



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Mother Lode Field Office

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El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

www.blm.gov/ca/motherlode

Cobbs 32/Wagner Ridge Fuel Break Maintenance and Construction (CA-180-11-32) Finding of No Significant Impact April 2011

It is my determination that this decision will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. Anticipated impacts are within the range of impacts addressed in the Sierra Resource Management Plan (RMP)/Final Environmental Impact Statement. The proposed action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared. This conclusion is based on my consideration of CEQ's following criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27), regarding the context and intensity of the impacts described in the EA, and based on my understanding of the project:

1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse and a significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects. Potential impacts include negligible soil disturbance caused by the use of a rubber-tracked chipper or masticator and temporary dust due to mastication of vegetation and temporary smoke due to burning piled vegetation. However, none of these impacts would be significant at the local or regional scale (cumulatively) because of the small scale of the proposed action and the project design features incorporated into the proposed action. Visual resources may be negatively impacted but these impacts are in accordance with management goals and objectives stated in the Sierra RMP and are not considered significant. BLM's visual resource management standards for the area would be met.

2) The degree of the impact on public health or safety. No aspects of the proposed action have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety. In fact, the project is designed to help firefighters fight wildfire; therefore protecting public health and safety, especially for local residents.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area. The area affected by the proposed action does not have any unique characteristics. Soils, vegetation, and wildlife are all typical of the elevation and terrain in the central Sierra Nevada foothills.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial effects. No anticipated effects have been identified that are scientifically controversial. As a factor for determining within the meaning of 40 C.F.R. § 1508.27(b)(4) whether or not to prepare a detailed environmental impact statement, "controversy" is not equated with "the existence of opposition to a use." *Northwest Environmental Defense Center v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 117 F.3d 1520, 1536 (9th Cir. 1997). "The term 'highly controversial' refers to instances in which 'a substantial dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effect of the major federal action rather than the mere existence of opposition to a use.'" *Hells Canyon Preservation Council v. Jacoby*, 9 F.Supp.2d 1216, 1242 (D. Or. 1998).

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.* The analysis does not show that the proposed action would involve any unique or unknown risks.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.* Fuel break maintenance using hand crews, mechanized equipment (i.e., rubber-tracked chipper, masticator, etc.), and prescribed fire is not precedent setting. BLM undertakes these types of projects on a regular basis.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.* No significant cumulative impacts have been identified. The proposed action is consistent with the actions and impacts anticipated in the Sierra RMP.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect National Historic Register listed or eligible to be listed sites or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.* The proposed action would not affect cultural resources listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect ESA listed species or critical habitat.* No ESA listed species (or their habitat) would be affected by the proposed action.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of environmental protection law or requirements.* There is no indication that this decision would result in actions that would threaten such a violation.

William S. Haigh
Field Manager, Mother Lode Field Office

Date



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EA Number: CA-180-11-32

Project Name: Cobbs 32/Wagner Ridge II fuel break construction and maintenance

Location: MDM, T 1 S, R 16 E, Sections 32 and 33
Tuolumne County, CA (see attached maps)

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 the central Sierra Nevada foothills, especially in the chaparral belt and lower yellow pine belt. Due to decades of fire suppression, much of this area has not experienced wildfire in decades. Chaparral and other fuels have become decadent in some locales, increasing the possibility of a high-severity wildfire. At the same time, foothills communities such as Big Oak Flat and Greeley Hill have grown. There are now numerous private residences in the area, including adjacent to BLM-administered parcels containing dense fuels. Local residents are concerned about wildfire. The public lands around these communities are considered to be within the wild land-urban interface (WUI) and the communities are considered "at risk." Some residents are anxious to see public land managers like the BLM take action to reduce fuels on public lands. Fuel breaks are needed to help give firefighters places to hold wildfire or launch suppression efforts. In the past, Cal Fire crews and others built a series of shaded fuel breaks on prominent ridges on public lands. These fuel breaks are located near the communities of Big Oak Flat and Greeley Hill. The fuel breaks were constructed to serve as a strategic holding point in the event of a wildfire. Because these fuel breaks are important strategically to fighting wildfire and protecting local communities, BLM would like to maintain them over the next 10 years. In 2010 and 2011, BLM authorized fuel break maintenance under EA CA-180-10-23. The fuel breaks discussed in this EA connect to other fuel break projects being planned by the Stanislaus National Forest, Yosemite Foothills Fire Safe Council, and the Southwest Interface Team (SWIFT). Fuel break maintenance is underway. This EA would authorize additional fuel break maintenance and construction, connecting to and helping to complete the fuel breaks authorized under EA CA-180-10-23.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed action—to construct a fuel break that is a portion of a series of shaded fuel breaks on public land from Big Oak Flat to Greeley Hill/Stanslaus National Forest boundary—is consistent with the Sierra Resource Management Plan, approved in February 2008. The Sierra Resource Management Plan's Record of Decision (pages 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's objectives for meeting these goals are to 1). reduce the risk of wildfire in WUI communities; 2). reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire through fuels management; 3). use prescribed fire, mechanical, and biological treatments to reduce fuels and promote ecosystem diversity and resilience, control invasive species, reduce fuel hazard, improve wildlife habitat, increase water yield,

