Decision Record

EA Number: OR-056-06-078
Title of Action: The Greater La Pine Community Wildland Urban Interface Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project
Serial Case File or Project Number: Not applicable
BLM Office: Prineville District

I. Decision

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment for the Greater La Pine Community Wildland Urban Interface Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project, it is my decision to implement the Proposed Action. This Decision Record documents the specific components and rationale of my decision, which includes a number of actions focusing on a variety of treatments on approximately 19,212 acres within three treatment bands in the La Pine Basin. Proposed treatment prescriptions vary; however, all treatments are designed to improve public safety by promoting low-intensity fire behavior in units within 1.5 miles of a community at risk.

There are no actions contained in this Decision Record that were not analyzed in the Environmental Assessment.

II. Management Objectives

I seek to reduce the potential for high-intensity wildfires in the Project Area by manipulating vegetation to decrease surface and crown fire behavior. The project would focus on altering the key components of wildfire behavior such as surface fuel loading, ladder fuel presence and crown bulk density. Reducing these components would lower wildfire intensity, increase fire suppression effectiveness, and provide for protection of life, property and resources. In addition, recognizing fire's essential role as an ecosystem process, fuel reduction activities would have the added benefits of helping improve overall forest and range health and preventing large-scale occurrences of insect and disease.

III. Management Actions

The EA describes a variety of treatments that would occur in three treatment bands within 1.5 miles of a community-at-risk, as identified in Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

The first treatment band closest to non-federally managed property, called the home ignition area, targets residences, businesses, administrative sites and other key structures and extends out for 100 – 500 feet depending on local site conditions. Vegetation and fuel treatments would be the most intense in this band with the goals of managing for conditions that would not support crown fire and would only allow for surface fires with flame lengths of less than two feet. Providing safe ingress and egress to structures would also be a key factor. The areas identified for treatment band one involve an estimated 1,751 acres.

The defense area (second band) extends out from the first band up to approximately one-quarter mile, depending on treatments identified in CWPPs. The goal for this band is designed to

prevent crown fire initiation and spread, and keep surface flame lengths below the three to four foot range. Flame lengths below this are considered to be a safe environment for suppression forces to engage in direct attack of the fire. This zone is approximately 3,553 acres.

The general forest area (third band) encompasses the remainder of the project area, furthest away from homes and up to 1.5 miles (approximately 13,405, acres). Vegetation and fuel treatment goals in this band would be designed to reduce the occurrence, size and severity of crown fires by breaking up fuel continuities and limiting ladder fuels. Most wildland fires would be limited to surface fires less than four foot flame length with limited passive crown fires. Treatments goals would also place a higher emphasis on wildlife habitat and silvicultural needs as long as fuel continuities and ladder fuels are reduced on at least 50 percent of the area.

Table 2-2 in the EA (pages 17 – 20) identifies the treatment units and the specific activities identified for each of the 98 units in the project area. The majority of treatments would be mechanical, and many units would require more than one entry to reach the objective of promoting low-intensity fire behavior. The following details my decisions concerning the different treatment types.

<u>Mechanical</u>

- Commercial Thinning (approximately 3,583 acres) - generally utilizes small three-wheeled or bobcat mounted shears, or larger track-mounted shears/hot-saws with swing boom, delimbers, skidders and feller bunchers.
- Non-Commercial Thinning (approximately 9,415 acres) - can involve either rubber tired, or tracked machines or hand chainsaw methods, depending on the type of stand and objectives.
- Machine Piling - usually done by tracked machine with brush rake, sometimes with a rubber-tired skidder or bobcat. A tracked vehicle with grapples may also be used.
- Masticating/Mowing (approximately 3,105 acres of treatment) – can be implemented by tracked or wheeled machine to cut or break material to lower the fuel profile, reduce piece size, and put material into contact with the ground.

<u>Hand</u>

- Pre-commercial thinning or pruning - manual cutting using a chainsaw.
- Hand piling of treatment or natural fuels (approximately 1,751 acres)

<u>Prescribed Fire</u>

These treatments could include low-intensity burning of larger areas (broadcast), intense burning of small areas to create small openings (jackpot burning), and pile burning to reduce or eliminate debris and slash. Specifically, according to treatment area the following methods would be expected:

- Hand or Machine Pile Burning (approximately 1,051 acres) - high intensity, small area impacts.

- Ponderosa Pine Stand Maintenance (approximately 2,123 acres) - low-intensity underburning
- Lodgepole Pine Regeneration (approximately 700 acres) - high intensity underburning to create “holes” in the canopy
- Meadow/Riparian Treatments (approximately 2,120 acres) - broadcast burning of mechanically pre-treated adjacent lodgepole pine thickets. Some fire spread into the meadow area is expected and desirable.

