

U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Colorado River Valley Field Office  
2300 River Frontage Road  
Silt, CO 81602

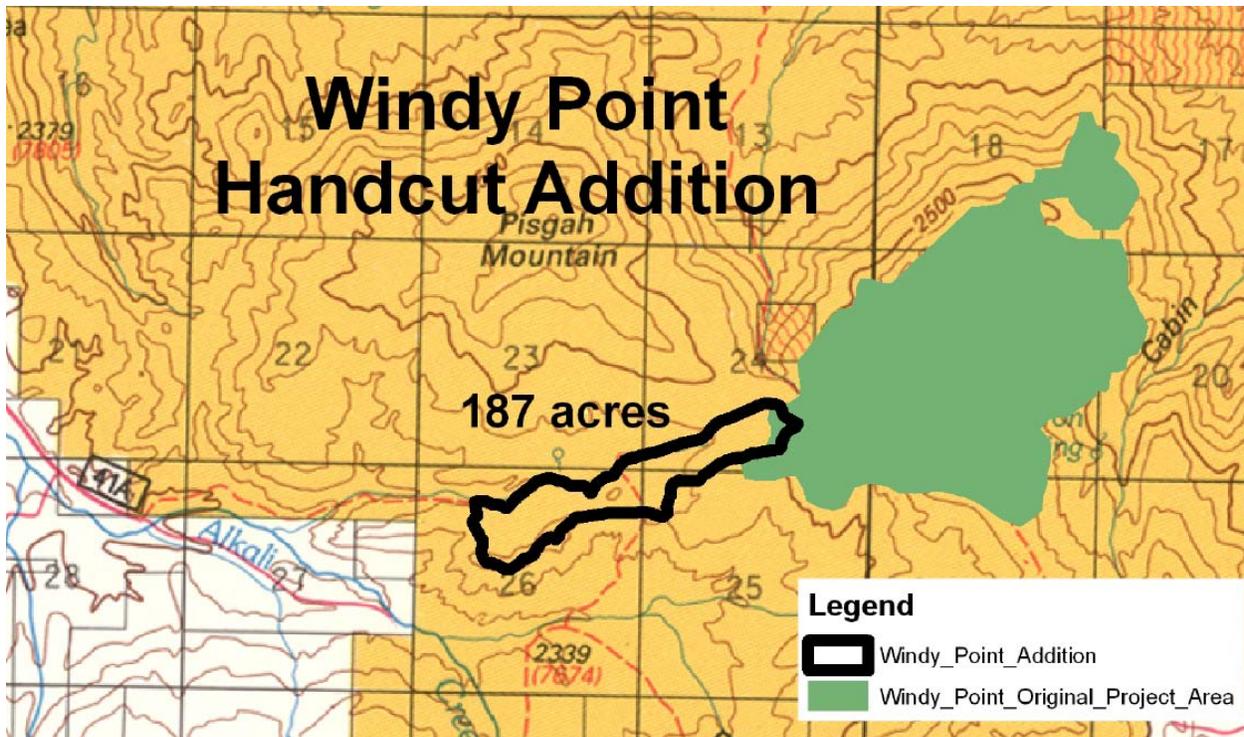
## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

**NUMBER:** DOI-BLM-CO140-2010-0048-EA

**CASEFILE NUMBER:** N/A

**PROJECT NAME:** Windy Point Pinyon-Juniper Tree Removal – Hand-cut Addition

**LEGAL DESCRIPTION:** T2S, R84W, Portions Of Sections 23, 24, 25 NS 26.



**APPLICANT:** BLM

**ISSUES AND CONCERNS:**

The project was initiated to: restore/maintain sagebrush shrublands and enhance wildlife habitat on public lands as identified by: (a) North Eagle South Routt Greater Sage Grouse Conservation Plan - 2004, (b) Fire Management Plan for Wildland Fire Management and Prescriptive Vegetation Treatment Guidance, and (c) Field reviews with the Colorado Division of Wildlife. The project is locally supported by the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the North Eagle South Routt Greater Sage Grouse Working Group.

