



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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Decision Record

Stringer Meadow/Lower Summers Meadow Near Lek Sagebrush Habitat Restoration/Improvement Project (DOI-BLM-CAC-070-2009-51-EA)

Introduction and Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Bishop Field Office plans to implement a sagebrush habitat restoration project designed to improve habitat conditions for Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) in support of the *Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan for Nevada and Eastern California*. The proposed habitat improvement project would involve the hand removal of low density pinyon that are currently encroaching into otherwise suitable sage-grouse habitat in the vicinity of the Stringer Meadow (Lek 9) and Lower Summers Meadow (Lek 10) leks in the westernmost portion of the Bodie Population Management Unit. Any trees greater than 10 feet in height, or greater than 6 inches in diameter, would be cut, piled and burned; smaller trees would be cut, lopped and scattered. Approximately 658 acres of tree encroached sagebrush habitat distributed among 3 separate project areas would be improved. Proposed project work would occur on public lands located 5 to 8 miles south of the town of Bridgeport in Mono County, California.

The primary purpose of the proposed project is to improve near lek habitat conditions for Greater Sage-Grouse by removing sparsely distributed trees that currently deter sage-grouse from using otherwise suitable nesting, early brood rearing and roosting habitat in the vicinity of the Stringer Meadow (Lek 9) and Lower Summers Meadow (Lek 10) leks. The proposed project would also increase habitat connectivity between these two lek areas, increase habitat connectivity with other nearby seasonal use areas, and improve overall sage-grouse habitat conditions in the project vicinity. Other sagebrush associated wildlife and plant species are also expected to benefit from project implementation.

Greater Sage-Grouse are a BLM designated sensitive wildlife species and a candidate for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. For listing purposes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) recently classified Greater Sage-Grouse populations in the Bi-state area of western Nevada and

eastern California as a distinct population segment. The Bishop Resource Management Plan, the Bi-state portion of the *Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Plan for Nevada and Eastern California*, the Bodie Hills Conservation Action Plan, and the Service's recently completed status reviews all identify the need to implement projects designed to reduce tree encroachment into key sage-grouse habitats.

Decision and Rationale

Based on the information and analysis provided in environmental assessment DOI-BLM-CAC-070-2009-51-EA and the associated finding of no significant impact, I have determined that implementation of the proposed action as designed would not result in any significant adverse effects on the human environment and therefore an environmental impact statement is not required. I have also determined that the proposed action conforms to, and is consistent with, the overall guidance and management direction provided by the Bishop Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved March 25, 1993. The Bishop RMP has been reviewed, and the proposed action conforms to the land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5.

Implementation of this project will improve habitat conditions for Greater Sage-Grouse within the Bi-state distinct population segment; a BLM designated sensitive wildlife species and candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Implementation of this project will also improve habitat conditions for other sagebrush associated wildlife and plant species and may have a positive effect on recreation and social economic values due to increased opportunities for wildlife viewing and hunting.

The project will have negligible effects on air quality, global climate change, soils, invasive non-native plant species, visual resources and pinyon-associated wildlife species.

The project will have no effect on any threatened or endangered species, nor will it result in the destruction or adverse modification of any designated critical habitat.

Therefore, it is my decision to implement the proposed action as designed, and subject to, the following project implementation stipulations as outlined in the environmental assessment:

- ❖ Project area access will be limited to existing roads. No off-road vehicle travel will be permitted. All project work will be conducted by hand crews working of foot.
- ❖ No project work will be allowed during periods of high fire danger. Full or partial shutdown days due to high fire danger conditions will be based on the

Inyo National Forest Project Activity Level (PAL) system. All pile burning operations will require and conform to an approved burn plan.

- ❖ All project vehicles and equipment will be equipped with spark arrestors and mufflers.
- ❖ No toxic materials or fluids will be used or disposed at the site.
- ❖ No tree removal will occur in true pinyon-juniper woodland ecological sites.
- ❖ Slash piles will not be placed within or immediately adjacent to sheep bedding areas or other disturbed sites likely to have high density cheat grass infestations.
- ❖ To protect cultural resources, exclusion areas will be identified where project specific archeological surveys have identified cultural resources that could be negatively impacted by the proposed sagebrush habitat restoration and improvement work. No project work will be allowed in areas identified for exclusion.
- ❖ If previously undiscovered archaeological resources are encountered during project implementation, operations will be immediately stopped and the Bishop Field Office manager and archaeologist notified. The project will be modified to avoid impacts to any late discoveries of archaeological resources prior to the resumption of work.
- ❖ To protect extant Bodie Hills draba populations, exclusion areas will be identified in low sagebrush habitats where project specific sensitive plant surveys have identified extant Bodie Hills draba populations. No piling and/or pile burning will be allowed in low sagebrush areas identified for exclusion.
- ❖ To protect breeding and nesting birds, no project work will occur between March 1st and August 15th.
- ❖ To protect and improve habitat for pygmy rabbits, exclusion areas will be identified where project specific burrow surveys have identified extant pygmy rabbit populations and/or burrow systems. No piling and/or pile burning will be allowed in areas identified for exclusion.

Administrative Remedies

Administrative remedies may be available to those who believe they will be adversely affected by this decision. Appeals may be made to the Office of Hearings and Appeals, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior, Board of Land Appeals (Board) in strict compliance with the regulations in 43 CFR Part 4. Notices of appeal must be filed in this office within 30 days after

publication of this decision. If a notice of appeal does not include a statement of reasons, such statement must be filed with this office and the Board within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed. The notice of appeal and any statement of reasons, written arguments, or briefs must also be served upon the Regional Solicitor, Pacific Southwest Region, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2800 Cottage Way, E-1712, Sacramento, CA 95825.

The effective date of this decision and the date initiating the appeal period for this decision will be the date this decision record is posted on the BLM's Bishop Field Office internet website at www.blm.gov/ca/bishop.

Project Contact

For additional information about this decision and project implementation, please contact Steven Nelson, BLM Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist, at 351 Pacu Lane, Suite 100, Bishop, CA 93514, phone 760-872-5006; or myself, Bernadette Lovato, BLM Bishop Field Manager, at 351 Pacu Lane, Suite 100, Bishop, CA 93514, phone: 760-872-5011.

_____/s/ Bernadette Lovato_____
Bernadette Lovato
Bishop Field Manager

__9/01/2010_____
Date