and enhance watersheds. The Folsom/Mother Lode Field Office Fire Management Plan, approved in March 2008 gives BLM various fire and 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. The proposed action is consistent with these objectives and strategies.

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

The proposed action is to maintain and construct fuel breaks on BLM-administered land near the community of Big Oak Flat. This portion named "Cobbs 32" would be built on a southwest trending ridge. Other than a narrow trail on the ridge, there is no other evidence of a fuel break here. This proposed fuel break would connect to a series of shaded fuel breaks, already being maintained, that were authorized under EA CA-180-10-23. Two smaller fuel breaks would be maintained. The first is through the Cobbs Creek canyon (crossing over the Hetch Hetchy Aqueduct) in the northwest quarter of Section 32. This fuel break would need to be built. The other is in the southwest quarter of Section 33. This fuel break is part of the original Ponderosa Way fuel break. It is heavily overgrown, at least on the north end, and would need to be maintained. These two fuel breaks would help complete the series of shaded fuel breaks authorized in EA CA-180-10-23.

The fuel break construction and maintenance proposed in this EA would be done by a hand crew (i.e., a BLM fuels crew, an inmate crew, a Hotshot crew, a BLM-selected contractor, etc.) under BLM supervision. In addition to using chainsaws and other hand tools, the crew would use any of the following methods:

1. The crew would feed cut vegetation into a rubber-tracked brush chipper staged on existing roads/trails. The chipped vegetation would be broadcasted over the project area.
2. The crew would pile and prep vegetation in 6 x 6 ft piles for burning at a later date in accordance with a BLM-approved burn plan and other BLM policy. Approximately 30 piles per acre would be constructed.
3. The crew would use a mechanical masticator to grind, chip, and chew vegetation. The masticated vegetation would be broadcasted across the project area, leaving an altered fuel type, which does not reduce the fuels, but rearranges them so they are more manageable in the event of wildfire suppression. Equipment selected to carry out this task would be designed to minimize ground disturbance. Multiple cutting attachments would be used to adapt to the terrain and fuels. The Cobbs Creek canyon portion is too steep for a masticator. A hand crew would build fuel break here, instead.

Construction of the fuel breaks may take several days. The fuel breaks would tie into fuel breaks that are planned for portions of the ridge on private lands. These fuel breaks are being planned by various entities: Stanislaus National Forest, Yosemite Foothills Fire Safe Council, and the Southwest Interface Team (SWIFT).

Once completed the fuel break would be maintained at any time over the following 10 years. At the end of this 10-year period, fuel break maintenance would need to be reauthorized, perhaps with a "fresh" NEPA document. This EA would need to be reviewed by the relevant staff to determine whether it is adequate to use to reauthorize maintenance. During the 10-year period, maintenance would be done by a crew under BLM supervision. The fuel break would be maintained using any or all of the methods described above.

Any fuels treatment work (i.e., broadcast prescribed burn) that BLM may propose in the future affecting land outside the scope of the proposed action described above and/or outside of the area analyzed in this EA would be subject to BLM's full environmental review/decision-making process. In other words, a new NEPA document may be needed. Certainly, new cultural and biological recommendations would be needed.