**BACKGROUND:**

The original project area covers approximately 1085 acres of greater sage grouse habitat in the Windy Point area. The project was designed to target the improvement of sage grouse habitat by removing encroaching pinyon and juniper (PJ) trees from sagebrush stands. The objective is to target/remove all trees with a sagebrush understory within the project area that can be safely removed. The treatment was designed to target only pinyon pine and juniper trees, leaving grasses and forbs relatively undisturbed, thus protecting the soil from erosion and maintaining the herbaceous vegetation needed for sage grouse habitat.

**DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES:**

The proposed action is to hand-cut an additional 187 acres of encroaching pinyon-juniper trees (see project area photos below). About 10 acres are within the original project boundary and 177 acres are immediately west of the project (see legal description above). Trees would be removed via chainsaws. Felled trees would be lopped and branches scattered. Chainsaw work would be completed by the interagency fire crews. The project is anticipated to be completed between May - June 2010 or August –September 2010 if spring conditions hinder completion of the project. It is anticipated that it would take 2-5 days to complete the project.

**Photos of project area.**





**No Action Alternative:**

Under the no action alternative, no tree removal would be conducted.

**ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT CARRIED FORWARD:**

The use of prescribed fire to remove encroaching trees in the area was considered, but due to the importance of the sagebrush vegetation for sage grouse habitat, fire was discounted as a viable option as fire would remove sagebrush vegetation. Sagebrush and understory herbaceous vegetation in the area is in good condition. The only limiting factor regarding sagebrush dependent species use of the area is the encroachment of pinyon pine and juniper trees.

**NEED FOR THE ACTION:**

To increase the usability of the area for greater sage grouse, a T&E candidate species. Since greater sage grouse are utilizing the project area as they move between the Sunnyside area and the Windy Point area it is considered beneficial to the survival of this small population to: (a) protect the sagebrush stands from encroaching pinyon-juniper (PJ) trees and (b) reducing raptor perching sites. Removing trees from the project area would also benefit a variety of other sagebrush dependent species.

**PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW:**

The proposed action is subject to the following plan and amendments and has been reviewed for and is in conformance to the plan and amendments (43 CFR 1610.5, BLM MS 1617.3).

Name of Plan: Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan Glenwood Springs Resource Area

Date Approved: 1984 (Revised 1988), Amended in November 1991 - Oil and Gas Leasing and Development - Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement; amended Nov. 1996 - Colorado Standards and Guidelines; amended in August 1997 -

Castle Peak Travel Management Plan; amended in March 1999 - Oil and Gas Leasing & Development Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement; amended in November 1999 - Red Hill Plan Amendment; and amended in September 2002 – Fire Management Plan for Wildland Fire Management and Prescriptive Vegetation Treatment Guidance.

Decision Page Number and Decision Language:

Terrestrial Habitat Management - Page 18. Objectives - To provide approximately 57,933 animal unit months (AUMs) of big game forage (the amount needed to meet Colorado Division of Wildlife big game population goals in 1988), to improve existing wildlife habitat conditions, and to increase wildlife species diversity.

Fire Management Plan – Chapter IV, Page 26-27 Guidelines:

- Except where specific treatments are designed to control or manage vegetation within riparian areas, treatments will be designed to avoid riparian areas. Adequate buffer strips around water courses and drainages may be necessary to protect riparian areas. The extent of the buffer strip depends on a number of factors such as: the slope, the type of treatment, acres treated, current vegetation condition, etc., and will be determined through a site-specific environmental analysis.
- Vegetation treatments conducted on uplands adjacent to the Colorado River will be designed and conducted in a manner that limits potential for soil erosion and sedimentation and increases vegetative ground cover. This includes riparian restoration work, and salt cedar removal, intended to improve habitats. Where erosion potential is high, establish baseline water quality data prior to conducting vegetation treatments and conduct water quality studies until the site is revegetated and soils are stabilized to determine impacts of vegetation treatments on water quality.
- Consider visual qualities in Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I and II areas where the classification goal is to preserve the landscape character. Landscape modifications should replicate a natural shape, form, color and texture found in the surrounding area.
- Prescriptive treatments with the potential to disrupt visitors, should avoid high use areas and occur outside of high use seasons, such as the fall big game rifle hunting seasons

Livestock Grazing Management – Page 21- Following initial allocation, manipulate 27,800 acres of vegetation on 98 allotments using vegetation manipulation techniques listed in Appendix A (mechanical plant control).

