



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Mother Lode Field Office

5152 Hillsdale Circle

El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

www.blm.gov/ca/motherlode

EA Number: CA-180-09-39

Proposed Action: Skull Flat fuels reduction project

Location: MDM, T 7 N, R 13 E, Section 35, Calaveras County, CA (see the project area map attached)

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

1.1 Need for Action

The Bureau of Land Management's Mother Lode Field Office (BLM) manages scattered public lands in the foothills of the central Sierra Nevada. Some areas have not experienced wildfires in decades. Chaparral and other fuels have grown, increasing the possibility of a catastrophic wildfire. At the same time, local communities have grown. There are now numerous private residences in the area, including residences adjacent to BLM-administered parcels containing dense fuels. Local residents are concerned about wildfire and are anxious to see public land managers like BLM take action to reduce fuels on public lands adjacent to their homes. BLM proposes to issue variance permits to landowners in the Skull Flat area allowing them (or a contractor of their choosing) to reduce fuels on BLM-administered land, at the public land boundary, adjacent to their property. In some cases, BLM would do the fuels reduction work within the project area (referred to herein as the variance area).

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action—issuing variance permits—is consistent with the Sierra Resource Management Plan, approved in February 2008, and the Mother Lode Field Office Fire Management Plan, approved in March 2008. The Sierra Resource Management Plan's Record of Decision (page 15-16) gives BLM the goal of establishing a cost-efficient fire management program commensurate with threats to life, property, public safety, and environmental resources. BLM also has the goal of suppressing wildfire to protect life, property, and environmental resources. BLM's objectives for meeting these goals are use various kinds of treatments to reduce the risk of wildfire in WUI communities and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire through fuels management. The Fire Management Plan gives BLM various non-fire fuels treatment objectives and strategies for specific lands under BLM's administration. Specific objectives and strategies for the fire management unit, in which the project area is located, are laid out in the plan.

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

The proposed action is to issue variance permits to landowners in the Skull Flat area. The permits would allow them to reduce fuels on BLM-administered land along their property boundary and up to 100 ft onto the public land. In some cases, BLM and its contractors would do the fuels reduction work within the variance area. In either case, the work would be done in the following way:

Defensible space around structures would be built by hand using chainsaws and other hand-held tools. Vegetation would be chipped and dispersed by a wheeled or rubber tracked chipper. Clearing would not reduce vegetative canopy closure to less than 50 percent of the treated area.

Clearing of vegetation by mechanical vehicles or equipment (i.e., dozers, ATVs, etc.) is prohibited unless BLM specifies that a specific type of equipment may be used. This EA does not cover such situations; a separate NEPA document would be written for each project involving the use of equipment. Fire suppression tools would be kept on hand during clearing work. Hand tools with internal combustion engines would have state or federally approved spark arresters.

Any dead vegetation less than six inches in diameter would be cut and removed. Live trees with trunks less than 6 inches in diameter as measured six inches above the ground would be cut and removed. Tree trunks would be cut flush with the ground. Ladder fuels (branches) would be removed from the lower third (up to 8 ft high) of trees not cut down. Generally, grasses and forbs may be cut with a string trimmer (see exception below under Project Design Features). All cut vegetation, garbage, trash, litter, discarded equipment or parts, waste material, or other refuse resulting from operations would be removed by hand to adjacent private property and disposed of on the landowner's property, at the local county landfill, or in accordance with prior written authorization by BLM.

Fuels management on public land with specific land use designations including Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness Study Area, Special Recreation Management Areas would be handled with site specific NEPA documentation.

2.2 Project Design Features

To minimize the potential for introduction or spread of invasive weeds, all equipment used for the proposed action would be cleaned prior to entering the variance area and, where possible, would avoid operating within weed-infested areas, such as stands of scotch broom.

Fuels reduction projects can cause the spread of invasive plant species. Of particular concern is the spread of weedy brush species like Scotch broom, French broom, and Spanish broom. If these species are cut to reduce brush fuels, and the branches are moved, seed of the broom species may be spread. If branches of these species are to be moved, the branches would be cut small enough to be loaded in plastic bags. Any transport of the branches would be done inside intact and closed plastic bags. For the same reason, raking of areas with any broom species is not permitted. Because chipping can spread seed, chipping of branches of broom plants is not permitted.

In most cases grasses and forbs may be cut with a string trimmer. However if weeds are present, (e.g., yellow starthistle, Italian thistle, bull thistle), and if the weeds have mature seed, the weeds would be pulled and bagged before any string trimming occurs. Any transport of cut or pulled weeds with seed would be done inside intact closed plastic bags.

If the operator discovers, encounters, or becomes aware of cultural or paleontological resources within or near the variance area (i.e., historic or prehistoric sites, objects, features; human graves or grave markers; fossils; artifacts; etc.) all operations in the vicinity would cease and a BLM-approved archaeologist would be notified. The archaeologist would assess the discovery and provide recommendations on how to proceed within the context of BLM policy. Operations would resume at the discovery site upon BLM authorization.

