

# **Decision Memorandum on Action and for Application of: Departmental Categorical Exclusion 1.12**

## **Coulter Mesa Prescribed Burn**

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Glenwood Springs Field Office  
Garfield County, Colorado**

**Number:** CO-140-08-115-CX

**Legal Description:** T4S, R92W, Sections 1,5,6,8

**Description of the Proposed Action and the Purpose and Need for the Action**

### **Need For Proposed Action:**

The project site is located on BLM administered land north of Rifle Gap Reservoir. There are two BLM parcels that are both adjacent to Forest Service administered land, and private land. Rifle Mountain Park is in the vicinity of the proposed project location. Both BLM parcels are adjacent to private property and fuel loadings are in the high category. There is a need to reduce fuel loads primarily in the oakbrush and mountain shrub vegetation communities. This project would be a collaborative effort with the U.S. Forest Service to treat vegetation with prescribed fire. The project site vegetation is mostly Gambel oak with some grasses and mountain brush. The elevation of the project area is between 7,600 feet and 9,000 feet. The Gambel oak in the area is decadent and over mature.

The Bureau of Land Management is proposing to use prescribed fire to reduce the density and continuity of Gambel oak and mountain shrubs on public lands. The project would reduce the threat of a catastrophic wildfire in the area, promote regeneration of mountain brush, provide more available forage for big game animals, and enhance firefighter and public safety in the event of a wildfire.

### **Proposed Action:**

The proposed action would treat approximately 357 acres of BLM administered land with prescribed fire. The legal description for the project is Township 4 South, Range 92 West, sections 1, 5, and 8. The prescribed burn would follow a burn plan and be in conjunction with the White River National Forest. The BLM administered land would be separated into two units. The first unit would be BLM Unit 4, the second unit would be BLM Unit 1 East. Please see map that is attached.

This proposed action would include approximately 49 acres of private land in Unit 4. Using prescribed fire on this parcel of private land would help facilitate holding operations and access to the project area. By including this private parcel, resource impacts and fire fighter safety risks would be reduced compared to not including it. Hand lines would not need to be cut mid slope

and holding operations would be at the toe of the slope compared to mid slope. This parcel would be administered and reviewed as if it were a federal land parcel.

The prescribed burn would treat Unit 4 and Unit 1 of the USFS Rifle Burn Blocks: Coulter Mesa project. Unit 4 is a total of 583 acres; Unit 1 is 2,078 of U.S. Forest Service land and approximately 357 acres of BLM land, for an overall total of 3,032 acres to be treated.

The proposal is to burn approximately 357 acres over a 1-4 year period on BLM administered lands and approximately 2,661 acres on USFS lands. The U.S. Forest Service will provide a separate Categorical Exclusion to provide for NEPA adequacy for the Forest Service administered land.

The preferred method of initiating fire is aerial ignition in the springtime using a helicopter. The helicopter is equipped with an aerial ignition device called a Plastic Sphere Dispenser (PSD) or a Heli Torch that can ignite ground fuels in a short time over large acreage. The ignition pattern and density of application is determined on site during the burn by the burn boss. This method of ignition will cover a large area quickly and it can pinpoint desirable pockets of burnable vegetation. This ignition method can also pinpoint natural advantage points to help direct the prescribed fire into fuel breaks and snow banks. Hand firing using drip torches and fusees can be used to supplement the aerial ignition. Hand firing may also be used as the primary ignition method depending on availability of the helicopter and to take advantage of prescription windows. Prescription windows are timeframes that meet the burn plan requirements that can vary in length from one day to a week or more. Hand firing requires more labor and resources on the ground than aerial ignition. Any fire and fire line improvements would stay out of any riparian area and streambeds.

Springtime is the preferred time frame to take advantage of good nighttime humidity recovery combined with the remaining snow banks which will help limit fire spread and reduce fire intensities. This will aid in the protection of desired vegetation riparian. Burning can be accomplished in the fall if the area meets the required prescription for ignition and control.

With either firing method or time of season, the intent is to apply fire in such a way as to create a mosaic with varying burn intensities including areas of unburned vegetation. Fire would be controlled utilizing natural fuel breaks, existing roads and trails, ignition patterns, and select weather conditions. There could be portions of hand line construction needed to complete this project. Hand line locations will be determined by the Burn Boss and constructed by fire crews before the prescribed fire is initiated.

