

**Telegraph Fire
Cultural Resource Assessment
August 2008**

I. Objectives

- Identify cultural resources on Folsom Field Office (BLM)-administered lands damaged or exposed by the Telegraph Fire, with the objective of stabilizing and preventing post-fire related degradation to critical cultural resources.
- Develop and implement treatments to stabilize critical cultural resources and prevent post-fire related degradation to these resources.
- Ensure that all Emergency Stabilization (ES) and Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) treatments are planned and implemented in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and other BLM historic preservation policies.
- Work with Cal Fire to identify and stabilize cultural resources damaged by fire suppression activity. Stabilization of cultural resources damaged by suppression activity will not be funded under BLM's ES and BAR programs.

II. Issues

- Prevent looting, unauthorized salvage, and vandalism at critical historic-era mining sites, such as the Schroeder Mill and Permit Mill, burned by the Telegraph Fire.
- Prevent looting and vandalism at critical archaeological sites, such as TM-77, exposed by the fire.
- Prevent off-highway vehicle (OHV)-related damage to critical archaeological sites, such as TM-61, exposed by the fire. There are also threats to TM-46, TM-03, and TM-04.

III. Observations

Background

In July-August 2008 the Telegraph Fire burned more than 21,000 acres of Folsom Field Office (BLM)-administered land in the Merced River watershed. In the aftermath of the fire, BLM is applying for Emergency Stabilization (ES) and Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) funds through the Department of the Interior to conduct projects designed to address management and environmental issues caused by the fire. These issues include threats to life and property caused by erosion and runoff; threats to critical cultural resources damaged or exposed by the fire; replacement of destroyed fences and signs; and re-vegetation of areas unlikely to recover on their own. This report discusses the threats to critical cultural resources, makes recommendations for dealing with these threats under the ES and BAR programs, and provides guidance to help BLM follow federal historic preservation policies as it plans and implements ES and BAR projects.

Under the federal historic preservation system, cultural resources include sites, structures, buildings, objects, districts, and, in some cases, cultural landscapes. Cultural resources must generally be at least 50 years old to receive management consideration, though they include places that have continuing traditional religious and cultural significance to living people, such as Native American tribes.

Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, federal agencies such as the BLM are required to consider the effects of their undertakings on significant cultural resources—those resources eligible for or listed on the National Register of Historic Places. ES and BAR projects are considered undertakings and are subject to 36 CFR 800—the regulations that implement Section 106. The Folsom Field Office is required to use California BLM’s Protocol Agreement to comply with the Section 106 regulations. Section 106 requirements must be met before any ES and BAR projects are implemented, including those designed to specifically benefit cultural resources.

BLM-administered lands burned by the Telegraph Fire contain numerous cultural resources, including prehistoric archaeological sites, historic-era archaeological sites, buildings, trails, roads, bridges, and mines. Also, a local Native American tribe—the American Indian Council of Mariposa County—has told BLM about traditional use areas and places of tribal interest on BLM-administered land along the Merced River, now within the area burned by the Telegraph Fire. A quick tally of known cultural resources on BLM-administered land in the burned area indicates that there are around 70. The following culture history provides a context for understanding these resources and why some of them are critical.

B. Culture History

The prehistory of the burned area is not well known. Inferences can be made from archaeological studies conducted in Yosemite National Park, along the upper reaches of the Merced River. These studies indicate that hunter-gatherers groups inhabited Yosemite for thousands of years prior to historic contact in the 1800s, and that by late prehistory (1500 to 200 years ago) these groups had a lifestyle typical for Californian hunter-gatherers of the western Sierra. Acorns, deer, and salmon were of primary importance to them. The upper reaches of the Merced River watershed were just one portion of a much larger area used by prehistoric people as they went about procuring these and other resources.

Less is known about the prehistoric land-use in the BLM-administered portions of the watershed between 3000 and 1000 ft in elevation, including the burned area. Bedrock milling stations and camp sites have been found on BLM-administered land along the Merced River within this elevation range, and it seems certain that prehistoric people hunted, gathered, fished, and sought other resources deep within this part of the Merced River canyon, at least on a temporary basis, as part of their seasonal rounds (annual migration into the high country). More substantial settlement appears to have been focused on the river’s tributaries on the canyon rim. At the time that Euro-Americans and other outsiders arrived in droves during the mid-1800s, the Miwok—thought to be the descendants of the area’s prehistoric people—were living in the Merced River watershed.