**Standards for Public Land Health:** In January 1997, Colorado Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved the Standards for Public Land Health. These standards apply to five categories of resource values: 1) upland soils, 2) riparian systems, 3) plant and animal communities, 4)

threatened and endangered species including BLM sensitive species, and 5) water quality. Standards describe conditions needed to maintain public land health and relate to all uses of the public lands.

The Colorado River Valley Field Office is in the ongoing process of completing Land Health Assessments on a landscape basis. A Formal Land Health Assessment was conducted in the Burns to State Bridge Watershed in 2006 which included the project area. This watershed was found to be meeting all land health standards, with a few issues. These issues were related primarily to heavy browsing of shrubs by big game animals (leading to decadence and/or mortality of shrubs) and encroachment of pinyon-juniper trees into sagebrush parks. In some areas, sagebrush stands were old, overly dense, and lacked diversity and cover of herbaceous species.

Because a standard exists for these five resource categories, the impact analysis must address whether the proposed action or any alternatives being analyzed would result in impacts that would maintain, improve, or deteriorate land health conditions for that specific parameter. These analyses are located in specific elements listed below.

**AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT / ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES / MITIGATION MEASURES:**

This section provides a description of the human and natural environmental resources that could be affected by the proposed action and no action alternative. In addition, the section presents comparative analyses of the direct and indirect consequences on the affected environment stemming from the implementation of the various actions. This environmental assessment (EA) is a companion document to CO140-2008-084-EA which analyzed the original habitat treatments. The EA is tiered to the discussion of impacts in EA # CO-140-2001-0051, Fire Management Plan for Wildland Fire Management and Prescriptive Vegetation Treatment Guidance.

**CRITICAL ELEMENTS:**

A variety of laws, regulations, and policy directives mandate the evaluation of the effects of a proposed action and alternative(s) on certain critical environmental elements. Not all of the critical elements that require inclusion in this EA are present, or if they are present, may not be affected by the proposed action and alternative (Table 2). Only those mandatory critical elements that are present and affected are described in the following narrative.

In addition to the mandatory critical elements, there are additional resources that would be impacted by the proposed action and alternative. These are presented under Other Affected Resources.

Table 1 - Critical Elements of the Human Environment									
Critical Element	Present		Affected		Critical Element	Present		Affected	
	Yes	No	Yes	No		Yes	No	Yes	No
Air Quality	X			X	Prime or Unique		X		X

					Farmlands				
ACECs		X		X	Threatened or Endangered Species*	X		X	
Cultural Resources	X			X	Wastes, Hazardous or Solid	X			X
Environmental Justice	X			X	Water Quality, Drinking and Ground	X			X
Floodplains		X		X	Wetlands and Riparian Zones*		X		X
Migratory Birds	X		X		Wild and Scenic Rivers		X		X
Invasive, Non-native Species	X		X		Wilderness				
Native American Religious Concerns	X			X			X		X

\*Public Land Health Standard

## AIR QUALITY

### Affected Environment:

The proposed action and area (Eagle County) has been described as an attainment area under CAAQS and NAAQS (Colorado Ambient Air Quality Standards and National Ambient Air Quality Standards). An attainment area is an area where ambient air pollution amounts are determined to be below NAAQS standards.

### Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:

*Proposed Action:* The proposed activities would result in short term localized emissions from chainsaws and mechanical equipment associated with the cutting and removal of trees, dust generation during dry conditions, and smoke associated with burning activities. Given the scale, location, and the timing of the proposed activities; it is anticipated that overall impacts to local air quality would be negligible and no additional mitigation is recommended at this time.