Individual prescribed fire plans are required for all prescribed burns. These plans describe exactly how and under what conditions prescribed burning will occur in order to meet the objectives determined. Prescribed fires are set only when humidity, temperature, winds and fuel conditions are within pre-determined ranges specified by a Burn Plan. The BLM is required to meet all state and local air quality permit stipulations when they conduct prescribed burns.

The following resource protection measures will be implemented as part of the Proposed Action to avoid or minimize impact to natural resource values within the project area:

A standard Education/Discovery/NAGPRA Stipulation for cultural resource protection will be included in the Project Burn Plan. The importance of this stipulation should be stressed to prescribed burn team informing them of their responsibilities to protect and report any cultural resources encountered

#### Education/Discovery/NAGPRA Stipulation

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires that if newly discovered cultural resources are identified during project implementation, work in that area must stop and the agency Authorized Officer notified immediately (36 CFR 800.13). The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), requires that if inadvertent discovery of Native American Remains or Objects occurs, activity must cease in the area of discovery, a reasonable effort made to protect the item(s) discovered, and immediate notice made to the BLM Authorized Officer, as well as the appropriate Native American group(s) (IV.C.2). Notice may be followed by a 30-day delay (NAGPRA Section 3(d)). Further actions also require compliance under the provisions of NHPA and the Archaeological Resource Protection Act.

Treatment Units 1 and 4 contain areas mapped as CSU 4 (Controlled Surface Use) for erosive soils on slopes greater than 30% and NSO 15 (No Surface Occupancy) for slopes greater than 50% regardless of soil type. When possible try to avoid excessive foot or mechanical operations on steep slopes with erosive soils especially in close proximity to drainages.

Treatment Units 1 and 4 occur in close proximity to area drainages. In particular are the perennial George Creek to the east of Unit 4 and the perennial Butler Creek to the west. George Creek is not known to contain fish, but Butler Creek in the project area contains Colorado River cutthroat trout. Area drainages will be buffered from treatment such that a strip of untreated vegetation in conjunction with the riparian vegetation zone can collectively filter out potential ash and debris. Protection of the riparian vegetation will minimize the amount of sediment and nutrient loading in these drainages during spring runoff.

To avoid impacts to migratory breeding birds burning operations be restricted to periods outside the breeding season for most avian species in this area generally occurs between May 15 and July 15.

#### Range Management:

Range improvements (fences, gates, reservoirs, pipelines, etc) shall be avoided during burning activities to the maximum extent possible. The operator will be responsible for repairing or replacing any damaged range improvements.

### **Plan Conformance**

The Proposed Action is consistent with the Glenwood Springs Resource Management Plan, 1991 and the Fire Management Plan, 2004 as required by appropriate Federal, State, or local statutes having a bearing on the decision. The Proposed Action was designed in conformance with all bureau standards and incorporates appropriate guidelines for specific required and desired conditions relevant to project activities.

Decision Number/Page: The proposed action is within Fire Management Unit C-140-01 West of Glenwood Springs – Rifle Gap Reservoir Area. The Fire Management Objectives, Strategies (including Prescriptive Vegetative Treatments) and the Priority Ranking are in Appendix B, pages 40-43 of the Fire Management Plan for Wildland Fire Management and Prescriptive Vegetation Treatment Guidance 2002 and revised 09/2004. Also within the Fire Management Plan, Chapter III page 10 discusses Fuels Treatment Prioritization.

### **Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act**

The Proposed Action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with 516 DM 2, Appendix 1, 1.12. The application of this categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment. None of the exceptions apply. These extraordinary circumstances are contained in 516 DM 2, Appendix 2.