2.2 Project Design Features

All project design features incorporated into EA CA-180-10-23 will be implemented during fuel break construction and maintenance.

2.3 No Action

Under the no action alternative, BLM would not maintain or construct the fuel breaks.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

BLM did not consider any other alternatives in detailed analysis.

3.0 Affected Environment

Refer to EA CA-180-10-23 for a description of the affected environment. The project area is located on BLM-administered parcels in the west-central Sierra Nevada foothills. Specifically the project area is the tops of prominent ridges, from just south of Big Oak Flat. Elevations within the project area range from approximately 2300 ft to 3000 ft above sea level.

Vegetation in the project area varies depending on elevation, soils, exposure, soil moisture, microclimates, and other factors. The upper elevations of the project area are generally dominated by a mixed ponderosa pine-black oak forest. Understory species include mountain misery, poison oak, and manzanita. There are also dense stands of manzanita in some portions of the project area. Lower elevations are dominated by chaparral with chamise, buckbrush, and occasional gray pine near the chaparral-forest transition.

This mixed ponderosa pine-black oak forest provides habitat for a variety of wildlife including black bear, coyote, bobcat, grey fox, California quail, Steller's jay, raven, hawks, and eagles. The project area is near the boundary of the Stanislaus National Forest.

Recreational use of the project area is considered to be low. 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. There are small seasonal streams in the area. The project area is not located on a major stream. The area that would be treated is

relatively small in size. Use of a masticator is expected to cause little soil disturbance. Masticated brush and other fuels would be dispersed throughout the project area. This layer of mulch would help prevent erosion. Vehicle barriers such as cables, berms, and large boulders may be placed at strategic locations to prevent dirt bikes and other off-highway vehicles from driving within the treated area and causing erosion problems. Cutting and mastication of fuels, as proposed, would create some dust, but not enough to affect air quality.

The BLM botanist is in the process of conducting a botanical study of the project area. He conducted a field inventory in month/year when conditions were near optimal for plant identification within the project area. The study is designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act and other authorities. The proposed action would be designed so that it does not affect threatened and endangered plants or other BLM special status plants. Manzanita and other fuels that would be treated are commonplace and would grow back within a few years.

The BLM wildlife biologist is in the process of analyzing the impacts of the project on wildlife, especially on special status wildlife. Her analysis is designed to help BLM meet its obligations under the Endangered Species Act and other authorities. The proposed action would be designed to not affect threatened and endangered wildlife or other BLM special status wildlife (refer to the study attached).

The BLM archaeologist is in the process of conducting a cultural resource study of the project area. The study included background records search, field inventory, and Native American consultation. The study is designed to help BLM meet its obligations under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act and other authorities. The BLM archaeologist recommends that no significant cultural resources would be affected by the proposed action. Any significant cultural resources present within the project area would be avoided. This includes places of Native American religious and/or cultural significance (refer to the Section 106 compliance study attached).

The proposed action could have negligible short-term impacts on recreational use. Walkers, joggers, bicyclists, and motorists might be inconvenienced temporarily during project implementation due to the noise and dust caused by cutting and masticating fuels. Recreationists would continue to use the project area after the project is implemented.

The project area is not known for its visual resources. The proposed project would have a negligible impact on visual resources. Some vegetation would be removed. The fuel break would not be visible, except by the air. It would not, for example, mar the scenic beauty of a river canyon. The proposed action is in line with BLM's VRM class III management objective 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. There could be impacts to firefighting efforts. If a wildfire occurred, firefighters would not have this strategic fuel break to stop the advance of the fire and attack the fire. The result could be a larger wildfire that impacts environmental resources well beyond the project area. There may also be impacts to private property.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts are not anticipated. The proposed action would not impact significant biological and cultural resources. The proposed action would not impact water and soil resources. The proposed action would have negligible impacts on plants and wildlife. The proposed action is expected to have beneficial cumulative impact on wildfire suppression in the area as long as BLM maintains the fuel break.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

No outside agencies were consulted.

