

**UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Bureau of Land Management
Vale District Office
Baker Resource Area**

Finding of No Significant Impact

Mormon Basin/Pedro Mountain Fuels Management Project
Environmental Assessment
NEPA Register Number DOI-BLM-OR-V000-2009-004-EA
<http://www.blm.gov/or/districts/vale/plans/index.php>

Introduction

Baker Resource Area, Vale District, has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze and achieve management objectives described in the Baker Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision within the Mormon Basin / Pedro Mountain planning area by:

- 1) Reducing hazardous fuels
- 2) Restoring plant communities
- 3) Improving wildlife habitat diversity

The need for action is based on degraded landscape conditions and threats to resources, private property and fire fighter safety. This was determined by comparing existing conditions of hazardous fuels, wildfire risks, rangeland plant communities, forest health, and wildlife habitat to the desired condition for those resources.

Summary of the Actions described in the alternatives

There are three alternatives. Alternative 1 is the No Action alternative and represents the continuation of current management. Alternative 2 is the Proposed Action, which would treat portions of the 15,289 acres within the project area with a combination of mechanical methods and prescribed fire. Alternative 3 is a modified version of the Proposed Action that would not allow: construction of temporary roads within the project area for the purpose of implementation; or any broadcast application of herbicides.

The BLM has prepared this EA to analyze 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/vale/index.php>

Context

The project is located around the Mormon Basin/Pedro Mountain areas which lies mainly within the Baker Resource area, but also small areas within the Malheur Resource area. It is composed of two discrete units (Mormon Basin and Rooster Comb) that are situated approximately 25 air miles southeast of Baker City, Oregon. It includes all or portions of the South Bridgeport, Devils Canyon, Towne Gulch, Log Creek, Pedro Mountain, Dixie Creek, Mormon Basin, Bowman Flat and Pine Creek grazing allotments. It would have local impacts on the affected interests, lands and resources similar to, and within the scope of, those described and considered in the Southeastern Oregon and Baker Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/FEIS, 2002 *or* 1989). There would be no broad societal or regional impacts which were not considered in the PRMP/FEIS. The actions described in the EA represent anticipated program actions which comply with the Southeastern Oregon and Baker RMP/Record of Decision (ROD, implementing forestry, fuels and weeds management programs within the scope and context of this document.

Currently, juniper has expanded outside out its historic range on the project landscape. Juniper and other conifers are encroaching upon important wildlife habitat such as riparian vegetation and mountain mahogany. The forested environment is overstocked, compounding forest health issues and increasing the potential for catastrophic, stand replacing fires. This has also caused a decline in range land health by increasing fire potential and degrading range vegetation. Cultural and wildlife surveys have been conducted and any implemented projects will avoid and buffer designated areas as stated in the EA. The Proposed Action is to utilize two silvicultural thinning prescriptions, conifer cutting, prescribed burning and applications of herbicide to annual grasses to reduce fuels and restore fire adapted ecosystems on up to 5,000 acres of mixed conifer forests and 10,500 acres of sagebrush-steppe within the Mormon Basin / Pedro Mountain project area. These treatments would be accomplished through a combination of service contracts, stewardship contracting, small timber sales, and federally employed personnel.

Intensity

I have considered the potential intensity and severity of the impacts anticipated from the 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)?

Rationale: No. Alternative 1 - No Action: Under this alternative, there would be no application of prescribed fire, cutting of conifers in stands of mahogany or aspen, thinning of forestlands, or broadcast application of herbicide on low elevation stands of sagebrush with understories dominated by annual grasses. Conversion of rangelands to juniper woodlands within the planning area is occurring under the current management. The risk of a high intensity crown fire occurrence in the project area is also increasing as density and distribution of fuels are becoming increasingly hazardous. Management under the No Action Alternative would proceed under the current Baker RMP and all other relevant policy

direction. This would have a slight adverse impact upon the project area as fuels continue to slowly build and forest and range conditions slowly deteriorate.

Alternative 2 – No. The Proposed Action is to utilize two silvicultural thinning prescriptions, conifer cutting, prescribed burning and applications of herbicide to annual grasses to reduce fuels and restore fire adapted ecosystems on up to 5,000 acres of mixed conifer forests and 10,500 acres of sagebrush-steppe within the Mormon Basin / Pedro Mountain project area. These treatments would be accomplished through a combination of service contracts, stewardship contracting, small timber sales, and federally employed personnel. The proposal is expected to have short-and-long term effects by restoring forested communities and rangeland to historic normalcy over the life of the project and beyond.

