

DECISION RECORD

Billingsley Allotment Fuels Reduction and Habitat Restoration
DOI-BLM-OR-134-2013-DNA-08
Bureau of Land Management
Wenatchee Field Office
915 Walla Walla Avenue
Wenatchee, Washington

1. Background

The action to implement treatments on a 50 acre portion of the Red Bridge pasture in the Billingsley Allotment (#000775), as described and analyzed in the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (EA No. OR134-FY02-EA-12), will reduce hazardous fuels and manage habitat to restore conditions that meet greater sage-grouse life history needs (multi-structure cover and forage). The treatment area currently supports an average sagebrush canopy layer of approximately 20% cover, but smaller pockets within the treatment area have dense sagebrush canopy that may exceed 30% cover. Understory vegetation is dominated by low-growing Sandberg's bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), while taller growing bunchgrasses such as bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudorigneria spicata*) and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) have been reduced based on expected conditions described in the Ecological Site Descriptions for the area. Dense shrubs have produced a continuous overstory fuel load, while simultaneously suppressing well-spaced grasses which could lead to development of a continuous cheatgrass fuel load in the understory. This degraded understory habitat condition also makes the area unsuitable for sage-grouse nesting habitat because the grasses do not provide the density and height required for nest concealment. The degraded understory condition and areas of dense shrubs also put the area at greater risk of invasion by non-native species, especially cheatgrass, and reduce the resiliency following wildfire.

2. Decision

It is my decision to implement treatment actions to reduce hazardous fuels while enhancing sage-grouse habitat on a 50 acre portion of the Red Bridge pasture in the Billingsley Allotment (#000775). Treatments will be implemented through the following actions: 1) Reduction in overly-dense shrubs (primarily big sagebrush, *Artemisia tridentata*) acting as a continuous fuel layer. 2) Control of the ground (forb/grass) layer by discontinuous perennial grasses and soil crust to limit development of continuous fuel layer of annual invasive weeds. 3) Improvement in patch resiliency by restoring native species reference state as defined by Ecological Site Descriptions for the treatment area.

Specific treatment actions include sagebrush thinning, seeding, and planting native species, hand pulling invasive weeds and grasses, and temporary fencing to exclude grazing for 2-5 growing seasons in the treatment areas as well as a control area. There

will be no reductions in authorized AUMs within this pasture, due to the small size of the treatment area.

As a wildland fire management decision pursuant to 43 CFR 4190.1, this decision is effective immediately. Based on the draft Wildfire Risk Assessment/Community Wildfire Protection Plan for Douglas County (2013), this area is depicted as having a high relative wildfire threat level. Wildfire originating in the action area could pose substantial risk to key resources including greater sage-grouse habitat, rangeland productivity, vegetation, soils, and the wildland urban interface.

3. Authority

This action is subject to the following authorities:

1) The Spokane Resource Management Plan Record of Decision (1987) which gives direction to maintain and/or improve range productivity, manage upland habitat for nongame and game species, and consider enhancement of state listed or endangered species habitat.

2) Instructional Memorandum (IM) 2011-138 (2011) which specifically directs that Fuels Management projects protect existing sagebrush ecosystems, modify fire behavior, restore native plants, and create landscape patterns which most benefit sage-grouse habitat, restore annual grasslands to a species composition characterized by perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs,

3) IM No. 2012-043 for Integrated Vegetation Management (2011) which directs the agency to implement management actions to improve degraded greater sage-grouse habitats that have become encroached upon by shrubland or woodland species, enhance the native plant community, and meet vegetation management objectives that have been set for seeding projects prior to returning the area to authorized uses, specifically livestock grazing,

4) the State of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan (Stinson et al. 2004) which provides conservation strategies and tasks including developing and implementing fire management plans on public lands to prevent catastrophic destruction of sage-grouse habitat, restoring degraded sage-grouse habitat, suppressing cheatgrass and weeds and restoring bunchgrass and native forb understory to degraded areas.

and 5) the Code of Federal Regulations Subpart 4190.1 - Effect of wildfire management decisions.

(a) Notwithstanding the provisions of 43 CFR 4.21(a)(1), when BLM determines 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, BLM may make a rangeland wildfire management decision

effective immediately or on a date established in the decision. Wildfire management includes but is not limited to: (1) Fuel reduction or fuel treatment such as prescribed burns and mechanical, chemical, and biological thinning methods (with or without removal of thinned materials); and (2) Projects to stabilize and rehabilitate lands affected by wildfire.

