



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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Decision Record

Upper Aurora Canyon Headcut Stabilization and Riparian/Wet Meadow Habitat Improvement Project (DOI-BLM-CAC-070-2010-0050-EA)

Introduction and Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Bishop Field Office plans to implement a stream channel stabilization and riparian meadow habitat improvement project in the upper reaches of Aurora Canyon Creek in the Bodie Hills, Mono County, California. The proposed project would involve stabilizing 1 large headcut (~ 6 ft drop) and as many as 25 small headcuts (~ 0.5 - 3 ft drop) along the upper 1.5 to 2 miles of Aurora Canyon Creek. The proposed project would also involve the thinning of juniper (*Juniperus spp.*), silver sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*), rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus spp.*) and other upland species that are encroaching into the streamside riparian corridor and adversely affecting meadow habitat conditions in upper Aurora Canyon. Project work would occur for an estimated 1 to 3 weeks each year over the next 1 to 5 years.

Headcuts would be stabilized using a combination grade control structures including gabions, log v-weir dams, log beams and loose rock check dams. A small backhoe would be used to aid the installation of larger (>1.5 ft) stabilization structures. Smaller stabilization structures would be installed by hand. Juniper thinning would be done selectively by hand using a chainsaw. Cut juniper logs would be used in the construction of grade stabilization structures. Shrub thinning would be completed using a weed wacker or mower. Cut shrubs would be chipped on site, or piled then burned early the following spring while snow is still on the ground.

The primary purpose of the proposed project is to improve hydrologic function and streamside riparian meadow habitat conditions by stabilizing historic and active headcuts within the upper reaches of Aurora Canyon Creek. The stream channel in upper Aurora Canyon is incised in several areas due to historic and active headcutting and associated gully erosion. Adjacent streamside riparian meadow habitat has been encroached by juniper, silver sagebrush, rabbitbrush and other upland species due to downcutting and loss of hydrologic function. Remaining meadows are currently at risk of continued downcutting and gully

erosion that would further compromise hydrologic function and associated streamside riparian habitat conditions. The proposed project is designed to alleviate existing accelerated erosion conditions and to prevent the potential loss of important riparian meadow habitat in upper Aurora Canyon.

Decision and Rationale

Based on the information and analysis provided in environmental assessment DOI-BLM-CAC-070-2010-50-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 the proposed project would increase stream channel stability and improve streamside riparian meadow habitat conditions in the upper reaches of Aurora Canyon Creek as prescribed by the Bishop RMP. Primary benefits would include increased soil stability, reduced soil erosion, increased riparian vegetation cover, and increased meadow species diversity, vigor and production. Associated benefits would include improved floodplain function, improved resistance to weed invasion, improved rangeland condition, improved surface water quality and improved visual quality.

The proposed project would benefit Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) within the Bi-state distinct population segment; a BLM designated sensitive wildlife species and candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The proposed project would also benefit other riparian meadow dependent wildlife species within the project vicinity.

Dispersed recreation opportunities would be enhanced commensurate with improved riparian, scenic and wildlife values.

The proposed project would have negligible adverse impacts on air quality and global climate change. The proposed project would also have minimal short-term adverse impacts on invasive non-native plant species, soils, vegetation, visual resources, surface water quality and wildlife.

The project would have no effect on any threatened or endangered species, nor would 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 based on the environmental assessment:

- ❖ Primary access to the project area will be limited to existing roads. Off-road equipment travel and use will be limited to only that which is necessary to complete the proposed project. No equipment travel or use will be allowed more than 100 meters off existing roads. All other project work will be conducted by hand crews working on foot.
- ❖ All project equipment will be equipped with spark arrestors and mufflers.
- ❖ No toxic materials or fluids will be used or disposed at the site.
- ❖ No off-road equipment work, chainsaw cutting, mowing or pile burning 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.
- ❖ To minimize soil disturbance and vegetation crushing impacts, off-road equipment access will be limited to the minimum number of trips needed to facilitate project implementation. Ingress and egress routes will be flagged. Equipment will not be parked off-road during extended periods of non-use. Disturbed areas and equipment tracks will be re-contoured and camouflaged by hand following project completion.
- ❖ To minimize the importation or spread of invasive non-native species, all equipment, tools and materials from outside the project area will be inspected and washed prior to transport to the project area. The project area will be monitored for non-native invasive species for 3 years following project completion.
- ❖ To protect extant special status plant populations, exclusion areas will be flagged and avoided where project specific sensitive plant surveys have identified extant populations of Bodie Hills draba and Mono County phacelia in the vicinity of the proposed project. Equipment will not be used or staged in areas where Bodie Hills draba or Mono County phacelia occurs.
- ❖ To protect breeding and nesting birds, including Greater Sage-Grouse, no shrub thinning will occur between March 1st and August 15th.
- ❖ To protect pygmy rabbit populations and habitat, exclusion areas will be flagged and avoided if project specific burrow surveys identify extant pygmy rabbit populations and burrow systems that could be negatively impacted by project implementation. No digging or shrub thinning will occur in any area that has not received a site specific pygmy rabbit burrow survey.
- ❖ To protect cultural resources, exclusion areas will be flagged and avoided if project specific archeological surveys identify cultural resources that could be negatively impacted by project implementation. No digging or rock collection will occur in any area that has not received a site specific cultural resource survey.

- ❖ 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 promote vegetation re-growth and soil stability, small livestock exclusion fences will be placed around select stabilization structures if required to accelerate recovery and ensure project success. Any exclusion fence will be built to BLM specifications for 3-wire fences in mule deer habitat and coordinated with the affected grazing permit holder.

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.

Project Contact

For additional information about this decision and project implementation, please contact Martin Oliver, BLM Botanist, at 351 Pacu Lane, Suite 100, Bishop, CA 93514, phone 760-872-5035; or myself, Bernadette Lovato, BLM Bishop Field Manager, at 351 Pacu Lane, Suite 100, Bishop, CA 93514, phone: 760-872-5011.

<u>/s/ Bernadette Lovato</u>	<u>9/30/2010</u>
Bernadette Lovato	Date
Bishop Field Manager	