*No Action Alternative:* Under the no action alternative, vegetation clearing activities would not occur. The result would be no impact on air quality.

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Affected Environment:** No Class III cultural resource inventories have been conducted within the proposed project area. Both historic properties that are eligible or potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and areas of Native

American concern may be present. Rock features or structures such as eagle traps, hunting blinds, and vision quests may also be present which could date to the prehistoric period.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* A “**Conditional No Adverse Affect**” was determined for this project since only hand thinning of trees less than 6 inches in diameter and no ground disturbing activity is planned. The hand cutting of these trees could be considered a casual activity. Trees of this size are generally too small to have been used for aboriginal or historic shelter or tools and are likely about 50-75 years old. The absence of heavy equipment would also prevent adverse impacts that could damage archaeological sites. If the proposed methods are changed additional cultural resources inventory may be required.

There would be no direct impacts to cultural resources from the implementation of the proposed action. However, indirect long-term cumulative impacts from increased access and personnel could result in a range of impacts to known and undiscovered cultural resources in the vicinity of the location. These impacts could range from exposure of previously buried remains to illegal collection, excavation and vandalism. Compliance with the Education/Discovery stipulation should help in alleviating these impacts somewhat.

*No Action Alternative:* This alternative would be neither beneficial nor detrimental to cultural resources.

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

**Affected Environment:**

Review of 2004 data from US Census Bureau indicates the median annual income of Garfield County averages \$50,119 and is neither an impoverished or wealthy county. Median annual income of Eagle County averages \$59,037 and is not impoverished but is considered a wealthy county. U.S. Census Bureau data from 2006 shows the minority population of Garfield and Eagle County comprises less than 0.6 % of the total population of Colorado<sup>1</sup>.

Garfield County	Eagle County
Median Household Income (2004)	Median Household Income (2004)
Estimate - \$50,119	Estimate - \$59,037

**INVASIVE, NON-NATIVE SPECIES**

<sup>1</sup> Source U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. Data derived from Population Estimates, Census of Population and Housing, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, State and County Housing Unit Estimates, County Business Patterns, Nonemployer Statistics, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permits, Consolidated Federal Funds Report  
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**Affected Environment:**

Weed populations within the project site have been reported as very low from field office personnel. No comprehensive weed surveys have been conducted in the project area, however, due to the widespread nature of weeds in the Glenwood Springs Field Office, it is likely some population level of noxious or invasive weed species are present at the project site.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation**

*Proposed Action:* Noxious weed populations are a threat to land health as they contribute to loss of rangeland productivity, increased soil erosion, reduced species richness, reduced wildlife habitat quality, and reduced aesthetic quality. Weeds generally germinate and become established in areas of surface disturbing activities or other human activities such as road construction and maintenance, vehicular traffic, big game and livestock grazing. Soil and vegetation disturbance from the proposed action would create a niche for noxious weeds to become established and spread. However, given that weed populations are low and the project has been designed to improve the overall health of the rangeland, it is expected that weed populations would not increase dramatically within the project area.

*Mitigation:* Fire crew vehicles associated with the proposed action would be washed before transported to the project site to remove any noxious weed seeds. Monitoring for an increase in weed populations would occur for 3 consecutive years after the project by BLM personnel. BLM would be responsible for treating any infestations.

*No Action:* Under the no action alternative, vegetation cutting would not take place thus no niche for noxious and invasive species would be created.

**MIGRATORY BIRDS****Affected Environment:**

BLM Instruction Memorandum No. 2008-050 provides guidance toward meeting the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) responsibilities under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and the Executive Order (EO) 13186. The guidance directs Field Offices to promote the maintenance and improvement of habitat quantity and quality. To avoid, reduce or mitigate adverse impacts on the habitats of migratory bird species of conservation concern to the extent feasible, and in a manner consistent with regional or statewide bird conservation priorities.