The famous American explorer, soldier, and political leader John Fremont was among the earliest Euro-Americans to settle in the area. In 1847, he acquired a large Mexican land grant called Las Mariposas that included the present-day town of Mariposa. Not long after the start of the Gold Rush in 1848, prospectors began scouring his land, the Merced River canyon, and elsewhere in the region for placer gold. Sherlock Creek, named for the Sherlock brothers, may have been one of the earliest creeks to be mined in the Merced River canyon. Placer mining waned by the early 1850s as the easily found placer gold became depleted.

By the late 1800s hardrock gold mining became a dominant industry within the Merced River watershed and Mariposa County generally. Production may have peaked during 1860s-1880s, (mining activity/returns for this period were poorly documented). Many of the operations, particularly those that endured well into the 1900s, appear to have been small in scale, with few workers, sporadic development, shoestring budgets, and hodgepodge arrays of mining and milling machinery. By the mid-1900s, the mines still being developed were typically worked, on the side, by one or two men, who typically were involved full-time in ranching or some other occupation. Mines located on (or partially on) BLM-administered land in and around the Merced River canyon include the Schroeder, Our Chance, and Permit.

The rugged brushy terrain of the Merced River canyon appears to have hindered ranching, farming, and homesteading during the late 1800s, but there was enough timber here to support commercial logging, particularly at higher elevations, within the Stanislaus National Forest. By the early 1900s, many of the best virgin stands had been logged by operators like the Yosemite Lumber Company. Other industrial/commercial endeavors were attempted in lieu of gold mining and logging. The opening of Yosemite Valley as a major tourist destination by the turn of the century reinvigorated and changed the economy of Mariposa County. The Yosemite Valley Railroad, built in 1907, was designed to help get people to and from Yosemite Valley. The railroad grade ran from Merced in the Central Valley to El Portal just west of Yosemite Valley. The train passed through the BLM-administered part of the Merced River canyon, including portions of the Mountain King Mine complex, Railroad Flat, McCabe Flat, and Briceburg.

The patented Mountain King Mine was discovered sometime during the mid- to late 1800s, but little is known about its early history. By 1904, the mine was being developed by the Omparisa Mining Company headed by H. C. Austin. The Austin family is believed to have had Native American ancestry. A five-stamp mill was installed in 1905 and was increased to ten stamps later the same year. The mine also had a hydroelectric facility built by PG&E. The remains of the facility include a dam located on BLM-administered land, still visible today. The development of the mine was sporadic during the 1910s when the Mountain King Mining Company took over operations. The company called it quits in 1922 because operating costs exceeded production returns. After a few years of development under lease, the mine was abandoned.

Railroad Flat was the location of a small town called Hart associated with the Mountain King Mine. The town reportedly consisted of houses and a few businesses, including a "cat house." There is a small cemetery (with historic and modern graves) at Railroad Flat, located near the

BLM campground that now occupies much of the area. McCabe Flat, also a BLM campground, has seen sporadic mining and residential activity since the Gold Rush.

During the 1910s Briceburg consisted of a store/railroad station owned by William Brice and the Brice family house. The construction of the highway to Yosemite Valley during the 1920s (current Highway 140) led to the abandonment of the Yosemite Valley Railroad by the end of World War II. (The railroad grade survives, in part, as an access road and recreational trail.) A bridge was put in across the Merced River at Briceburg to move supplies from the railroad to the construction sites. Convict workers from San Quentin were used to build the highway. A residential camp (Camp E) for the workers and their supervisors was placed along the highway near Briceburg. The camp consisted of various tent structures occupied from 1923 to 1925.

Built in 1927 the River View Tavern (later known as the Briceburg Inn) was a full-menu Italian restaurant and Standard Oil gas station located along the highway at Briceburg. A motel was added later. For years, the Briceburg Inn catered to travelers on the highway connecting Mariposa and Yosemite. In the late 1980s, the building was acquired by BLM and turned into a visitor center.

During the 1930s the Civilian Conservation Corps and the US Forest Service built a new suspension bridge across the Merced River at Briceburg. A segment of the Ponderosa Way Fire Break road (now called Burma Grade and Bull Creek Road) was built through Briceburg during this time. The intent of the Ponderosa Way project, which when completed was about 650 miles long and 150-200 ft wide, was to help prevent fires from burning from the chaparral up into the more valuable Sierran timber.

C. Methods

BLM archaeologist James Barnes was assigned to the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) team—the team tasked with developing ES and BAR projects necessary to help rehabilitate and protect areas burned by the Telegraph Fire. He worked in the field with other BAER team members from August 16 to August 21, 2008 to identify BLM-administered cultural resources damaged or exposed by the fire. He also visited cultural resources the burned area on August 11, 2008 with BLM archaeologist/lands specialist Dean Decker.

