Background on the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on BLM Lands in Oregon

Noxious weeds are spreading on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Oregon at an estimated 12 percent per year, or 144,000 acres per year. Although the BLM has an aggressive control program that treats about 50,000 noxious and invasive weed-infested acres per year, the herbicide component of that program has been limited to the use of the same four herbicides for 23 years.

In addition, the BLM in Oregon manages tens of thousands of acres of native vegetation for a variety of objectives, and no herbicides are used at all for this work. Failure to utilize newer, more target-specific herbicides allows weeds to spread; makes it difficult to cooperate on weed control projects with adjacent Federal, State, county, and private landowners; increases costs; and, causes more environmental and human health risk.

How does this EIS relate to other planning efforts?

Answer: Working within the list of 18 herbicides approved for use by BLM nationally as part of the *Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on BLM Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic EIS* and associated 2007 Record of Decision, the *Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on BLM Lands in Oregon Final Environmental Impact Statement* (EIS) was prepared, tiering to the Programmatic EIS and analyzing three action alternatives all within the scope of, and consistent with, the 2007-selected alternative for the other western states. The Record of Decision augments the Oregon BLM's existing Integrated Vegetation Management program by increasing the number of herbicides available to the nine Oregon districts and increasing the types of vegetation and management objectives that can be pursued using herbicides.

This Record of Decision, like the one for 17 western states, is programmatic and does not authorize any herbicide treatment projects. Site-specific National Environmental Policy Act analysis will occur prior to any herbicide treatments at the BLM District level.

What were the key issues considered in the selection of the proposed action?

Answer: Alternative 4, the proposed action, was selected because it best addressed the following key issues: Control invasive plant species to protect native ecosystems and the flora and fauna that depend on them.

- Protect the safety and function of BLM and other authorized infrastructures by controlling encroaching native and other non-invasive vegetation.
- Control native vegetation to provide sustainable habitats for wildlife, fish, and native plants, particularly those included in the Special Status Species program.

- Manage vegetation to reduce the risk that large-scale, high-intensity fires will unacceptably damage resources and human developments.
- Cooperatively control invasive plants so they do not infest or re-infest adjacent non-BLM lands.
- Prevent herbicide control treatments from having unacceptable adverse effects to applicators and the public, to desirable flora and fauna, and to soil, air, and water.
- Control plant pests and diseases by removing their native plant hosts when necessary to meet Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA)-identified control objectives.
- Minimize treatment costs and improve treatment effectiveness so resource and economic losses from invasive plants and other vegetation growth are reduced and more of the need can be met with expected funding.

What new information did the BLM come across in the scoping process, public comments, and the development of the draft and final EIS?

Answer: Key points learned during the analysis have included:

- Most of the newer herbicides selected for use are less toxic to fish, wildlife, and humans than the four currently available for use.
- The four herbicides currently available for use in Oregon will not kill all of the state-listed noxious weeds. In particular, Oregon has no herbicide that will selectively kill the invasive annual grasses like cheatgrass or medusahead that have invaded a significant portion of the sagebrush ecosystem throughout the west. These grasses are also causing extreme fire hazards in the wildland-urban interface around rural communities like Medford and Burns. The proposed action, Alternative 4 from the Final EIS, will provide the tool to kill these grasses, restore sagebrush communities, and better meet National Fire Plan objectives to protect these communities.
- Under the proposed action, the use of herbicide treatments will occur on an estimated 45,200 acres. This includes treating approximately 9,300 acres of native vegetation in rights-of-way, administrative sites, and recreation sites; and treating approximately 5,700 acres of native vegetation in those instances where it will benefit Federally-listed and other Special Status species.
- Expanding the use of herbicides to the treatment of invasive species and native vegetation in rights-of-way, administrative sites, and recreation sites and to benefit Federally-listed and other Special Status species are consistent with the types of herbicide treatments already taking place on BLM lands in other States.
- The four herbicides currently being used are some of the older herbicides available and are applied in pounds per acre. Newer herbicides made available by this decision are more target-specific, better able to focus on the unwanted plant and less on the surrounding native vegetation, and many are applied in ounces per acre.
- The proposed action is expected to increase the herbicide treatment acres from current levels of 12,000 acres to approximately 45,200 acres. While this represents an increase,

the pounds of herbicide applied per acre will be reduced from an average of 1.01 pounds to .72 pounds per acre.

- By applying Standard Operating Procedures as well as Mitigation Measures adopted in the national Programmatic EIS, none of the expected herbicide use would pose a significant risk to humans or the environment.
- The proposed action is expected to slow the noxious weed spread rate by half and prevent 2.2 million acres from becoming infested in 15 years when compared to the No Action Alternative.

What is the net result of the Final EIS?

Answer: Since a 1984/87 court injunction, the BLM in Oregon has used only four herbicides and uses those only to control noxious weeds. Herbicides are used to treat approximately 12-14,000 acres per year, and all other (non-herbicide) vegetation management for all objectives in Oregon is more than 100,000 acres annually.

- The proposed action would make 13 (west of the Cascades) or 16 (east of the Cascades) herbicides available and increase the total acres treated with herbicides to approximately 45,200 acres.

- The proposed action would allow herbicides to be used on noxious and other invasive weeds, for the treatment of encroaching native vegetation to meet safety and maintenance objectives in rights-of-way, administrative sites, and recreation sites, and for limited habitat improvement.

- The 15,000 acres of anticipated native plant treatments would, for the most part, simply replace management already taking place (less efficiently) with non-herbicide methods. The proposed action does *not* include the use of herbicides specifically to improve timber or livestock forage production.

What planning went in to the creation of the Final EIS?

Answer: The Final EIS analysis was shaped in part by the results from 12 public scoping meetings held throughout Oregon in July 2008, and by the results of a public comment period on the Draft EIS during October-December 2009.

The Final EIS tiered to the *Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on BLM Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic EIS* and associated Record of Decision completed by the Washington Office (WO220) in 2007. The alternatives examined in the Oregon Final EIS were all consistent with the alternative selected in the Record of Decision for the Programmatic EIS.

A Record of Decision is expected to be issued in the fall of 2010.