4. Rationale

It is my decision to approve the Red Bridge pasture treatment because this action meets the need and will accomplish the purposes for action as described and analyzed in the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (OR134-FY02-EA-12, January 2005). Alternative 2 was the Proposed Action for the EA and was adopted as the Final Decision (1/31/2005) and found to have no significant impacts. Objectives under Alternative 2 include action to “maintain and improve upland range condition...and restore and manage rangelands to provide habitat conditions that would support shrub-steppe obligate wildlife” (p. 5). Among the items analyzed in Alternative 2 numerous range improvements were listed including:

- Temporary fencing to protect restoration projects, thinning projects, revegetation projects, and riparian zones to facilitate recovery
- Sagebrush thinning to reduce sagebrush cover
- Revegetation of perennial grass and forb species for forage production and wildlife feed and cover
- Restoration projects, as determined by an Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) of resource specialist including wildlife biologists, botanists, soil specialists, recreation specialists, restoration specialists, and archeologists, to restore areas having early or mid-seral ecological status or lacking plant diversity in order to achieve desired plant community composition.

5. Public Involvement

The EA was made available to the public by publishing a legal notice in the Wenatchee World Newspaper as well as being posted on the Spokane BLM Internet website. The BLM range staff coordinated with the grazing lessee, specifically to review the proposed pasture rotation and grazing plan. The grazing lessee was provided with a copy of the EA for review and comment. All substantive comments received were responded to in conformance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

6. Coordination and Consultation

The Washington Department of Natural Resources, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Natural Resource Conservation Service assisted or were consulted in the development of the pasture rotation and grazing plan.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 tribal consultations for this project were initiated on November 26, 2012; letters were sent to the Washington State

Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation (DAHP), the Colville Confederated Tribes and the Yakama Indian Nation (YIN). Concurrence on the area of potential effect (APE) was received from DAHP on November 29, 2012. The CCT responded on December 17, 2012, concurring with the APE. They also expressed interest in the restoration project's monitoring plan. Responses were not received from the Yakama Nation.

A Class III cultural resources inventory was completed on March 19, 2013. Results of this inventory were provided to DAHP, the CCT and the YIN on May 7, 2013 along with a determination of "No Historic Properties Affected". Concurrence on this determination of effect was received from DAHP on May 13, 2013. Responses were not received from the CCT and YIN.

7. Protest and Appeal

This wildfire management decision is issued under 43 CFR 4190.1 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. Appeal of this decision may be made to the Interior Board of Land Appeals in accordance with 43 CFR 4.410. The appeal must be sent to the Office of the Solicitor as follows: Office of the Solicitor, US Department of the Interior, Pacific NW Region, 805 SW Broadway, Suite 600, Portland, OR 97205. 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 as contained in 43 CFR 4.416.

/s/ Linda Coates-Markle

06/13/2013

Linda Coates-Markle
Field Manager

Date

Attachment: Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA)

Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA)

Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management, Spokane District
1103 North Fancher Road
Spokane Valley, WA 99212

A. Background

BLM Office: Wenatchee Field Office

Lease/Serial/Case File No.:

NEPA Log Number: DOI-BLM-OR-134-2013-DNA-08

Proposed Action Title: Billingsley Allotment Fuels Reduction and Habitat Restoration

Location of Proposed Action: Douglas County, WA. T22N-R24E-S11.

Description of Proposed Action: The Proposed Action would reduce hazardous fuels and manage habitat to restore conditions that meet greater sage-grouse life history needs (multi-structure cover and forage) on 50 ac. portion of the Red Bridge pasture in the Billingsley allotment (#000775), as described and analyzed in the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (EA No. OR134-FY02-EA-12, pg. 18). The proposed treatment area currently supports an average sagebrush canopy layer of approximately 20% cover, but smaller pockets within the treatment area have dense sagebrush canopy that may exceed 30% cover. Understory vegetation is dominated by low-growing Sandberg's bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), while taller growing bunchgrasses such as bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudorigneria spicata*) and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) have been reduced based on expected conditions described in the Ecological Site Descriptions for the area. This degraded understory habitat condition makes the area unsuitable for sage-grouse nesting habitat because the grasses do not provide the density and height required for nest concealment. The degraded understory condition and areas of dense shrubs also put the area at greater risk of invasion by non-native species, especially cheatgrass, and reduce the resiliency following wildfire. The Proposed Action would reduce hazardous fuels while enhancing sage-grouse habitat through the following actions:

1. Reduction in overly-dense shrubs (primarily big sagebrush, *Artemisia tridentata*) acting as a continuous fuel layer.
2. Control of the ground (forb/grass) layer by discontinuous perennial grasses and soil crust, to limit development of continuous fuel layer of annual, invasive weeds (cheatgrass).
3. Improvement in patch resiliency by restoring native species reference state as defined by Ecological Site Descriptions for the treatment area.