On August 19, 2008 the BLM archaeologist met with Cal Fire archaeologist Linda Pollack in the field. Pollack was involved in managing cultural resources threatened by suppression activity during the fire. She is currently working on stabilizing cultural resources damaged by suppression activity on private land and the Stanislaus National Forest. She told the BLM archaeologist that no previously unidentified cultural resources were found on BLM-administered land by Cal Fire archaeologists during the fire. Cultural resources were discovered on private land. They also discussed suppression damage to TM-40 (see next section)

During the August 2008 fieldwork BLM did not make an effort to conduct extensive new cultural resource inventory. The purpose of the fieldwork was to identify known critical resources damaged or exposed by the fire, with the intention of planning ES and BAR projects

to stabilize and protect them. Later this year BLM may attempt to conduct new inventory in the burned area to help meet its requirements under Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Under Section 110, federal agencies such as the BLM are required to proactively identify and manage significant cultural resources. During the August fieldwork, Barnes relied on the BLM's cultural resource database (inventory reports, research records, etc.), which he found to be reliable.

D. Telegraph Fire's effects on cultural resources

Cultural resources are affected by fire and fire suppression activities in many ways. During the actual fire, historic-era buildings and other cultural resources with flammable elements may be consumed. During the Telegraph Fire, historic-era gold mills like the Schroeder and Permit mills were particularly vulnerable and burned to the ground. The Mosher Cabin also burned to the ground.

Using bulldozers and other heavy equipment to suppress fire poses a great threat to cultural resources, though impacts to known/previously documented resources are avoidable. Heavy equipment (i.e., bulldozers) is used to build helicopter land pads, fire-control lines, etc. to help fight fire. During the Telegraph Fire, scores of bulldozers were used and over 37 miles of dozer line were built on BLM-administered land. Bulldozer suppression work can severely damage archaeological sites by breaking artifacts, destroying archaeological features and deposits, and generally distorting artifact and feature patterning at sites. These kinds of damage can undermine a site's archaeological integrity, which is vital to scientific investigation. Using crews to build fire-control lines by hand can also damage archaeological sites in a similar way. Several miles of hand line were built to contain the Telegraph Fire.

Cal Fire archaeologists were involved in identifying and protecting cultural resources during fire suppression work. Their efforts appear to have paid off because, so far, only one site (TM-40) on BLM-administered land is known to have been damaged by fire suppression work. The damage to this site is considered to be not substantial; the bulldozer just clipped the southern portion of the site. A small segment of historic-era ditch was also damaged in the vicinity of TM-40. Aside from the heroic efforts of Cal Fire archaeologists to identify and manage cultural resources during suppression work, it appears that archaeological sites on BLM-administered land were largely unaffected by the fire and fire suppression activity because many of the sites are located in areas where the fire burned through rapidly and with lower intensity. Most of the bulldozer work was focused on US Forest Service lands north of the Merced River canyon.



Digital photo showing BLM archaeologist Dean Decker observing damage to the southern portion of TM-40

After the fire has been put out or mostly contained, heavy equipment and hand crews are used to rehabilitate areas damaged by fire suppression. They build water bars, spread brush over fire-control line to put it to bed, and do other work. Without oversight of cultural resource specialists, this rehabilitation can threaten archaeological sites in much the same way that the suppression work can threaten them. So far, there is no known sites have been damaged by the rehabilitation work. As this report is being written, rehabilitation work is continuing at Dozer Rodeo where TM-40 was damaged by suppression activity. Workers are aware of TM-40 and are avoiding it.

Cultural resources can be threatened by post-fire related erosion and runoff, well after suppression and rehabilitation work has ended. For the Telegraph Fire, post-fire related erosion and runoff does not appear to threaten cultural resources. Placer mining evidence in Drunken Gulch may be most at risk, but the BAER team hydrologist and soil scientist believe that erosion and runoff are unlikely to affect these cultural resources and is not a concern at this time.

What is of concern is OHV use off of routes designated in the Sierra RMP. The fire burned thousands of acres of chaparral, opening up many areas to cross-country OHV use, especially in the upper Good Gulch watershed. Sensitive cultural resources, such as prehistoric sites with archaeological deposits (i.e., TM-61, TM-46, TM-03, and TM-04), are now more vulnerable to

OHV-related damage. Areas that were difficult for OHVs to access are now more open because the brush has burned off.