The use of herbicides is prohibited.

No ground disturbing activity is authorized. No new roads or trails shall be created or constructed.

Roads or trails commonly in public use would not be enclosed or obstructed. Existing telephone, telegraph, transmission lines, fences, ditches, roads, trails, and other improvements would be protected.

All survey monuments, witness corners, reference monuments, and bearing trees would be protected against destruction, obliteration, or damage during operations.

All federal, state, and local laws and regulations applicable to the premises would be followed.

The parking of vehicles and the storage of materials on public land are both prohibited, and this would be emphasized to variance participants.

Dumping of any sort of waste material, including vegetative material, is prohibited on public land, and this would be emphasized to variance participants.

All forms of plant cultivation including gardening, landscaping, and tree planting is prohibited on public land and this would be emphasized to variance participants. Similarly the placement of lawn furniture, tables, fencing, play structures or other improvements on public land is prohibited and this would be emphasized to variance participants.

To avoid misunderstandings, private landowners would be given written instructions/permit stipulations pertaining to their rights and responsibilities under their fuels variance. The instructions/permit stipulations for the project would be read to the landowner. The instructions/permit stipulations would specify penalties for non-compliance.

2.3 No Action

Under the no action alternative, BLM would not build and maintain a fuel break in the project area.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

BLM did not consider any other alternatives in detailed analysis.

3.0 Affected Environment

The project area is located in the foothills of the central Sierra Nevada. Specifically, the variance area is dominated by west side ponderosa pine forest with a mixed chaparral understory. The chaparral provides habitat for a variety of wildlife. Deer and other herbivores make use of chaparral. Some small herbivores use chaparral species in fall and winter when grasses are not in abundance. Rabbits and hares eat twigs, evergreen leaves and bark from chaparral. Chaparral provides seeds, fruits, insects, protection from predators and climate, as well as singing, roosting, and nesting sites for many birds. There are numerous private residences near the variance area. Recreational use of BLM-administered land in the area is considered to be very low. Recreationists visit this area infrequently. BLM manages this area in accordance with class III visual resource management (VRM) standards. BLM's objective for class III is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered in this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mentioned later in this EA, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: areas

of critical environmental concern, prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, wetlands and riparian zones, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, and environmental justice.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action would not impact atmospheric, water, or soil resources. The area that would be treated is relatively small in size. The use of hand tools within this area is expected to cause little, if no, soil disturbance. Cut brush and other fuels would be dragged by hand from the variance area onto private property and then properly disposed of. Cutting of fuels, as proposed, could create some dust, but not enough to affect air quality.

The BLM botanist conducted a botanical study of the project area. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act. He did not find any special status plants affected by the proposed action. The botanist recommended that the proposed action would not affect threatened and endangered plants or other BLM special status plants. Vegetation that would be treated within the variance area would grow back within a few years although repeated clearing is likely to alter competitive interactions among species (refer to the study attached).

The BLM wildlife biologist analyzed the impacts of the project on wildlife, especially on special status wildlife. Her analysis was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act. The biologist recommended that the project would have negligible short-term impacts on wildlife due to temporary noise and dust when fuels are cut and masticated. There would be no impacts on threatened and endangered wildlife or other BLM special status wildlife.

The BLM archaeologist conducted a cultural resource study of the project area to determine whether significant cultural resources could be affected by the proposed action. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act. The BLM archaeologist found that no significant cultural resources would be affected by the project. No places of traditional religious and cultural significance to Native Americans would be affected (refer to the study attached).

The proposed action would not negatively impact recreational use. Recreational use is very uncommon in the area affected by the proposed action. Recreation could be impacted, for a short period of time, during project implementation.

The proposed project would have a negligible temporary impact on visual resources. BLM manages the area in accordance with VRM class III standards, and the proposed action is in line with the management objective for this class, which is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

There would be no impacts to environmental resources, such as water, soils, and wildlife. However there could be impacts to private property. If the proposed action is not implemented, private property would have less protection against a wildfire.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

Negative cumulative impacts are not anticipated. The proposed action would not impact significant biological and cultural resources. The proposed action would not impact atmospheric, water, and soil resources. The proposed action would have negligible short-term impacts on commonplace plants and wildlife. The vegetation would grow back and wildlife would return to the area once project work has ceased. Except for trees too large to be cut during the initial fuel break construction, as long as the fuel break is maintained, vegetation would be kept at an early seral stage. This would affect wildlife use patterns, favoring those species that make use of early seral habitat. Wildlife species that do not stray from cover would make less use of the fuel break area. Wildlife species that use the ecotone between

dense brush and more open habitat should be favored by the fuel break with adjacent uncut brush. In all of these instances, other fuels reduction work in the vicinity can lead to cumulative impacts. The proposed action is expected to have beneficial cumulative impact on wildfire protection.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

No outside agencies were consulted.

