

**UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
SURPRISE FIELD OFFICE
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**TULEDAD FUELS REDUCTION AND HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
CA-370-08-04**

BACKGROUND

The BLM Surprise Field Office (SFO) is proposing 4,616 acres of hazardous fuels reduction and habitat restoration treatments in the Tuledad Allotment which encompasses 138,618 acres of public lands in the south western portion of the Surprise Field Office. There are 9 proposed individual treatments varying in size from 28 acres to 1,036 acres. These projects would reduce hazardous fuels, treat western juniper in sage steppe plant communities which are decadent or declining in vigor as a result of competition and would develop fuel breaks to protect priority habitat areas.

Juniper woodlands throughout the Great Basin and other geographic regions are expanding into habitats historically dominated by perennial grasses, sagebrush and other native shrubs (Tausch, 1999; Brockway, et. al, 2002; West, et. al, 1998). In some areas, long-term fire suppression efforts, excessive grazing, and drought-related conditions have led to the conversion of sagebrush/grass communities to areas dominated by homogenous stands of sagebrush, with declining, remnant populations of native perennial forbs and grasses. In some areas the establishment of juniper on sagebrush/grass sites has resulted in the loss of the grass and forb component and led to decadence and low vigor of important shrub species, such as antelope bitterbrush. When valuable grass, forb and shrub species decline, excessive surface runoff and soil erosion, reduced soil moisture and decreased groundwater recharge may occur (Bedell, 1993; Thurow, 2005). Reduced soil moisture and the competition of woody species for light, nutrients and moisture has resulted in reduced forage for wildlife, livestock and wild horses. Additionally, on many woodland ecological sites, the natural diversity of successional stages has been changed toward a preponderance of mature even-aged stands, which do not support a natural diversity of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Proper functioning ecological sites have a diversity of grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees and are essential to watershed integrity by stabilizing soils, promoting water infiltration and providing sufficient soil cover. A decline in the ecological condition of these plant communities adversely affects rangeland health, wildlife habitat, soil stability and other watershed values over the long-term.

Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) is a standardized tool that was developed for determining the degree of departure from reference condition vegetation, fuels and disturbance regimes (Hann et al, 2003). A natural fire regime is a general classification of the role fire would play across a landscape in the absence of modern human intervention, but including the influence of aboriginal burning (Hann et al., 2003).

Assessing FRCC can help guide management objectives and set priorities for treatments. Coarse scale definitions for natural (historical) fire regimes have been developed, mapped and interpreted for fire and fuels management. Five natural (historical) fire regimes have been classified based on average number of years between fires combined with the severity of the fire on the dominant overstory vegetation. They are:

- I- 0 to 35 year frequency and low severity fires
- II- 0 to 35 year frequency and high severity fires
- III- 35-100+ year frequency and mixed severity fires
- IV- 35 to 100+ year frequency and high fire severity
- V- 200+ year frequency and high fire severity

A fire regime condition classification is the amount of departure from the natural regime. Coarse scale FRCCs have been developed and defined. They include three condition classes for each fire regime group. The classification is based on a relative measure describing the degree of departure from the historical natural fire regime. This departure results in changes to one or more of the following ecological components: vegetation characteristics (species composition, structural stages, stand age, canopy closure, and mosaic pattern); fuel composition; fire frequency, severity, and pattern; and other associated disturbances (e.g. insects and diseased mortality, grazing, and drought). The three classes are based on low (0-33% departure; FRCC1), moderate (34-66% departure; FRCC2), and high (67-100% departure; FRCC3) departure from central tendency of the natural (historical) regime. Low departure is considered to be within the natural (historical) range of variability, while moderate and high departures are outside the range of variability. The FRCC rating is accompanied by a series of indicators of the potential risks that may result from the changes to the associated ecological components when disturbance is applied. Reference descriptions for a typical FRCC1 community have been developed for most major vegetation types. Reference conditions are compared to actual conditions for purposes of determining current FRCC classes.

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act, (HFRA), directs public land management agencies to prioritize hazardous fuels reduction treatments near wildland urban interface areas that are within FRCC3 or within Fire Regime Groups I, II, and III and within FRCC2. Vegetation data has been collected and analyzed, and an FRCC analysis has been completed for the proposed project area. Treatment areas would be prioritized to address first, those areas where condition class has not declined below a rating of 3.

Treatments could be completed using several methods including hand clearing, mechanical thinning and cutting, prescribed burning, or a combination of these treatments. Work would be completed by either Federal or contract personnel. The byproducts of these treatments would be made available for firewood collection or biomass harvest, piled and burned on site or scattered and left to decompose naturally.

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Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR

1508.27, I have determined that the actions will not have a significant effect on the human environment other than those already analyzed in the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy EIS. All environmental effects for this decision (listed below) have been discussed and disclosed in the EA, therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required prior to implementing treatments in the project area.