E. Results of the fieldwork

BLM archaeologist James Barnes visited all but one portion of the burned area with concentrations of known cultural resources. The purpose of the fieldwork was to identify critical cultural resources that require ES treatments to stabilize them and prevent other kinds of post-fire related damage.

Barnes visited Sherlock Creek/Mosher Road; Saxon Creek (off of Telegraph Road and Rancheria Creek Road); Briceburg; campground access road/Yosemite Valley Railroad grade (from Briceburg to the Mountain King Mine); and Burma Grade/Bull Creek Road (from Briceburg to the National Forest boundary). The area not visited was the North Fork Merced River. The results of the field visits are described, by geographic area, in the following subsections.

Sherlock Creek/Mosher Road

TM-295 (Mosher Cabin) burned to the ground, leaving rock foundations and miscellaneous debris. No suppression damages were observed. In 2006 BLM determined that this 1900s cabin site is not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. No management issues are anticipated.

TM-234, TM-130, and TM-129, and TM-232 (placer mining-related sites) were burned by the fire. The fire does appear to have done any damage to them. No suppression damages were observed. Considerable placer mining evidence was observed in Drunken Gulch including stacked tailings. The BAER team hydrologist and soil scientist believe that possible increases in erosion and runoff in Drunken Gulch caused by the fire are unlikely to affect cultural resources in this area, even the stacked placer tailings located within the floodplain. The gate on Mosher road should remain locked to protect cultural resources on lower Sherlock Creek. PG&E built a landing just below its power line to conduct power line repairs just after the fire. No cultural resources were affected.

TM-156 (prehistoric site) and TM-175 (Our Chance Mine) were not visited, but it is known that the fire burned them. No management issues are anticipated.

TM-117 and TM-119 (both BRM sites) in upper Lyons Gulch were not visited. No management issues are anticipated.

Saxon Creek

TM-259 (Schroeder Mill) is a significant mine building that burned to the ground as a result of the Telegraph Fire. BLM needs to step up patrols to prevent unauthorized salvage of the extant mill machinery and other associated artifacts at the mill site.

TM-43 (BRM) and other Saxon Creek sites were burned over during the fire. PG&E used a bulldozer to build a road on BLM-administered land off of Telegraph Road just after the fire to replace a power pole. No cultural resources were affected by PG&E's work. The Saxon Creek area needs further fieldwork; cultural resources like historic mining ditches associated with the Schroeder Mine may be discovered here.

TM-40 (prehistoric site/historic-era site) was the topic of discussion between BLM archaeologist James Barnes and Cal Fire archaeologist Linda Pollack in the field on August 19, 2008. There was bulldozer damage to TM-40 during the fire. Barnes told Pollack that the bulldozers damaged a small portion of the site, on its southern end, and that stabilization will not be necessary. Future rehab work in this area will be done by hand. There will be no new ground disturbance. The site's boundaries have been flagged for avoidance. The gate further up the road needs to remain locked to keep motorized vehicles out of the site. A small portion of a mining ditch near TM-40 was also damaged by bulldozer work.

Briceburg

The Briceburg bridge, Briceburg Inn (BLM visitor center), Camp E site, the "town" site of Briceburg, and other cultural resources in this area were not affected by the fire or fire suppression activity.

Yosemite Valley Railroad grade (campground access road)

TM-77 (prehistoric and historic-era site) was exposed by the fire. Prehistoric artifacts, historic-era foundations, rockwork, and other features are highly visible due to their proximity to the campground access road. BLM must step up its management presence in the area to prevent looting and vandalism.

Merced River sites include mainly bedrock milling stations. They were not affected by the fire or fire suppression activity.

Burma Grade/Bull Creek Road

Ponderosa Way (a.k.a. Burma Grade/Bull Creek Road) is located on the steep slopes just north of Briceburg. The fire burned through this area. The 1930s CCC rockwork and culverts associated with the fire break road are now much more obvious. Some of these engineering features have historic value and should be carefully documented. Steps should be taken to preserve the road and its historic engineering features.

TM-61, TM-03, TM-04, TM-46, and TM-47 (prehistoric sites) were burned over. No suppression damages were observed. We must assume these sites are critical until more archaeological research can be conducted. TM-61 has been exposed and is at risk. An OHV road runs through the site. The road is not designated for motorized use, pursuant to the Sierra RMP. As for the other sites, they are threatened by OHV use unless BLM carefully manages the road network and enforces the route decisions in the Sierra RMP. Also, there are cattle fences and a stock pond near some of the sites. BLM needs to manage grazing use on BLM-administered land in the area to avoid negative effects to the sites caused by grazing.