The site-specific methods for each treatment unit would be selected based on the current condition of the vegetation, visual resource management considerations and input from adjacent communities through Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

To ensure the effects documented in the Environmental Assessment, I have decided to implement all of the Best Management Practices identified in the EA on pages 19 and 20.

Alternatives Considered

Pursuant to current legislation, this EA only analyzed the proposed action. Section 104 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act provides an alternative analysis process for projects in wildland urban interface areas, including allowing for the development of a single proposed action. The Act states that “If an authorized hazardous fuel reduction project proposed to be conducted in the wildland-urban interface is located no further than 1.5 miles from the boundary of an at-risk community, the [Agency] is not required to study, develop, or describe any alternative to the proposed agency action in the environmental assessment or environmental impact statement prepared pursuant to section 102(2) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969(42 U.S.C. 4332(2)).”

Rationale for Decision:

In making the above decision, I have determined that the fuels reduction activities in this EA would:

- Meet the purpose and need, and respond to existing laws, plans, strategies and direction described on Pages 10-11 of the EA;
- Respond substantively to other agency, governmental, and public advice and requests, as described in the EA on page 11 and in the response to comments as described below;
- Are feasible and can be accomplished.

The activities proposed for the Project Area will conform to the Upper Deschutes Resource Management Plan (2005) to treat vegetation within the wildland urban interface. At the same time, the agency will meet the direction provided by the Greater La Pine, Upper Deschutes River Natural Resource Coalition and the Walker Range Community Wildfire Protection Plans. These plans have identified 41 Communities-at-Risk throughout the project area and provide the BLM with treatment objectives that focus on reducing hazardous fuels, increasing fire suppression capabilities (defensible space) and improving ecosystem health.

Compliance and Conformance with Land Use Plans

I have evaluated the actions in the EA against the goals and objectives of relevant land use plans. My decision is consistent with the direction in the Upper Deschutes Resource Management Plan as summarized in the following:

- In the wildland urban interface, manage live and dead vegetation so that a wildland fire would burn with fire behavior where firefighters can be safe and successful in suppression efforts under hot, dry summer weather conditions. Design treatments for human safety while still considering recreation opportunities, wildlife habitat and corridors, visual quality, air and water quality, and public access.
- Restore and maintain ecosystems consistent with land uses and historic fire regimes through wildland fire use, prescribed fire, and other methods to reduce areas of high fuel loading that may contribute to extreme fire behavior.
- Maintain and promote healthy and diverse lodgepole and ponderosa pine forest ecosystems. Manage stand structure, density, species composition, patch size, pattern and distribution to provide an environment in which fire intensity can be managed for human safety and fire effects that are compatible with other management objectives. Provide for a balance of biological, social and economic needs in an urban/wildland setting.
- Maintain or improve habitats to support healthy, productive and diverse populations and communities of native plants and animals (including species of local importance) appropriate soil, climate and landform. Where consistent with habitat capabilities, meet ODFW management objective numbers for deer, elk and pronghorn.
- Ensure that water quality (surface and ground) influenced by BLM activities a) achieves or is making significant progress toward achieving established BLM objectives for watershed functions, and b) complies with or is making progress toward achieving State of Oregon water quality standards for beneficial uses as established per stream by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ).
- Restore the extent and diversity of wet and moist meadow and riparian plant communities using techniques such as burning, cutting encroaching conifers, planting native hardwoods, grazing management, fencing, and managing uplands for improved hydrologic function.
- Help achieve the goals and objectives of the La Pine State Park Master Plan and offer expertise in helping to maintain and restore healthy and functioning forest, meadow and riparian ecosystems within La Pine State Park.

This project also meets the goals and objectives of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003). HFRA contains a variety of provisions to speed up hazardous-fuel reduction and forest-restoration projects on specific types of Federal land that are at risk of wildland fire and/or of insect and disease epidemics.