Specific treatments (Table 1) would include:

1. Sagebrush thinning. Reduction of big sagebrush cover from > 20% to 10-15% (initially), using: a) chainsaw and chipper (25 ac.); and b) chainsaw, chipper, and prescribed burning with point source ignition (25 ac.). This thinning would facilitate revegetation by native bunchgrasses, while reducing potential fire intensity. Thinned sagebrush is predicted to return to target (15%) cover levels (as specified in EA No. OR134-FY02-EA-12 ("Billingsley EA"), p. 10) within approximately 5 years. Prescribed burning would incorporate a thinning buffer

upslope, appropriate fuel breaks, and burning in conditions conducive to control. Specifics of prescribed burning will be detailed in a burn plan (on file, BLM).

2. Revegetation. Seeding of native bunchgrass species using an ATV. Perennial grass and forb species would be planted: a) to exclude invasive annual species which create continuous fuel beds (IM 2011-138, Attachment 2); and b) for forage production, wildlife feed and cover (Billingsley EA, p. 11). Specific seed species and seeding rates are depicted in Table 2.

3. Hand-pulling of invasive weeds and grasses that would otherwise respond to canopy/cover gaps post-thinning. Hand-pulling would occur outside of greater sage-grouse nesting periods.

4. Following seeding, the treatment area would be temporarily fenced to exclude grazing in order to facilitate accomplishment of project objectives. In addition to the 50 ac. of treated area, 25 ac. would be fenced as a grazing-free control. The Billingsley EA anticipated up to 1 growing season to accomplish shrub treatment objectives, and up to 3-5 growing seasons to meet revegetation objectives (EA, p. 10). Fenced areas would include flagging to preclude collisions by greater sage-grouse.

Half of the treated area and control area (37.5 ac. total) would have fences removed 2 growing seasons following seeding treatment. Grazing would be used as a tool in this 37.5 ac. to accomplish treatment objectives (see below). The remaining treated and control areas (37.5 ac. total) would be adaptively managed for up to an additional 3 growing seasons, based on the following treatment objectives:

- Seeded grasses are robust: > 7 in. tall and resistant to pulling.
- Densities of native bunchgrasses (including seedlings) > 3/yd² (Pellent, pers. comm.)
- Densities of weeds < 5/yd²;

Grazing would be resumed in remaining treated and control areas if the above treatment objectives were met. Grazing would be resumed in the entire treatment area 5 growing seasons following seeding, regardless of treatment objectives. There will be no reductions in authorized AUMs within this pasture, due to the small size of the treatment area.

B. Land Use Plan Conformance

Land Use Plan Name: Spokane Resource Management Plan

Date Approved/Amended: Approved 1987/Amended 1992

Option 1 (conforms with LUP): The proposed action is in conformance with the applicable LUP because it is specifically provided for in the following LUP decision(s):

1) Vegetative manipulation projects would be designed to minimize impact on wildlife habitat and to improve it whenever possible." (Spokane Resource Management Plan 1987, p. 53).

2) "Vegetation manipulation projects would advance ecological condition" (Spokane Resource Management Plan 1987, p. 86).

3) "The BLM is concerned about two basic types of fires: wildfire and prescribed fire. All four land use alternatives introduce prescribed fires into the management system, but the method and frequency of use would depend on the management goal of each alternative." (Spokane Resource Management Plan 1987, p. 63).

OR

(Option 2: not explicitly provided for in the LUP) The proposed action is in conformance with the applicable LUP, even though it is not specifically provided for, because it is clearly consistent with the following LUP decision(s) (*objectives, terms, and conditions*):

C. Identify applicable National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document(s) or other related document(s) that cover the proposed action

Name and date of NEPA document(s):

- 1) EA No. OR134-FY02-EA-12, the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (January 2005).
- 2) Programmatic Management Direction and Environmental Assessment for Vegetation Restoration (April 2006).