Alternative 3 – No. This alternative to the Proposed Action was developed to focus on fuels reduction and restoration objectives described in the Proposed Action while limiting impacts to soils, maintaining current permanent road densities, and restricting the use of herbicide to spot applications on discrete stands of noxious weeds. The overall effects would be less than the proposed alternative but would fail to fully manage noxious weeds and treat areas of overly dense forested stands.

2. Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on public health and safety (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(2))?

Rationale: No. Under Alternatives 2 and 3, all burns would be planned based on either instructions given by, or in consultation with the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) and the State Implementation Plan (SIP) for prescribed fires and follow the Oregon State Smoke Management Plan to reduce health and visibility impacts on designated areas. All forestry-related activities are required to place warning signs on the roadway to advise the public. Management under the No Action Alternative would proceed under the current Baker RMP and all other relevant policy direction.

3. Would any of the alternatives have significant adverse impacts on unique geographic characteristics (cultural or historic resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas (ACECs, RNAs, significant caves)) (40 CFR 1508.27 (b)(3))?

Rationale: No. All areas of the project area have been or are currently being surveyed for cultural and historic resources. No wild and scenic rivers, endangered or threatened species, ACECs, RNAs, or other protected areas are within the project boundary.

4. Would any of the alternatives have highly controversial effects (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(4))?

Rationale: No. The activities proposed under Alternatives 2 and 3 would directly benefit fuels management and would stimulate the local economy while preserving the integrity of the environment and returning vegetation to historic conditions.

Management under the No Action Alternative would proceed under the current Baker RMP and all other relevant policy direction.

5. Would any of the alternatives have highly uncertain effects or involve unique or unknown risks?

Rationale: No. All effects upon resources from Alternatives 2 and 3 have been addressed in the EA and found to have long term benefits. Any potential negative short term impacts have been reduced through project design elements. The No Action alternative would continue to increase the risk of a high intensity crown fire occurrence in the project area over time.

6. Would any of the alternatives establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(6))?

Rationale: No. The alternatives clearly limit actions to fuels, forestry, temporary road construction/rehabilitation and noxious weed control related activities which will not have any significant impacts nor set a precedent for future actions with significant impacts. Under the No Action alternative, no precedence would be set for future actions as current management is already being implemented.

7. Are any of the alternatives related to other actions with potentially significant cumulative impacts (40 CFR 1508.27(b)(7))?

Rationale: No. Both action alternatives are for fuels, forestry, temporary road construction/rehabilitation and noxious weed control related activities which are covered in the EA. Included project design elements were developed to avoid damage of Special Status Species habitat, retain big game cover, maintain and improve water quality, avoid cultural resources, and reduce conflict with recreational uses. Project design elements would reduce effects related to loss of soil productivity and sedimentation of water sources to levels that are immeasurable at a watershed scale. Effects of smoke on air quality would be short-lived and would not have the potential to combine with the effects of other burning projects. The no action alternative has no related other activities other than what are occurring under the current 1989 Baker RMP and implemented NEPA.

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))?

Rationale: No listed or eligible sites occur within the project area that are or could be included in listing with the National Register of Historic Resources.

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: No. No known threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat occur within the project boundaries.

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))?

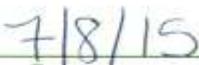
Rationale: No. All alternatives are in accordance with Federal, State, local laws and requirements.

Finding

On the basis of the information contained in the EA, the consideration of the intensity factors described above, and all other information available to me, it is my determination that: (1) the Proposed action and alternatives will not have significant environmental impacts beyond those already addressed in the Baker PRMP/FEIS (1989); (2) the Proposed Action and alternatives are in conformance with the Baker RMP ROD; (3) there would be no adverse societal or region impacts and no adverse impacts to the affected interests; and (4) the environmental effects, together with the proposed project Design Features, against the tests of significance (described above and found at 40 CFR 1508.27) do not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an EIS or supplement of the existing EIS is not necessary and will not be prepared.



Lori Wood
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Vale District BLM



Date