This EA also meets the goals and objectives of the Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River and State Scenic Waterway Comprehensive Management Plan (1996). Objectives specific to the Upper Deschutes Wild and Scenic River Plan include:

- Vegetation: Upland vegetation will continue to be dominated by ponderosa and lodgepole pine. The forest will be characterized by disturbances which mimic the effects of periodic occurrence of small, low intensity fires, to perpetuate a mosaic of stand structures and ages and reduce the risk of high intensity fires.
- V-6: Meadow restoration will primarily be achieved using prescribed burning or hand tools to remove encroaching vegetation. Other methods which will achieve objectives may be permitted if they would have no adverse effects on Outstandingly Remarkable Values.
- V-12: Some fuel reduction activities (pre-treatment) may be permitted (if such activities would not adversely affect Outstandingly Remarkable Values) to assist in the safe use of prescribed fire and adjacent to private in-holdings to reduce the threat of fire spreading to federal, state, or county lands and elsewhere.
- V-17: Vegetation will appear natural and emphasize protection of riparian plant communities. Any silvicultural practices which provide long-term benefits to Outstandingly Remarkable Values may be allowed.

Monitoring:

This project will be monitored in accordance to the Upper Deschutes Resource Management Plan (Upper Deschutes Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan, pages 162-163). This will emphasize third party collaboration and adaptive management concepts. Ten percent of treated units may be qualitatively monitored using protocol identified in the Central Oregon Fire Management Service Monitoring Plan. In addition to a pre-treatment assessment, units would be monitored for at least two growing seasons following treatment, to attempt to determine the effects of the treatment. This plan provides a standardized set of protocols, allows for data sharing between units and agencies, and monitors the first order treatment effects of prescribed fire and mechanical treatments.

Terms / Conditions / Stipulations:

The following will guide public land work activities associated with this project:

The La Pine Field Interdisciplinary Team will prepare site specific treatments prior to implementation, within the prescription parameters established for each unit in Sections 2.1 (Proposed Action) and 2.2 (Best Management Practices) of the EA . At a minimum, this field review team will be comprised of a team leader, 1-2 agency specialists, and one agency line officer. Other interested parties will be invited to participate in the review including the La Pine Stewardship contractor (Quicksilver), one representative from OregonWild, Sierra Club, ODFW, Sylvan Power, Deschutes and/or Klamath County, at least one representative from the adjacent CWPP/neighborhood, and the public-at-large.

The field review team will recommend proposed treatments to the Deschutes Resource Area Field Office Manager (FOM) along with a summary of any discussions, agreements, or additional mitigations. The FOM will consider these in making a final treatment determination. The purpose of this field team will be to:

- Continue collaborating on the desired future condition of the project area, develop site-

specific treatment prescriptions and any mitigations as provided within the scope of the EA, and;

- Provide a mechanism to allow adaptive management feedback when a treatment unit is accomplished.

The La Pine ID Team will meet at least twice a year, depending on schedules and work loads, with collaboration partners; once at the beginning of the calendar year to discuss upcoming projects, and the other at the end of field season to review projects.

Project activities on a given site will not proceed until such time as botanical, special status wildlife and cultural clearances are completed. Any measures specified in the respective clearance report will be adhered to in the design of unit treatments.

Implementation and Appeal Rights

Appeal rights for this decision have been identified in Sections 105 (Special Administrative Review Process) and 106 (Judicial Review) of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003). To be eligible to participate in the administrative review process for an authorized hazardous fuel reduction project, a person should have submitted, during scoping or the public comment period for the draft environmental assessment, specific written comments that relate to the proposed action.

This wildfire management decision is issued under **43 CFR Part 5003.1** and is effective immediately. The BLM has made the determination that vegetation, soil, or other resources on the public lands are at substantial risk of wildfire due to drought, fuels buildup, or other reasons, or at immediate risk of erosion or other damage due to wildfire. Thus, notwithstanding the provisions of 43 CFR 4.21(a)(1), filing a notice of appeal under 43 CFR Part 4 does not automatically suspend the effect of the decision. The Interior Board of Land Appeals must decide an appeal of this decision within 60 days after all pleadings have been filed, and within 180 days after the appeal was filed. 43 CFR 4.416.

/s/ Molly Brown 03/21/2007

Molly Brown
Deschutes Field Manager
Prineville District, Bureau of Land Mgmt.
Prineville, OR 97754

Date

Attachments: Public Involvement Summary

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT SUMMARY

Public involvement has been extensive throughout the planning and analysis process leading to this EA. Key public comment and participation was obtained on numerous occasions and has been documented in the EA on page 11. Efforts were made to ensure that all interested parties have had opportunities to participate and share their concerns and/or support for these actions.