CONTEXT

The project area is located south and southwest of Eagleville, CA, in both Lassen, and Modoc Counties in California and also Washoe County, Nevada. The Eagleville community is a wildland urban interface (WUI) located at the base of the South Warner Mountain Range and is located at the northern end of the Tuledad Allotment. The project area has been rated within Fire Regime Group III (mixed severity, 35-100+ year fire frequency) and Condition Class 2 (moderate departure from natural fire regime and vegetative characteristics) with heavy fuel loads comprised of dense juniper and sagebrush. Fire history in Tuledad consists of large, high intensity fires. Potential for loss and harm to life and destruction of property and habitat is considered high. The Eagleville community has been listed as an at-risk wildland-urban interface (WUI) community in Federal Register Vol. 66, No. 160, *Wildland Urban Interface Communities Within the Vicinity of Federal Lands That Are at High Risk From Wildfire*. This project meets the criteria of an Authorized Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project as defined under Section 102 of the *Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003* (HFRA), because it is located on Federal land and neighbors an at-risk wildland-urban interface (WUI) area.

INTENSITY

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The EA has considered both beneficial and adverse impacts of the hazardous fuels reduction project. Considering all impacts, the project will result in reduced fuel loads, improved vegetative condition and fire resiliency for the project area under consideration. Reduced fuel loading will reduce the risk of damage from wildfire within the project area. Secondary effects in the manner of overall habitat improvement, improved watershed stability, and establishment of a more fire resilient ecological community are expected over time. A return of the natural fire regime and vegetative conditions is considered as merely improving the quality of the human environment through proactive treatments and fire management. Impacts that could be adverse include erosion in treated areas that could occur with high intensity precipitation events for the first few (several) years following treatment. The project design of treating areas in a mosaic fashion should mitigate effects from erosion. The proposed action is expected to reduce overall adverse impacts to natural resources.

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The proposed action will result in improved public health and safety by reducing the fuel load, and minimizing the risk of damage due to uncontrolled wildland fires. Proposed treatment designs and mitigating measures would minimize impacts to public health and safety. A prescribed burn plan will be completed and a smoke permit will be attained to address public health and safety from burning.

Public health and safety will be compromised if treatments are not implemented in the area. Vegetation and soil are at substantial risk of wildfire due to fuels buildup and the frequency of summer lightning storms, and would be at immediate risk of erosion from a wildfire if it were to occur.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

The project area is representative of the Great Basin in vegetative condition and ecological functionality. The project area does not contain any park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers. The area is not considered an ecologically critical area, but failure to take action to reduce risk from wildfire could place the area at ecological risk from erosion and/or the establishment of noxious or invasive weeds following a large wildfire.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The treatments in the proposed action will allow for attainment of resource objectives. The treatment design features and mitigating measures associated with the treatments will minimize adverse impacts to the quality of the human environment. In the long term, benefits will be realized to the quality of the human environment as vegetation diversity will increase, and wildfire sizes will be decreased. The effects resulting from the proposed treatments are not likely to be highly controversial.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The treatment methods to be used are accepted standard practices, and the effects of the treatments do not involve unique or unknown risks. Mitigation measures have been included in the treatment designs to address known risks and uncertainties. Prescribed burning carries a level of uncertainty as local weather conditions could change at any moment. However, uncertainty will be eliminated or reduced to very low levels through development of a prescribed burn plan that will set the conditions allowed for burning. Monitoring is also incorporated in the project design to address any uncertainty.

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.*

The actions associated with this project, and as identified in the EA do not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. While monitoring data from this project might be used to determine appropriate actions in future similar type projects, those projects would be subject to environmental assessment standards and as independent decision-making processes.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

All resources have been evaluated for cumulative impacts in the EA and no significant impacts were identified. Other fuels reduction and vegetation treatment projects may be proposed in the south Warner Mountains. These projects seen together with anticipated future proposed land disturbing activities in the area would not result in cumulatively significant impacts at the local or watershed scale. Overall, future similar projects would improve vegetation and habitat diversity and protect watersheds from erosion and hazards from large wildfires. As standard procedure, future projects would be subject to cumulative impact analysis and review on an area-specific case-by-case basis.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

Mitigation measures associated with the actions address protection of eligible historic and cultural properties that occur in the project area. Identified cultural and historic properties would be avoided or mitigation actions completed prior to treatment to prevent adverse impacts.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.*

It has been determined that there are no federally listed threatened or endangered species in the project area. There is potential, but highly unlikely that the bald eagle, a federally listed threatened species could be seen in the project area.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The proposed action will not violate or threaten to violate any Federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed and alternative actions are in conformance with the Surprise Resource Management Plan (2008), and the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy Final Environmental Impact Statement (2008). The proposed and alternative actions are also consistent with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003) and the *Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* (2001), and other Federal, state, and local policies and plans to the maximum extent possible.



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Date