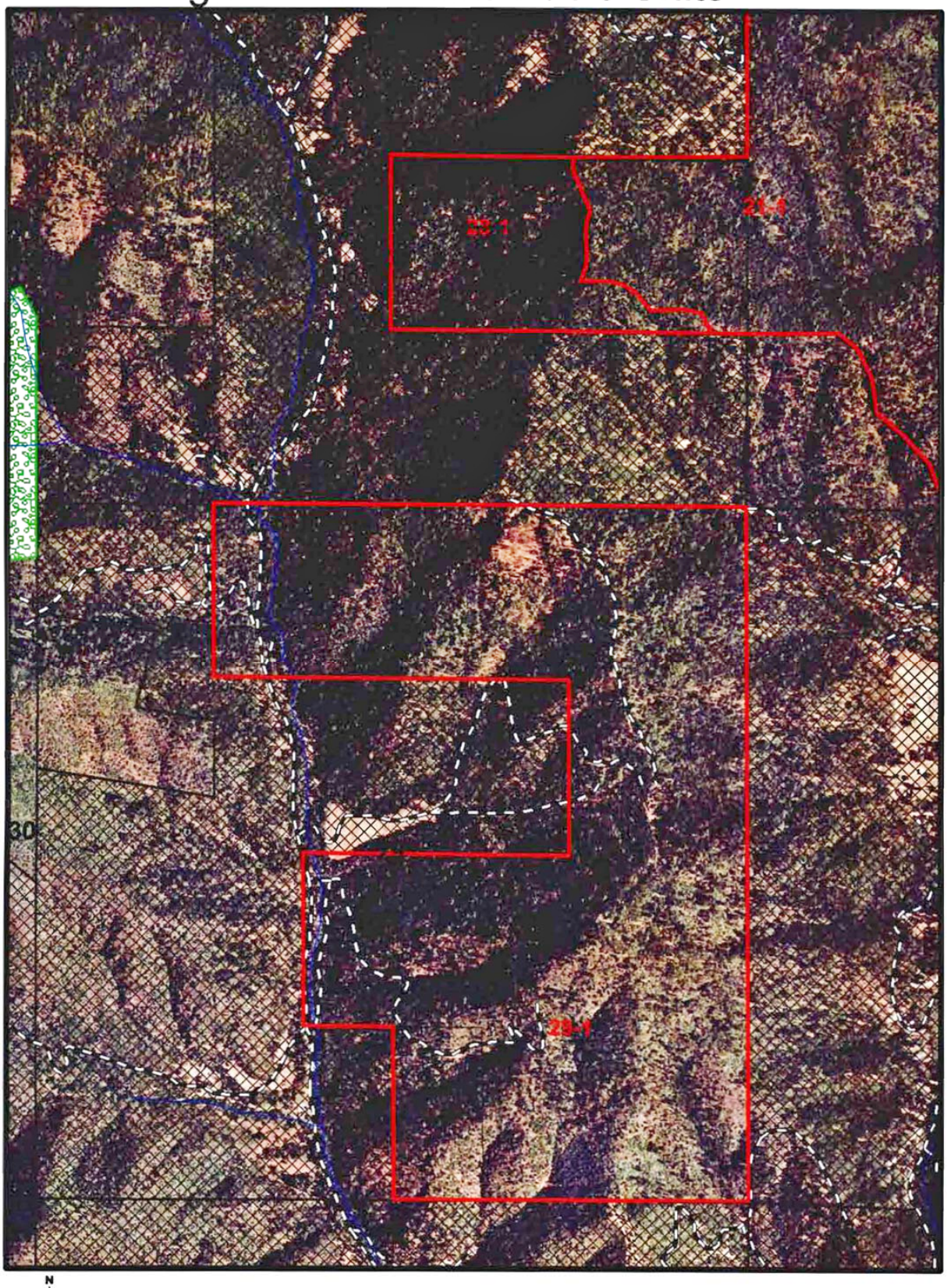
Notice of the forest management decision to be made on the action described in this categorical exclusion will be posted on the District internet website. The action is subject to protest under 43 CFR section 4.450-2. A decision in response to a protest is subject to appeal to the Interior Board of Land Appeals under 43 CFR part 4.

