Finding of No Significant Impact

Sage-grouse Playa Management

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http://www.blm.gov/or/districts/prineville/plans/index.php

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has completed an Environmental Assessment (EA), No. DOI-BLM-OR-P000-2012-0027-EA that analyzes the effects of four action alternatives to address renewal of livestock grazing permits and improve habitat for Greater sage-grouse in and around playas on 143,000 acres of public land south of Hampton, Oregon. A playa is a nearly level area at the bottom of an un-drained desert basin, sometimes temporarily covered with water.

The proposed actions include: renew livestock grazing permits; thin dense stands of young juniper; thin silver sagebrush in playas; re-route roads and primitive routes so they don't go through playas; fence playas to exclude livestock grazing; fill in dugouts (artificial water holes) in playas; and install wells, pipelines and troughs to replace livestock water lost at filled-in dugouts. The BLM has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) that analyzes the expected effects of these actions. The EA is summarized and incorporated by reference in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). Both are available at the BLM office listed above, and on the internet at http://www.blm.gov/or/districts/prineville/plans/index.php

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations state that the significance of impacts must be determined in terms of both context and intensity (40 CFR 1508.27). These are described below.

Context

Permit renewal

There were two main purposes of this project. One was to respond to applications for permit renewal and consider whether or not to renew (with or without modifications) the 10-year livestock grazing permits #3605569, #3605050, #3605623 in accordance with 43 CFR Part 4130. The grazing permits for the Hampton Allotment and ZX Allotment expired in 2014. The Ram Lake Allotment permit will expire in 2016. When issued, grazing permits must also address appropriate terms and conditions designed to "achieve management and resource condition

objectives for the public lands...and to ensure conformance with part 4180" (43 CFR Part 4130.3).

Sage-grouse habitat

A second primary purpose of this project was to improve habitat for Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*, hereafter sage-grouse) on playas (specifically, in an area with a high density of playas) and in areas where habitat connectivity is threatened by juniper encroachment (and where work would complement other nearby habitat enhancement projects).

The sage-grouse is a landscape-scale species that requires multiple, suitable sagebrush habitats for annual reproductive success and adult and juvenile survival. Historically, large size patches of intact sagebrush habitats existed across the western U.S., but since the arrival of Europeans many of these habitats have been degraded, reduced, or eliminated (Knick and Connelly 2011, Leu and Hanser 2011[1]). Sage-grouse currently occupy about 50 percent of their potential habitat prior to European settlement (Schroeder et al. 2004). The sage-grouse population in central Oregon population has declined steadily (average -0.004 percent/year) and the trend is the most sustained of all BLM districts (Hagen 2011).

The project focused on playas because playas are important for many aspects of the sage-grouse life cycle, and it focused in this area because of the high density of playas; within the project area there are 217 playas 2.5 acres or larger. Playas are important brood-rearing (early and late) habitat for sage-grouse because of their potential herbaceous and insect diversity. Playas also provide winter habitat for local sage-grouse populations, and playas are sometimes used as leks. Many of the playas in the project area are limited in plant species diversity and/or have altered natural hydraulic and nutrient cycling processes that are being exacerbated by dugouts, concentrated livestock grazing, or encroaching silver sagebrush. Playas often serve as water sources for livestock and wildlife; some have been dug out to extend water availability. Livestock concentrate in the playas when water is available, resulting in increased utilization, trampling of plants, altered nutrient cycles, and soil compaction; contributing to the diminished ecological condition of the playas. Silver sagebrush encroachment onto playas reduces plant species abundance and diversity, which alters playa function and reduces playa suitability for sage grouse.

Expansion of young juniper into sagebrush habitat reduces habitat connectivity both by removing suitable cover and by providing tall structures that attract predators of sage-grouse such as ravens (Doherty et al. 2008, 2010).

[1] See EA for full citation of references mentioned in this FONSI.

This habitat enhancement work complements past and ongoing work the BLM has done in the area. The BLM has already removed young juniper from over 10,000 acres in the project area both in and around playas under two previously approved projects. These previous projects allow BLM to cut juniper throughout the project area except in areas with wilderness characteristics (see description of wilderness characteristics in Chapter 3 of this EA). This resulted in large blocks between treatments where connectivity is limited and playas are surrounded by young juniper. These areas were excluded because at the time of the previous analysis and decision, national BLM direction was more restrictive concerning cutting juniper in areas with wilderness characteristics.

Intensity

I have considered the potential intensity and severity of the impacts anticipated from implementation of a Decision on this EA relative to each of the ten areas suggested for consideration by the CEQ. With regard to each:

1. **Would any of the alternatives have significant beneficial or adverse impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(1)?** No.
   Rationale: Each alternative included tradeoffs between beneficial and adverse impacts. None of the effects are potentially significant. A summary of effects is presented in Chapter 3 of the EA. Beneficial impacts that would occur under any one of the action alternatives include improved sage-grouse brood rearing habitat, and more acres of playa protected from concentrated grazing when soil is wet. Adverse impacts include a "weak" change (the contrast can be seen but does not attract attention) in visual contrast in Alternatives 3-5, and a reduction in the contribution of the allotments to grazing permittee personal revenue of 10 percent in Alternative 3 and 8.7 percent in Alternatives 4 and 5. In Alternative 5 the effect on the permittee would be temporary as AUMs would be restored upon removal of temporary fences.