Name and date of other relevant document(s):

- 1) Spokane Resource Management Plan Decisions include General Management Direction to "Maintain and/or improve range productivity", "Manage upland habitat for nongame and game species", and consider "enhancement of state listed or endangered species habitat" (BLM 1987 RMP ROD, p. 12).
- 2) Instructional Memorandum (IM) 2011-138 (2011) specifically directs for Fuels Management:
 - Where applicable, design fuels treatment objective to protect existing sagebrush ecosystems, modify fire behavior, restore native plants, and create landscape patterns which most benefit sage-grouse habitat.
 - As funding and logistics permit, restore annual grasslands to a species composition characterized by perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs.
 - Emphasize the use of native plant species, recognizing that non-native species may be necessary depending on the availability of native seed and prevailing site conditions.
- 3) IM No. 2012-043 for Integrated Vegetation Management (including Fuels Management) (2011) directs:
 - Implement management actions, where appropriate, to improve degraded greater sage-grouse habitats that have become encroached upon by shrubland or woodland species.
 - Pursue a long-term objective to maintain resilient native plant communities.
 - Enhance the native plant community, including the native shrub reference state in the State and Transition Model, with appropriate shrub, grass, and forb composition identified in the applicable ESD where available.
 - Meet vegetation management objectives that have been set for seeding projects prior to returning the area to authorized uses, specifically livestock grazing.
- 4) State of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan (Stinson et al. 2004) provides conservation strategies and tasks including:
 - 4.2.1 Develop and implement fire management plans on public lands to prevent catastrophic destruction of sage-grouse habitat.
 - 8.3 Restore degraded sage-grouse habitat
 - 8.3.1 Shrub-steppe restoration projects should use native seed sources.
 - 8.3.2 Suppress cheatgrass and weeds.
 - 8.3.3 Restore bunchgrass and native forb understory to degraded areas.

D. NEPA Adequacy Criteria

1. Is the new proposed action a feature of, or essentially similar to an alternative analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s)? Is the project within the same analysis area, or if the project location is different, are the geographic and resource conditions sufficiently similar to those analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s)? If there are differences, can you explain why they are not substantial?

The Proposed Action is primarily a feature of and (with respect to one aspect of the action) essentially similar to Alternative 2 analyzed in the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (OR134-FY02-EA-12, January 2005); Alternative 2 was the Proposed Action for that EA and was adopted as the Final Decision and found to have no significant impact (1/31/2005).

The Proposed Action in the Billingsley EA analyzed revegetation specifically in the Analysis Area for the Billingsley Allotment Fuels Reduction and Habitat Restoration (this Proposed Action). This Proposed Action would follow design criteria for revegetation in the Billingsley EA (p. 11) and be a feature or subset of the 200 ac. of revegetation analyzed in Red Bridge Pasture in that EA.

The Proposed Action in the Billingsley EA analyzed sagebrush thinning in a pasture directly adjoining this Proposed Action. The adjoining pasture has geographic and resource conditions which are very similar to the Action Area for this Proposed Action, including similar ecological sites, topographic positions, management, and shrub covers (BLM data on file). The effects to the human environment of treatment in Red Bridge Pasture (the Action Area) would be the same as treatment in Spring On 3 pasture (in the original Billingsley EA). Reduction of sagebrush cover to 10-15% is sufficiently similar to the target level of 15% described in the EA, because 10% sagebrush cover would provide the same habitat value as 15% considering the current understory condition (Stinson et al 2004, see Other Relevant Documents above). Also, note that shrub mechanical treatments would be similar to mechanical treatments analyzed broadly for shrub-steppe in the Analysis Area in the Programmatic Management Direction and Environmental Assessment for Vegetation Restoration (April 2006).

Herbicide treatment of revegetation areas was not explicitly described in EA No. OR134-FY02-EA-12. Therefore, hand-pulling of invasive annual grass species will occur, to allow native perennial bunchgrasses to become established. Hand-pulling of grasses would be comparable to, and less impacting than, mechanical treatments analyzed broadly for shrub-steppe in the Analysis Area in the Programmatic Management Direction and Environmental Assessment for Vegetation Restoration (April 2006).

2. Is the range of alternatives analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s) appropriate with respect to the new proposed action, given current environmental concerns, interests, and resource values?