In addition, during the 30-day comment period on the Draft EA, the BLM received comments concerning the proposed activities from individuals representing Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Deschutes County, the Sierra Club, OregonWild, Oregon Parks and Recreation, Sylvan Power Company, and the Upper Deschutes River Natural Resource Coalition. While many comments were supportive, several concerns were raised by ODFW, Sierra Club, OregonWild, and Oregon Parks and Recreation. To address these concerns, the interdisciplinary team responsible for the EA chose to respond to the comments through a series of meetings rather than in writing. The majority of changes resulting from these meetings were largely clarifications and no substantive changes were made to the draft EA or to the analysis. A summary of the meetings held to address issues and concerns follows:

- **LA PINE STATE PARK MEETING –** January 18, 2007 at the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department Office in Bend, Oregon. The meeting was attended by Steve Castillo, Dennis Fiore, Geoff Babb, Michelle McSwain, Curtis Smith, Letha Sanderson, Cliff Houck, Susan Skavlan, Larry Miller.

  The La Pine State Park primarily requested clarification over how vegetation would be treated inside the Park, and expressed concerns over how LPSP input would be incorporated into the unit decision-making process. Specifically, LPSP expressed concerns over treatment of vegetation in recreation areas and along the wild and scenic waterway, as well as expressing concerns over final viewsheds/aesthetics, wildlife habitat and recreational values.

  BLM was able to use the meeting process to clarify these issues and ensure LPSP that the BLM understands the need to mirror treatments with the park. The EA now does a more thorough job of identifying the relationship between BLM and LPSP and specifically identifies compliance with relevant objectives in the Upper Deschutes Resource Management Plan. Furthermore, the BLM will work with LPSP to create an implementation plan that emphasizes recreational and park values and will also work with LPSP to update and develop a current Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate future projects within the park. In addition, the BLM clarified that the EA will be implemented in the park using a collaborative process involving both BLM and LPSP parties. This collaboration will be used to identify treatment priorities such as roadways and administrative sites as well as address radial thinning around ponderosa pine on a case-by-case basis.

  BLM was also able to take advantage of the meeting to clarify several other issues raised by LPSP. As a result, the EA addresses more clearly that the BLM will dispose of all

slash after completing thinning either through burning, chipping or other means, and that the BLM has plans to retain wildlife habitat and travel corridors within the Park.

- **OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE MEETING –** 12/8/2006 at the USFS Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District in Bend. The meeting was attended by Steve Cohn, Steve Castillo, Geoff Babb, Glen Ardt, Steve George, Dennis Fiore, and Molly Brown.

  ODFW requested clarification of how BLM will meet primary wildlife needs, specifically cover and travel corridors as identified in the Upper Deschutes RMP. In addition, ODFW emphasized road closures to reduce habitat fragmentation, as a way of mitigating loss of wildlife cover in treatment units.

  As with other groups that commented on the EA, the response to comments was more in the way of clarifying information, rather than conducting a new analysis or making significant changes to the document. Through the meeting, the BLM was able to discuss the project in detail and provide clarity on how the site-specific unit treatments would be identified and implemented. ODFW will participate on the La Pine Field ID Team and will be able to provide unit treatment input to ensure wildlife needs are not overlooked.

  In response to specific ODFW questions over the relationship between hazardous fuel reduction and wildlife cover, as well as snag/downed wood retention, the BLM biologist clarified the following:

  Guidelines for Wildlife in the La Pine Project Area

  <u>Deer Migration Corridor</u>

  1. *Amount (percent) of cover retained*: Forty percent of BLM managed lands will be retained as suitable hiding cover to facilitate the use of and movement of mule deer through public lands. This includes vegetation managed in the La Pine State Park.
  2. *Scale to determine amount of cover*: Determining the amount of cover to be retained generally should not be calculated at the unit level, but should consider the general area surrounding the treatment area in such a way as to maintain connectivity of cover areas across the entire migration corridor.
  3. *Size of cover patches*: Where possible (based on the amount and location of available suitable hiding cover) the minimum cover patch size should be approximately 6.5 acres, and have a minimum width of at least 600 feet.
  4. *Location of cover patches*: Cover Patches should be located within 1,200 feet of another suitable cover patch to help provide connectivity of cover across the migration corridor. Locate cover patches away from roads, homes and other areas where people frequent. Also, when near water locate cover patches within 1,000 feet of water sources.
  5. *Hiding cover treatments*: In general, retained hiding cover areas may be thinned

when treatments will maintain or enhance suitable cover conditions (in consultation with ODFW).

6. *Areas lacking 40 percent hiding cover*: In areas where there is less than 40 percent hiding cover, treatments would be limited to fuels within the first 500 ft band and possibly in the second band depending on the abundance of fuel loads. Thinning around individual mature and old growth ponderosa pine trees would be allowed throughout a treatment unit.
7. *Transportation management*: To mitigate the loss of hiding cover and improve the habitat effectiveness of an area, roads that are not part of the interim road system may be closed.