The 1988 amendment to the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act mandates the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to "identify species, subspecies, and populations of all migratory nongame birds that, without additional conservation actions, are likely to become candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973." The "*BIRDS OF CONSERVATION CONCERN 2008*" (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2008) is the most recent effort to carry out this mandate.

The MBTA prohibits the "take" of a protected species. Under the Act, the term "take" means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to

attempt to engage in any such conduct. The USFWS interprets “harm” and “kill” to include loss of eggs or nestlings due to abandonment or reduced attentiveness by one or both adults as a result of disturbance by human activity, as well as physical destruction of an occupied nest.

The conservation concerns are the result of population declines - naturally or human-caused, small ranges or population sizes, threats to habitat, or other factors. Although there are general patterns that can be inferred, there is no single reason why any species was is on the list. Habitat loss is believed to be the major reason for the declines of many species. When considering potential impacts to migratory birds the impact on habitat, including: 1) the degree of fragmentation/connectivity expected from the proposed project relative to before the proposed project; and 2) the fragmentation/connectivity within and between habitat types (e.g., within nesting habitat or between nesting and feeding habitats). Continued private land development, surface disturbing actions in key habitats (e.g. riparian areas) and the proliferation of roads, pipelines, powerlines and trails are local factors that reduce habitat quality and quantity for many species.

The Colorado River Valley Field Office (CRVFO) is within the Southern Rockies/Colorado Plateau Bird Conservation Region (BCR). The 2008 list of Birds of Conservation include the following: Gunnison Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*), American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*), Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrines*), Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus/tenuirostris*), Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*), Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*), Gray Vireo (*Vireo vicinior*), Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), Juniper Titmouse (*Baeolophus ridgwayi*), Veery (*Catharus fuscescens*), Bendire's Thrasher (*Toxostoma bendirei*), Grace's Warbler (*Dendroica graciae*), Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*), Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*), Black Rosy-Finch (*Leucosticte atrata*), Brown-capped Rosy-Finch (*Leucosticte australis*), and Cassin's Finch (*Carpodacus cassinii*).

The CRVFO planning area provides both foraging and nesting habitat for a variety of migratory birds that summer, winter, or migrate through the area. The habitat diversity provided by the broad expanses of sagebrush, mixed mountain shrub, oakbrush, aspen, pinyon-juniper woodlands, other types of coniferous forests and riparian and wetland areas support many bird species. The Gray Vireo, Pinyon Jay, Juniper Titmouse, Lewis's Woodpecker and Grace's Warbler are characteristically found in pinyon/juniper woodlands. All of the P/J species are tree nesters. The sage sparrow is a ground nester that nests in sagebrush. The Brewer's sparrow (*Spizella breweri*) is also found within sagebrush habitats.

Many species of raptors (red-tailed hawks, Cooper's hawks, kestrels and owls) not on the Fish & Wildlife Service's Birds of Conservation Concern list also can be seen in the area. Golden eagles and red-tailed hawks likely forage throughout the project area. Raptor surveys have not been conducted in the area for the project however no nest sites are known to occur in such small trees. Nesting habitat for these species is present near the project area.

Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Bald eagles are increasing in numbers throughout their range and were removed from the federal threatened and endangered species list in 2007 however bald eagles are still protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Bald eagles are known to winter along portions of the Colorado, Eagle and Roaring Fork Rivers and its major tributaries. Wintering bald eagles are generally present from mid-November to mid-April. Large mature cottonwood trees along the rivers and their major tributaries are used as roosting and perching sites, and these waterways provide the main food sources of fish and waterfowl. Upland habitats adjacent to these waterways are used as scavenging areas primarily for winter killed animals. Major threats include habitat loss, human disturbance and illegal shooting.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* The removal of encroaching pinyon-juniper trees should result in long-term benefits to sagebrush dependent bird species including the sage sparrow and greater sage grouse. Tree removal will help to ensure the maintenance of contiguous blocks of sagebrush habitat. It is likely that tree cutting by hydro-axe will result in the temporary displacement of some native bird species to adjacent habitats for a short time due to noise associated with treatments and human presence. It is also possible that incidental trampling of ground nesting birds and/or their eggs could occur. However, because work is scheduled to occur either before or after the majority of nesting season, impacts should be minimal and of low potential. Hand thinning via chainsaws would have reduced impacts but would still result in some temporary displacement of birds.