### **Persons and Agencies Consulted**

Kelly Coeey, Private Land Owner  
Lathan Johnson, Central Zone Assistant Fire Management Officer  
Cheryl Harrison, Archeologist, GSFO  
John Seeman, U.S.F.S. Fuels Specialist  
Desa Ausmus, Wildlife Biologist, LSFO  
Tom Fresques, Fisheries Biologist  
Allen Crockett, Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist  
Jeff O'Connell, Hydrologist, GSFO  
Isaac Pittman, Rangeland Management Specialist, GSFO  
Kay Hopkins, Outdoor Recreation Planner, GSFO

**Categorical Exclusions: Extraordinary Circumstances**

Extraordinary circumstances exist for individual actions within CXs which may:

	YES	NO
2.1 Have significant impacts on public health or safety.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.2 Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990); floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.3 Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA Section 102(2)(E)].	_____	<u>X</u>
2.4 Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.5 Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.6 Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.7 Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or office.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.8 Have significant impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed, on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated Critical Habitat for these species.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.9 Violate a Federal law, or a State, local, or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.	_____	<u>X</u>
2.10 Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (Executive Order 12898).	_____	<u>X</u>
2.11 Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites (Executive Order 13007).	_____	<u>X</u>
2.12 Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and Executive Order 13112).	_____	<u>X</u>

## Remarks

*Cultural Resources/Native American Religious Concerns:* One Class III cultural resource inventory (GSFO# 15408-1) for the federal lands involved. No inventory was completed on the private lands. No historic properties were identified. However, the majority of private land is over 30% and dense vegetation meeting the inventory exception of our Protocol with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer. Additionally, discussions with the private land owner did not indicate any know standing historic structures in the project area. A determination of **“No Historic Properties Affected”** was made for the project in accordance with the BLM/National SHPO Programmatic Agreement (1997) and the Colorado BLM/SHPO Protocol (1998).

*Threatened and Endangered Species:* The proposed action would have ‘no effect’ to any federally listed or proposed species. The project area is mapped as “other” lynx habitat. “Other” habitat is defined as sagebrush or pure aspen within 500 meters of winter foraging habitat (spruce-fir dominated). The site is mapped as “other” habitat due to its proximity to mapped winter foraging habitat located within 500 meters to the east on BLM lands.

Although the proposed action is located in “other” lynx habitat, vegetation at the site is a mixed mountain shrub community, consisting primarily of Gambel oak. This vegetation type is very marginal for lynx and is not considered lynx habitat. Given that the project site does not provide suitable habitat for lynx, the proposed action would have “No Effect” to Canada lynx. There are no other known listed, proposed or candidate species or their habitat within the project area.

### Vegetation/Grazing Management:

Typically, vegetation treatments such as prescribed burns would be deferred from grazing for a period of 2 or more growing seasons to allow for vegetation to recover and be able to sustain grazing. The area that is proposed for burning is in steep terrain which is not currently grazed by livestock; therefore, grazing deferment may not be necessary to allow vegetation to recover.

### Wildlife, Terrestrial:

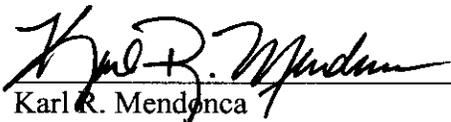
A variety of birds, mammals, and reptiles are found in the mountain shrub and Gambel oak community. The current state of vegetation in the project area limits the habitat’s potential for many species due to the dense and decadent condition found throughout much of the area. Many terrestrial wildlife species would benefit from improved access to habitat and the improved nutritional value of young mountain shrubs. Mast production would likely increase over time and benefit wildlife during winter through improved body condition.

### Noxious & Invasive Plant Species:

Surface-disturbing activities provide a niche for the invasion and establishment of noxious and non-native species, particularly when these species are already present in the surrounding area. Because noxious weeds have not been identified in the vicinity of the proposed project, the potential for noxious weed invasion is very low.

## Decision and Rational on Action

I have decided to implement the Coulter Mesa Prescribed Fire Project. The proposed application of prescribed fire will effectively reduce the density and continuity of Gambel oak and mountain shrubs on public lands. Implementation will reduce the threat of a catastrophic wildfire in the area, promote regeneration of mountain brush, provide more available forage for big game animals, and enhance firefighter and public safety in the event of a wildfire. In addition, I have reviewed the plan conformance statement and have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the approved land use plan and that no further environmental analysis is required.



Karl R. Mendonca  
Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist

Date

3/16/2009

## Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal.

## Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

Ody Anderson

OR

Angie Foster

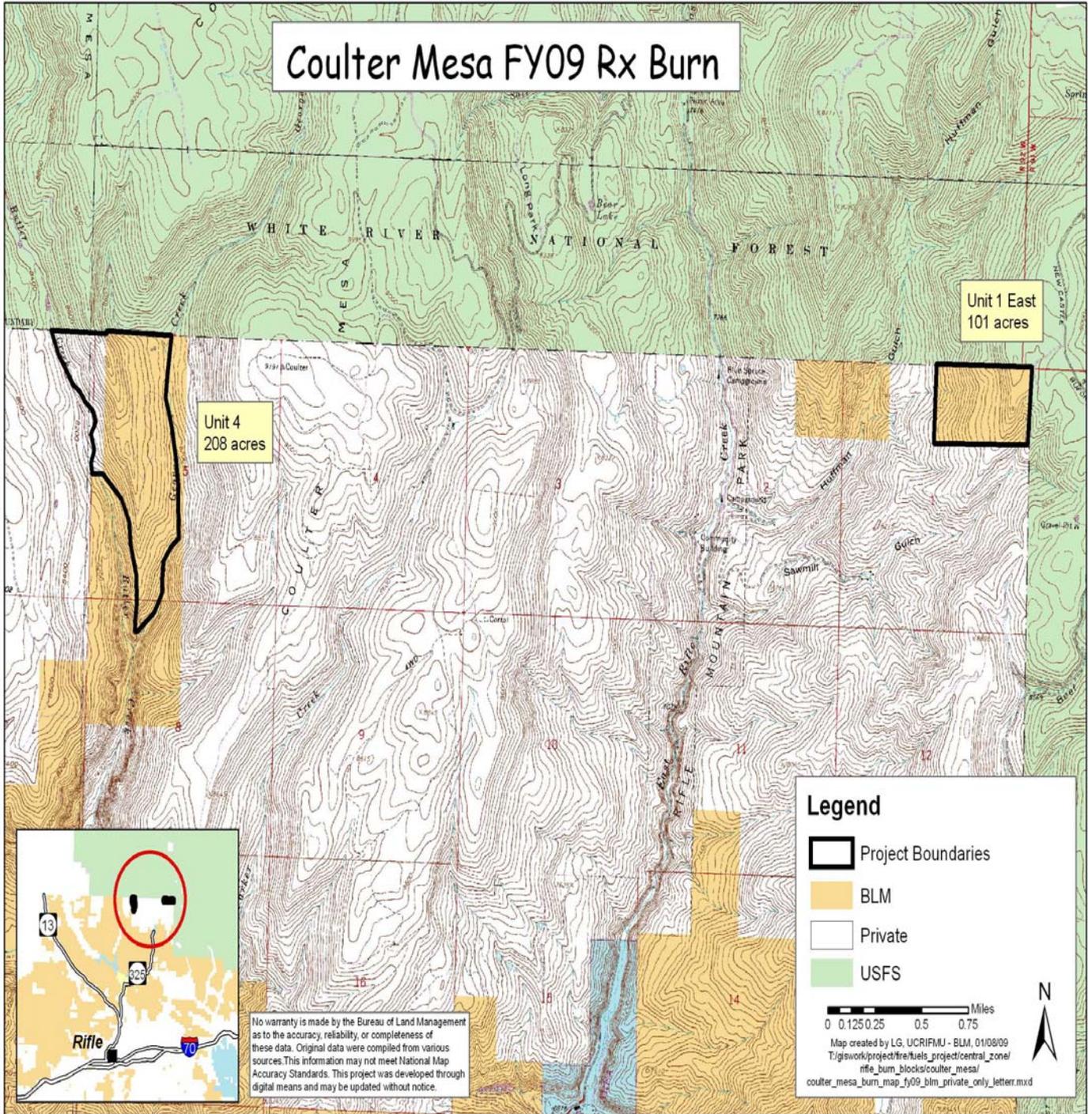
Fuels Management Specialist

BLM Fuels Program Manager

970-947-2810

970-244-3026

# Coulter Mesa FY09 Rx Burn



Unit 4  
208 acres

Unit 1 East  
101 acres

## Legend

- Project Boundaries
- BLM
- Private
- USFS

0 0.125 0.25 0.5 0.75 Miles

Map created by LG, UCRIFMU - BLM, 01/08/09  
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