TM-05 (prehistoric site) is a large midden and BRM complex located on private land. Bull Creek Road runs right through the site. Cal Fire appears to have damaged the site when they bladed the road during the fire. The damage was unintentional and not severe. Cal Fire archaeologist Linda Pollack was informed of the damage. Stabilization options seem to be limited; perhaps the portion of the road running through the site could be graveled.

In upper Good Gulch there appears to be historic-era archaeological sites that have been exposed by the fire that have not been documented. For example, the remains of rock cabin were found near TM-61. Selective inventory and documentation is recommended.

In Halls Gulch, from Forest Service land to the Merced River, members of the BAER team observed numerous mining-related sites, especially in one tributary. Selective inventory and documentation is recommended.

North Fork Merced River

Prehistoric and historic-era sites in this area were not visited, though it is known that the fire burned over them, from the North Fork confluence to the Timbrush fire break. Many of the known cultural resources are bedrock mortar sites, foundations/chimneys of historic-era cabins, or placer mining evidence. These resources were likely unaffected by the fire. No management issues are anticipated. Selective inventory and documentation is recommended to identify previously undocumented resources now exposed or easier to access.

IV. Recommendations

1. TM-77 is a prehistoric and historic-era archaeological site with building foundations, rockwork, and other features. The historic-era site dates to the early 1900s and is believed to be associated with families that still live in Mariposa County and have Miwok ancestry. The fire burned over TM-77 with no damage to the resource. However, the site is now exposed, highly visible to the public, and is vulnerable to looting and vandalism due to its proximity to a public road. BLM should patrol the site on a regular basis to prevent looting and vandalism. Patrols should continue in earnest until grasses and other vegetation have re-grown, obscuring the foundations, rockwork, and artifacts.



Digital photo of TM-77 showing that the site is exposed and highly visible

2. The Permit Mill and the Schroeder Mill are gold mills, built and operated during the mid-1900s. Sadly, both mills burned to the ground as a result of the Telegraph Fire. Family members of the people involved in building and operating the two mills still live in the area and want to see the mill ruins preserved in place. Extant mill machinery reflects mid-1900s gold mining technologies and, in conjunction with the historical record, has scientific research value. Members of the public have inquired about salvaging mill machinery and other metal artifacts for scrap. Salvage should not be allowed. BLM needs to patrol the mill sites to prevent unauthorized salvaging, looting, and vandalism. BLM should attempt to physically close the driveway to the Permit Mill site and the road to the Schroeder Mill site.



Digital photo of the Permit Mill showing artifacts that need protection from salvagers

3. TM-61 is a prehistoric archaeological site with midden and bedrock mortars. The Telegraph Fire did not damage the site and post-fire erosion is not anticipated. However, the fire burned off the vegetation in and around the site. It is now exposed, highly visible, and vulnerable to looting, vandalism, and other kinds of damage. The site is especially vulnerable to OHV-related damage. There are routes not designated for OHV use in the area and OHV use seems to be increasing. The site needs to be regularly patrolled by BLM to prevent looting, vandalism, and OHV-related damage. BLM should attempt to physically close roads in the area to prevent OHV-related damages. A combination of fencing, vegetation barricades, and signing are recommended. A nearby OHV-created route is causing sediment to erode over the midden. BLM should build water bars on the road.



Digital photo showing an OHV road running through TM-61. The fire burned off vegetation, potentially exposing the site to additional OHV-related damage

4. Burma Grade/Bull Creek Road (between Briceburg and upper Good Gulch) is a segment of the Ponderosa Way Fire Break, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Forest Service during the mid-1930s. In several locations along this segment of the fire break road, the fire exposed rockwork, culverts, and other engineering features built by CCC crews around 70 years ago. These features have historic value and should be documented and preserved. The steep slopes around the road burned severely. It is possible that the increased erosion and runoff could cause the historic rockwork/culverts to fail and the road to wash out. BLM considers the road to be an important public asset and is requesting ES funds to replace the culverts most vulnerable to failure. The road needs to be evaluated, pursuant to BLM's Section 106 requirements. If the road is significant, the effects of the culvert replacement need to be analyzed to determine if they are adverse. Replacing some of the historic culverts may be necessary to preserve the road and keep it in use.



Digital photo of rockwork and culvert at Good Gulch

5. Certain areas contain concentrations of cultural resources that could be vulnerable to looting, vandalism, and OHV-related damage. During the fire, access to these areas was improved because roads were graded and gates were unlocked. Keep gates locked that are to remained locked under the Sierra RMP.