The removal of pinyon pine and juniper trees could have some negative impacts to the pinyon jay, black-throated gray warbler, and gray vireo given their preference for pinyon-juniper woodland habitat. Some potential nesting habitat would be lost. However, targeted trees are generally small and scattered within otherwise predominant sagebrush habitats. The removal of scattered encroaching trees should have minimal impact to these migratory bird species. The treatments are intended to improve foraging habitat for all species.

Raptor species should not be affected as an abundance of upland foraging habitat exists in the general area. Pinyon-juniper trees to be treated are generally small and scattered and are not suitable for raptor nesting. Suitable perch trees would be eliminated, but this should have no impact to raptors in the area as an abundance of pinyon-juniper is found in the area to the west and north.

*No Action:* Under the no action alternative, no tree removal would be conducted. No change in habitat conditions for migratory birds would result.

## NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CONCERNS

### **Affected Environment:**

The Ute tribes claim this area as part of their ancestral homeland. At present, no Native American concerns are known within the project area. The Ute Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Bands, the primary Native American tribe in this area of the GSFO, have indicated that they do not wish to be consulted for small projects or projects where no Native American areas of concern have been identified either through survey or past consultations. Therefore, formal consultation was not undertaken. If new data are disclosed, new terms and conditions may have to be negotiated to accommodate their concerns.

### **Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* Although there would be no direct impacts from the proposed action, indirect impacts from increased access and public use in the vicinity of the proposed project could result in impacts to unknown Native American resources ranging from illegal collection to vandalism. Compliance with the Education/Discovery stipulation should help in alleviating these impacts somewhat.

*No Action Alternative:* This alternative would be neither beneficial nor detrimental to cultural resources.

## THREATENED, ENDANGERED, AND SENSITIVE SPECIES (includes an analysis on Land Health Standard 4)

### **Affected Environment:**

#### *Federally Listed, Proposed or Candidate Species*

According to the latest species list from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/endspp/CountyLists/COLORADO.pdf>), the following Federally listed, proposed, or candidate plant and animal species may occur within or be impacted by actions occurring in Eagle County: Ute ladies'-tresses orchid (*Spiranthes diluvialis*), black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), Mexican spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*), yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly (*Boloria acrocynema*), razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*), Colorado pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus lucius*), bonytail chub (*Gila elegans*), and humpback chub (*Gila cypha*).

*Black-footed Ferret (Mustela nigripes)*. Federally listed as endangered. Black-footed ferrets have ranged statewide but never have been abundant in Colorado. Their habitat included the eastern plains, the mountain parks and the western valleys – grasslands or shrub lands that supported some species of prairie dog, the ferret's primary prey. Little is known about their natural history. They mate in early spring and give birth to a litter of three or four mouse-sized pups after a seven-week gestation period. Black-footed ferrets are reported to be killed. They are susceptible to distemper, predators like owls and coyotes, and vehicles. It is assumed that plowing for agriculture and programs to

eradicate prairie dogs have driven the black-footed ferret to the verge of extinction. State and federal biologists have established two major black-footed ferret colonies: one at Coyote Basin (Colorado-Utah border west of Rangely) and another at the BLM's Wolf Creek Management Area southeast of Dinosaur National Monument (CDOW 2009). Because no known occurrences have been documented and the occurrence of the species in this area is unlikely due to range and habitat conditions, this species is not considered further.

Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). Federally listed as threatened. Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) was listed as a federally threatened species, effective April 24, 2000 (Federal Register Volume 65, No. 58). Canada lynx occupy high-latitude or high-elevation coniferous forests characterized by cold, snowy winters and an adequate prey base (Ruggiero et al. 1999). The preferred prey of Canada lynx throughout their range is the snowshoe hare (*Lepus americanus*). In the western United States, lynx are associated with mesic forests of lodgepole pine, subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, and quaking aspen in the upper montane and subalpine zones, generally between 8,000 and 12,000 feet in elevation. Although snowshoe hares are the preferred prey in Colorado, lynx in also feed on other species such as the mountain cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*), pine squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*), and blue grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus*).