2. **Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on public health and safety (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(2)?** No.
   Rationale: None of the alternatives would have any effect on human health or safety because none of the actions have a dangerous or hazardous aspect. The only potentially dangerous aspect is to those actually performing the work, and they would be instructed in safety precautions.

3. **Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on unique geographic characteristics (cultural or historic resources, park lands, prime and unique farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, designated wilderness or wilderness study areas, or ecologically critical areas (ACECs, RNAs, significant caves)) (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(3)?** No.

Rationale: The only unique geographic characteristic in the project area is the 640 acre Benjamin Lake Research Natural Area and Area of Critical Environmental Concern. None of the actions would have any effect on the Benjamin RNA/ACEC.

4. **Would any of the alternatives have highly controversial effects (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(4)?** No.
   Rationale: There is disagreement between the BLM and some of the livestock grazing permittees (two of the three permittees) about how much it would cost to maintain new water developments instead of just continuing to use dugouts. In the response to the permittees' comments, the BLM explained why it thinks the permittee came up with a different estimate of costs (partly because they didn't account for cost of periodic drying up of dugouts and associated "emergency" moving of livestock). The third permittee commented, "costs associated with installing these new facilities [wells and pipelines] will be more than offset by the reliable source of water provided and by the lessening of management adjustments that must be made due to the unpredictability of playa water."

   There is also disagreement between BLM and all three permittees about how filling dugouts and removing livestock grazing would affect playas and thus sage-grouse. Their primary concern was over the subsequent reduction in AUMs available for livestock. In the EA and response to comments, the BLM cited research showing why it came to its conclusions about effects on playas and sage-grouse.

   While most commenters expressed support for thinning juniper, some expressed concern about how it would affect the appearance of "naturalness," and whether this would mean areas would no longer have wilderness characteristics. In the project area 45,589 acres possess wilderness characteristics. As stated in the EA, acres appearing "natural" 20 years after implementation would be reduced five percent in Alternatives 3 and 4, increased five to six percent in Alternatives 1 and 5, and increased twelve percent in Alternative 2. None of these changes would cause the areas to no longer possess wilderness characteristics. While the action is controversial, the effects are not.

   The BLM respects the differing opinions expressed by some commenters, but does not believe the disagreement represents a high degree of controversy about effects.

5. **Would any of the alternatives have highly uncertain effects or involve unique or unknown risks (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(5)?** No.
   Rationale: There are no uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks associated with this project. All effects are described in Chapter 3 of the EA.

6. **Would any of the alternatives establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(6)?** No.

Rationale: One commenter said, "Creating a permanent exclosure out of the Canary Lake Pasture in the Hampton Allotment sets a bad precedent as the closure is not based on any proven scientific rationale and does not consider any mitigation other than elimination of livestock grazing to resolve impacts." As BLM stated in the response to comments, the grazing permittee for the Hampton Allotment previously expressed support for the large Canary Lake Pasture exclosure, rather than a smaller fence exclosing just the playa. According to him there isn't that much forage in the exclosure, and the proposed pasture division fences in the pastures to the south would offset the loss of AUMs in Canary Lake because he would get better cattle distribution in the cross-fenced pastures. The proposed actions are not uncommon on public land, and would not set a precedent for future actions with significant impacts.

7. **Are any of the alternatives related to other actions with potentially significant cumulative impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(7)?** No.
   Rationale: One commenter stated that the removal of water sources would have a significant adverse effect on bats, but the commenter did not explain why BLM's conclusion in the EA (that there would be no effects) was wrong. Another comment said, "The decision has the potential to have significant impacts on sage-grouse and wildlife habitat, in addition to significant impacts on the permittees' operations." The BLM analyzed effects of the proposed actions on each of these resources in detail in Chapter 3 of EA. The BLM also considered other actions that would combine with those proposed in the alternatives. In most cases, there were no other actions that would have any effect. For a few issues, there would be a cumulative effect, but in no instance would effects combine to produce a significant effect.

8. **Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on scientific, cultural, or historic resources, including those listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Resources (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(8)?** No.
   Rationale: There are cultural resources in the project area, but the proposed action and alternatives include design features to prevent effects on these resources. There would be no effect to cultural or historic resources because sensitive areas would be avoided through project design.

9. **Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(9)?**
   Rationale: The proposed action and alternatives would have no effect on threatened or endangered species because none are present or expected to be in the area during project activities. Effects on Greater sage-grouse (not yet listed) are described in detail in the EA, and are expected to be positive.

10. **Would any of the alternatives have effects that threaten to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(10))?** No.
    Rationale: None of the alternatives would have effects that threaten to violate any laws.

Finding

On the basis of the information contained in the EA, the consideration of intensity factors described above, and all other information available to me, it is my determination that: (1) the alternatives are in conformance with the Brothers / La Pine Resource Management Plan; and (2) none of the alternatives would constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an EIS or a supplement to the existing EIS is not necessary and will not be prepared.

Signed,

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June 12, 2014

H.F. "Chip" Faver
Field Manager, Central Oregon Resource Area

June 12, 2014