The Billingsley Allotment Fuels Reduction and Habitat Restoration (this Proposed Action) implements a portion of Alternative 2 of the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (OR134-FY02-EA-12, January 2005) adopted as the Decision in the FONSI (1/31/2005) for that EA. Alternative 2 of OR134-FY02-EA-12 is still appropriate given

current environmental concerns, interests, and resource values. EA OR134-FY02-EA-12 considered a range of Alternatives; these Alternatives could still be implemented on the remainder of the allotment.

3. Is the existing analysis valid in light of any new information or circumstances (such as, rangeland health standard assessment, recent endangered species listings, updated lists of BLM-sensitive species)? Can you reasonably conclude that new information and new circumstances would not substantially change the analysis of the new proposed action?

There have been no changes in rangeland health policies or science that would change analysis or implementation of the current Proposed Action. No species that have the potential to occur within the Affected Environment have been listed under the Endangered Species Act or added to BLM sensitive species lists. No new information is known that would substantively change the analysis.

Cultural surveys of the action area for the Billingsley Allotment Fuels Reduction and Habitat Restoration (this Proposed Action) were performed and received concurrence with a determination of no effect from Dept. Archaeology and Historic Preservation (DAHP); tribes were consulted and did not provide responses.

Wildlife surveys of the action area for the Proposed Action identified conditions similar to those described generally for the area analyzed in EA OR134-FY02-EA-12. Coordination with USFWS specifically for this proposed action occurred to minimize disturbance to greater sage-grouse. USFWS suggestions were incorporated in the Proposed Action as described here. Botany surveys of the action area for the Proposed Action included a review of botany records ; no special status plants are documented in the project area. During site review, neither special status plants or habitat suitable for the special status plants known nearby was observed.

4. Are the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects that would result from implementation of the new proposed action similar (both quantitatively and qualitatively) to those analyzed in the existing NEPA document?

Yes. The direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of mechanical treatment, prescribed burning (point source ignition), and revegetation for this new Proposed Action were fully considered for the Proposed Action in EA No. OR134-FY02-EA-12; the effects remain the same. Note that sagebrush cover reduction analyzed for several pastures (e.g., Spring On 3) in the allotment will be replaced by treatment in Red Bridge Pasture; effects to the human environment in the analysis area remain the same. The effect of reducing sagebrush canopy cover to 10-15% is similar to the 15% level analyzed in the EA because the area currently is only suitable for sage-grouse winter habitat and 10% sagebrush cover would still be suitable for winter use (Stinson et al 2004, see Other Relevant Documents above). Direct, indirect, and cumulative effects associated with mechanical removal of weeds in Douglas County is addressed in the Programmatic Management Direction and Environmental Assessment for Vegetation Restoration (April 2006).

5. Are the public involvement and interagency review associated with existing NEPA document(s) adequate for the current proposed action?

Yes. Public involvement and agency review considering shrub reduction and revegetation occurred associated with the Billingsley Ranch Allotment Management Plan and Environmental

Assessment (OR134-FY02-EA-12, January 2005) adopted as the Final Decision and found to have no significant impacts (1/31/2005). Treatment areas in this new Proposed Action were included in that analysis.

E. Persons/Agencies/Consulted (BLM Staff Consulted are listed on the coversheet attached to this document, or available at the BLM office identified in Section A, above).

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Resource/Agency Represented</u>
Dave Billingsley	Grazing Lessee	Private Land Owner
Michael Schroeder	Upland Bird Biologist	Wash. Dept. of Fish and Wildlife
Dave Volsen	District Biologist	Wash. Dept. of Fish and Wildlife
Jessica Gonzales	Assistant Project Leader	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

F: Conclusion

Based on the review documented above, I conclude that this proposal conforms to the applicable land use plan and that the NEPA documentation fully covers the proposed action and constitutes BLM's compliance with the requirements of the NEPA.

<u>/s/ Linda Coates-Markle</u>	<u>June 13, 2013</u>
(Signature of Responsible Official)	(Date)

Name: Linda Coates-Markle
Title: Field Manager

G. Contact Person

For additional information concerning this DNA, contact Chris Sheridan 509-665-2118

Note: The signed Conclusion on this worksheet is part of an interim step in the BLM's internal decision process and does not constitute an appealable decision. However, the lease, permit, or other authorization based on this DNA is subject to protest or appeal under 43 CFR Part 4 and the program-specific regulations.