Categorical Exclusion Reviewers:

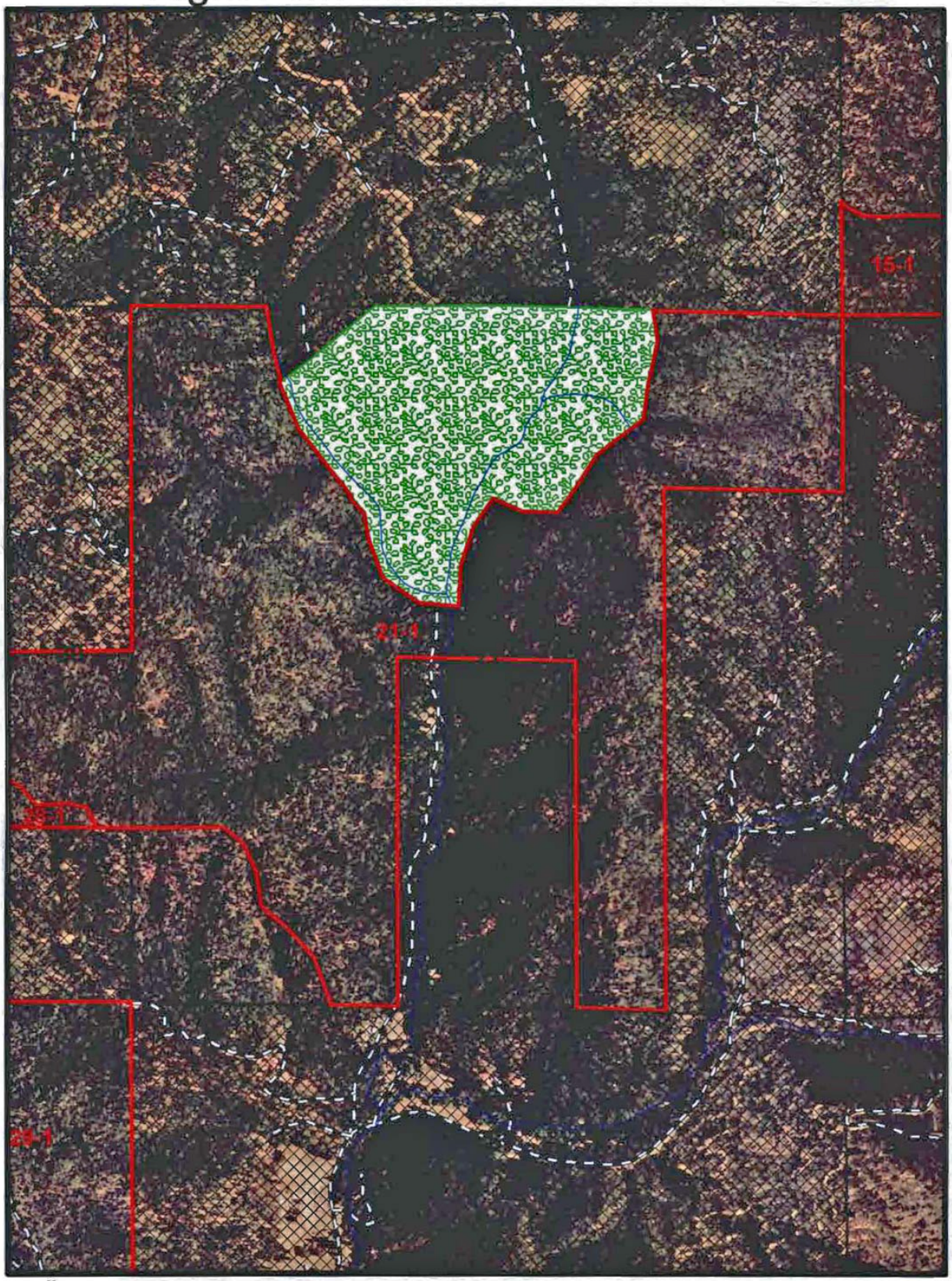
Name	Title	Date	Initials
Robyn Wicks ~~Jean Williams~~	NEPA Coordinator	12/4/08	RW
Marcia Wineteer	Botanist	11/19/08	mw
Linda Hale	Wildlife Biologist	11/17/08	LH
Steve Liebhardt	Fisheries Biologist	11/17/08	SL