5.1 Authors

Brian Mulhollen, BLM Fuels Specialist

James Barnes, BLM NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist

5.2 BLM Interdisciplinary Team/Reviewers:

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| NEPA coordinator/Archaeologist | Date |
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| Fuels specialist | Date |
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| Outdoor Recreation Planner | Date |
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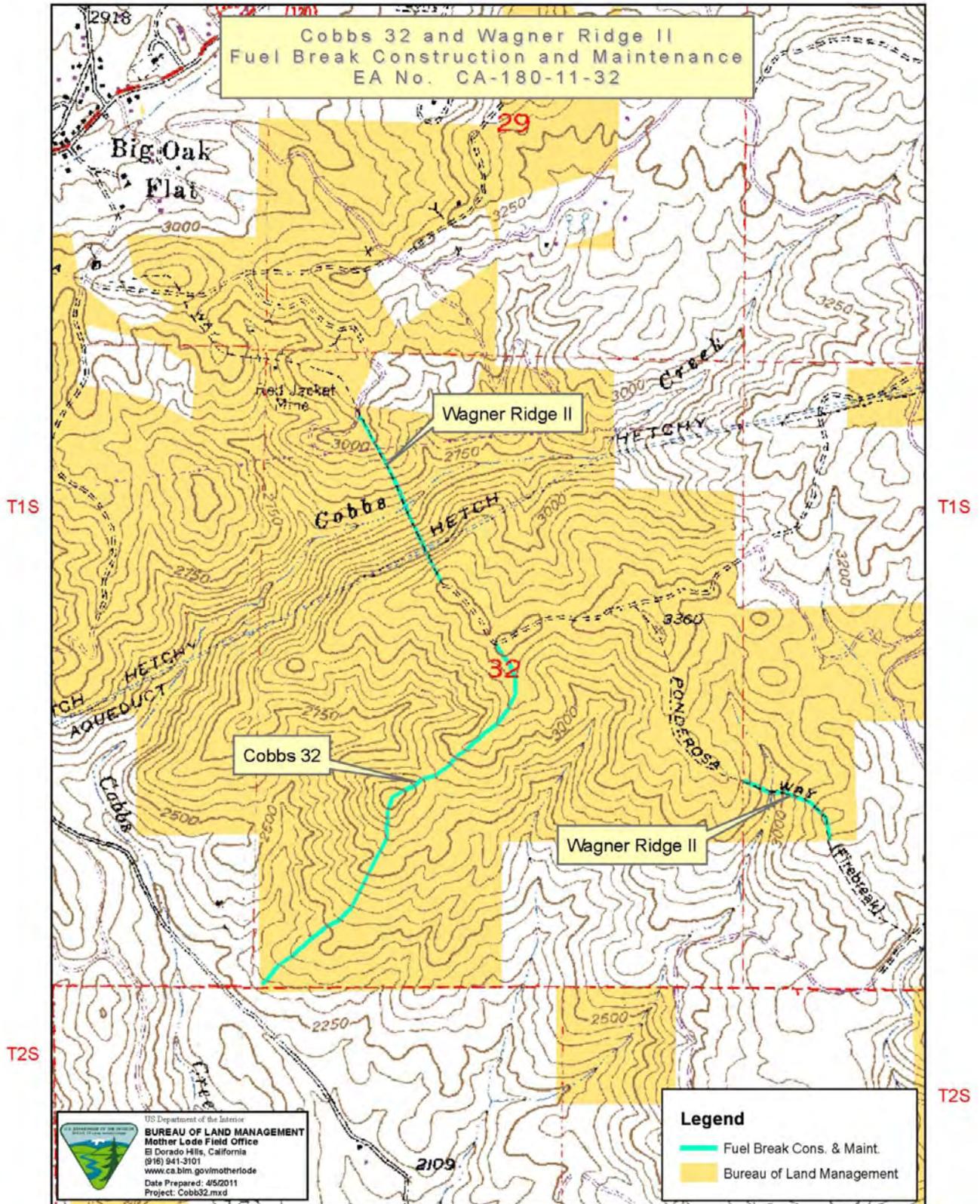
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| Wildlife biologist | Date |
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5.3 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

This EA will be posted on Mother Lode Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/motherlode) under NEPA and will 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 Hillside Circle, El Dorado Hills, California 95762 or emailed to James_Barnes@ca.blm.gov.

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