5.1 Authors

James Barnes, BLM NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist

Brian Mulhollen, BLM Fuels specialist

5.2 BLM Interdisciplinary Team/Reviewers:

/s/ James Barnes

NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist	Date
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Fuels specialist	Date
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Recreation	Date
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/s/ Albert Franklin

Botany	Date
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/s/ Peggy Cranston

Wildlife/fisheries	Date
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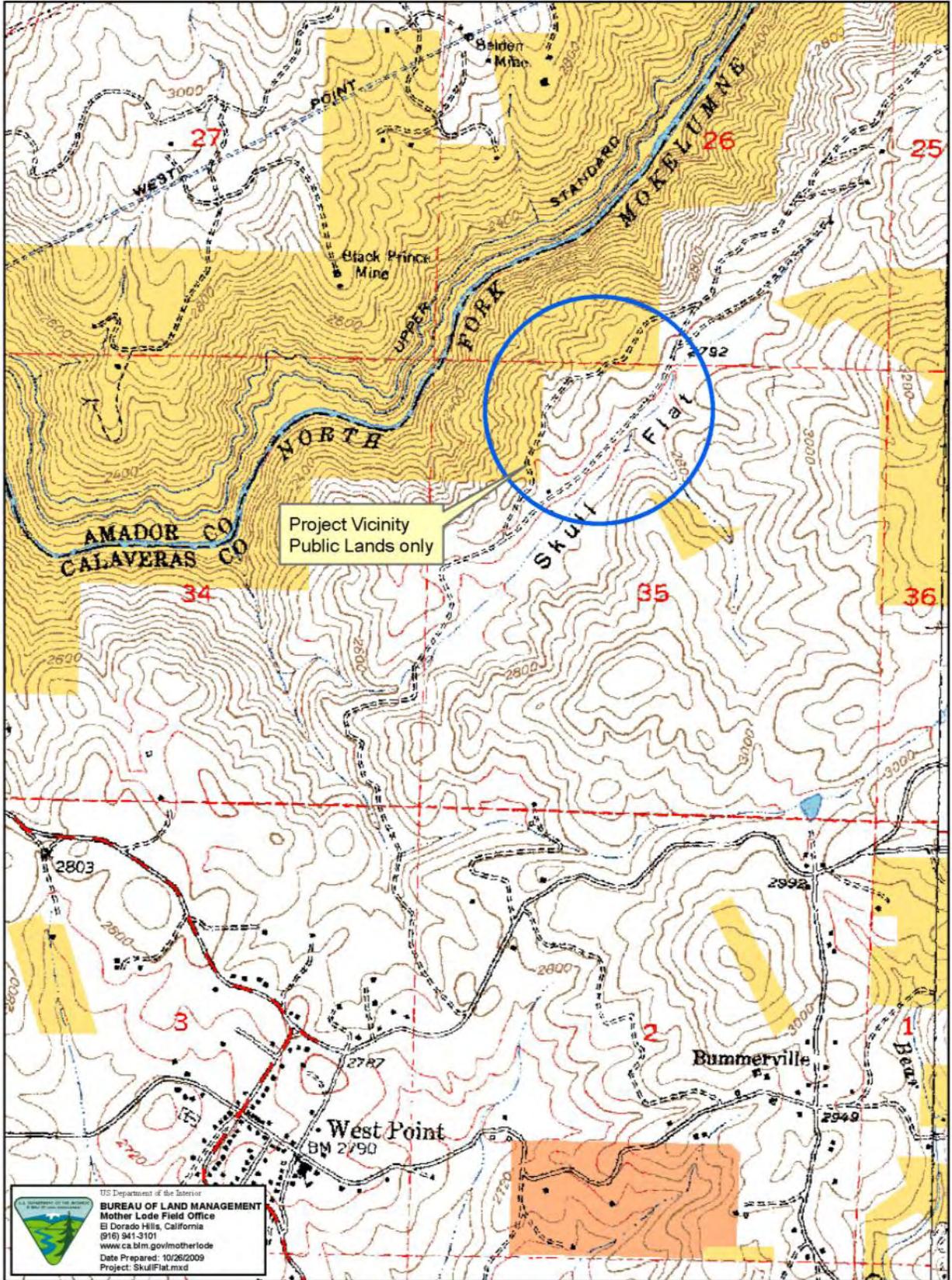
5.3 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

This EA would be posted on Mother Lode Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/motherlode) under NEPA and would be available for a 15-day public review period. The EA is also available by mail upon request during this 15-day public review period. Comments should be sent to James Barnes at Bureau of Land Management, Mother Lode Field Office, 5152 Hillsdale Circle, El Dorado, CA, 95762, or emailed to jjbarnes@blm.gov.

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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
 Mother Lode Field Office
 El Dorado Hills, California
 (916) 941-3101
 www.ca.blm.gov/motherlode
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