Shawn Simpson	Hydrologist	11/12/08	SLS
Ken Van Etten	Soil Scientist	11/17/08	KBV
Al Mason	Fire/Fuels Specialist	12/4/08	AFM
~~John McNeel~~ Ann Ramage / District Archeologist ~~Cultural Resource Technician~~		12/4/08	AR
Doug Stewart	Silviculturist	11-5-08	DJS
Trish Lindaman	Outdoor Recreation Planner	11/6/08	TL

Right Fork Sardine Creek Fuels Units

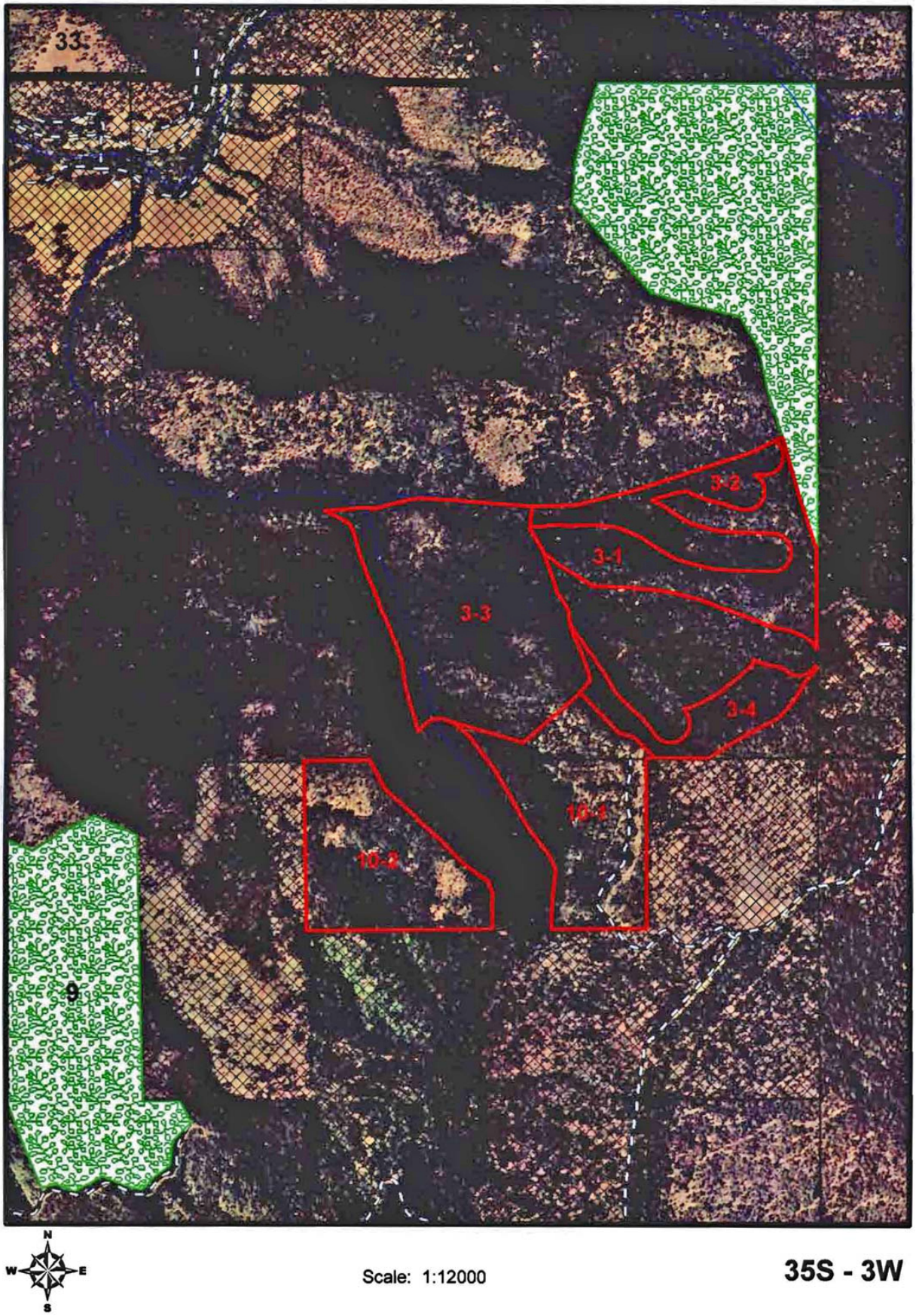
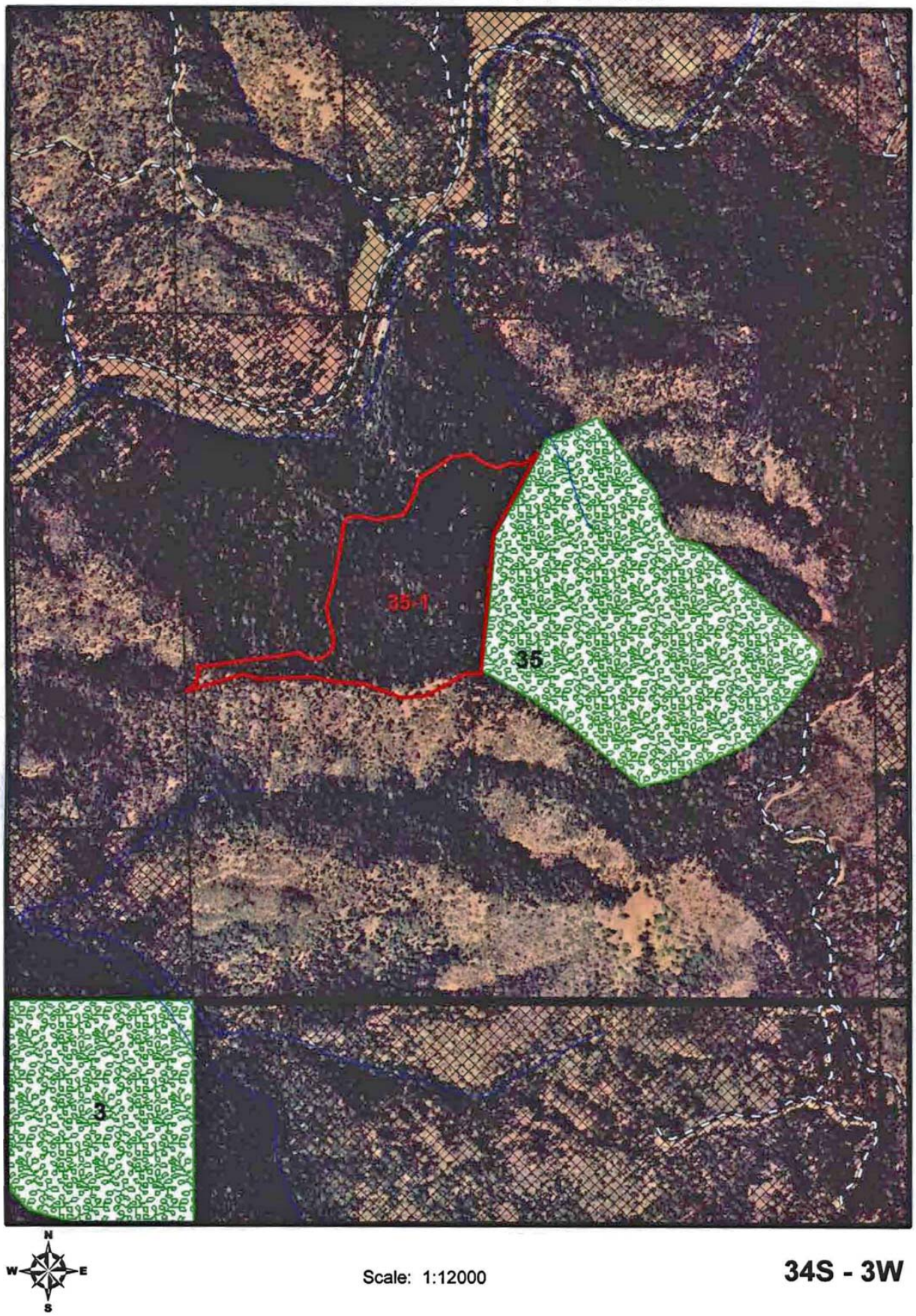
Right Fork Sardine Fuels Units



Right Fork Sardine Fuels Units



Evans Sardine Fuels Units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