Snags and Down Logs

1. Trees used to meet the snag and down log requirements will be selected from the largest trees available.
2. In ponderosa pine stands retain at least two hard snags (≥9 in. dbh) per acre.
3. In lodgepole pine stands retain at least six hard snags (≥9 in. dbh) per acre.
4. Where available, ponderosa pine trees will be selected for meeting the snag and down log requirements.
5. Retain at least 120 lineal feet of down logs (Class 1 and 2) per acre greater than or equal to 8 inch in diameter at the small end. Logs less than 12 feet in length will not be credited toward this total.
6. Some snags and down logs may be removed for safety reasons.
7. Retain all soft snags (stages 5-7) and down logs (Classes 4-6) from harvest and avoid destroying them during treatments. These snags and down logs do not count toward the hard snag and down log requirements. Some areas may have an over abundance of soft snags and down logs which may require some to be removed in order to facilitate vegetation management prescriptions.
8. In areas short in supply of hard snags and down logs, retain the largest green trees that would otherwise be harvested and use them to manage for snag and down log habitats.
9. Where hard snags and down logs are abundant, some may be harvested, but the largest snags and down logs available will be retained.
10. Snags do not need to be evenly distributed across a treatment area. If a clump of large snags is present, the clump may be retained to meet the snag requirements.
11. Where possible distribute down logs evenly across the treatment area.

- **SIERRA CLUB MEETING –** 12/15/2006 at the USFS Bend-Fort Rock Ranger District in Bend, Oregon. The meeting was attended by Marilyn Miller (SC),Asante Riverwind (SC), Sandy Lonsdale (Sylvan Power Company), Michelle McSwain, Ed Horn, Bill Dean, Steve Cohn, Steve Castillo, Molly Brown, Geoff Babb, and Dennis Fiore.

  As with other groups that commented on the EA, the response meeting was more in the way of clarifying information, rather than conducting a new analysis or making significant changes to the document. Through the meeting, the BLM was able to discuss the project in detail and provide clarity on how the site-specific unit treatments would be

identified and implemented. Sierra Club will participate on the La Pine Field ID Team and will be able to provide unit treatment input to ensure environmental needs are not overlooked.

The Sierra Club raised specific concerns regarding treatment methods, wildlife habitat and wildlife needs (such as road and seasonal closures) that the BLM was able to respond to in the meeting. Through discussion, the BLM was able to assure the Sierra Club that, although this EA uses expedited HFRA authorities, requirements outlined in existing land use plans and other authorities must still be met, including (but not limited to) protecting and promoting old-growth ponderosa pine stands, closing roads not identified in the land use plan, and managing for riparian objectives (the appropriate objective from the Upper Deschutes RMP has been added to the EA to further clarify the agency's role in restoring the diversity and extent of riparian communities). The BLM wildlife biologist's response to ODFW comments also provide clarification for additional issues raised by the Sierra Club.

- **OREGONWILD MEETING –** 12/21/06 at the La Pine State Park for a field trip and at the La Pine State Park Office. The meeting was attended by Steve Cohn, Steve Castillo, Burke Daggett (Sylvan Power Company), Dennis Fiore, Michelle McSwain, and Tim Lillebo (Oregon Wild).

  As with other groups that commented on the EA, the response meeting was more in the way of clarifying information, rather than conducting a new analysis or making significant changes to the document. Through the field trip and the subsequent meeting, the BLM was able to discuss the project in detail and provide clarity on how the site-specific unit treatments would be identified and implemented. OregonWild will participate on the La Pine Field ID Team and will be able to provide unit treatment input to ensure environmental needs are not overlooked. OregonWild also described the field review process as a way to make the projects better and to show how various interests (fire/fuels, wildlife, recreation, etc.) could be accommodated.

  OregonWild had specific concerns regarding the potential effects of treatments on old growth ponderosa pine and the need to restore ponderosa pine to a late successional condition where possible. They recommended promoting mixed stands to favor ponderosa. Through the field visit, the BLM was able to respond to these concerns and demonstrate how treatments would be designed, where applicable, to favor ponderosa pine.

  In addition, OregonWild expressed several wildlife-related concerns related to habitat and cover. Using the same clarifications provided for the ODFW meeting, the BLM was able to assure OregonWild that the BLM would continue to try to attain the wildlife hiding cover standards expressed in the Upper Deschutes RMP. As seen in the ODFW wildlife insert (above), the BLM was able to clarify the wildlife habitat objectives, as well as more clearly express the amount and condition of snags in the project area.