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has mapped suitable denning, winter, and other habitat for lynx within the White River National Forest (WRNF). The mapped suitable habitat in the WRNF comprises several areas known as Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs). Lynx analysis units (LAUs) are management areas that contain suitable lynx habitat and approximate the size of a female home range. Several LAUs border BLM lands however no areas large enough to be considered LAUs occur within the CRVFO. BLM lands within the CRVFO area generally support the movement of lynx dispersing to a new area or, potentially, moving to lower elevations during severe winter weather in search of prey. This project is outside of mapped lynx linkages areas. Because no known occurrences have been documented and the occurrence of the species in this specific area is unlikely due to range and habitat conditions, this species is not considered further.

Greater sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced on Friday, March 5, 2010 that the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) would be added to the Endangered Species Act "Candidate" list. The USFWS determined that proposing the species for protection is precluded by the need to take action on other species facing more immediate and severe extinction threats. As a result, the greater sage-grouse was placed on the list of species that are candidates for Endangered Species Act Protection. Evidence suggests that habitat fragmentation and destruction across much of the species' range has contributed to significant population declines over the past century. If current trends persist, many local populations may disappear in the next several decades, with the remaining fragmented population vulnerable to extinction.

Sage grouse, as the name implies, are found only in areas where sagebrush is abundant, providing both food and cover. Although these birds are found at altitudes of 6000-8500

feet, they are not forest grouse and prefer relatively open sagebrush flats or rolling sagebrush hills. In winter, sagebrush accounts for 100% of the diet for these birds. In addition, it provides important escape cover and protection from the elements. In late winter, males begin to concentrate on traditional strutting grounds or leks. Females arrive at the leks 1-2 weeks later. Leks can occur on a variety of land types or formations including: windswept ridges, knolls, areas of flat sagebrush, or flat bare openings in the sagebrush. Breeding occurs on the leks and in the adjacent sagebrush, typically from March through May. Females and their chicks remain largely dependent on forbs and insects for food well into early fall. Cultivated herbaceous broad-leaved plants (alfalfa, clover) are important early fall food sources when available.

The Northern Eagle/Southern Routt population, while small (<200 birds), probably has, or had, a relationship with the larger population in Moffat, Rio Blanco and western Routt counties, and probably with the Middle Park population to the east. Sage-grouse are still present in the Radium area between State Bridge and Kremmling (Northern Eagle/Southern Routt Greater Sage-Grouse Work Group 2004) and likely to occur in the Gypsum Hills area and the area north of Wolcott.

Mexican Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*). Federally listed as endangered. This owl nests, roosts, and hunts in mature coniferous forests in canyons and foothills. The only extant populations in Colorado are in the Pikes Peak and Wet Mountain areas of south-central Colorado and the Mesa Verde area of southwestern Colorado. Because no known occurrences have been documented and the occurrence of the species in this area is unlikely due to range and habitat conditions, this species is not considered further.

Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*). Candidate for Federal listing. This secretive species occurs in mature riparian forests of cottonwoods and other large deciduous trees with a well-developed understory of tall riparian shrubs. Western cuckoos breed in large blocks of riparian habitats, particularly woodlands with cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii*) and willows (*Salix* sp.). A few sightings of yellow-billed cuckoo have occurred in western Colorado along the Colorado River near Grand Junction (USFWS 2009b). Riparian areas in the project area do not provide suitable habitat for this species due to the patchy nature of the stands and the general lack of a tall-shrub understory. Because no known occurrences have been documented and the occurrence of the species in this area is unlikely due to range and habitat conditions, this species is not considered further.

Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly (*Boloria acrocne*). Federally listed as endangered. The butterfly has been verified at only two areas in the San Juan Mountains in Colorado. There is anecdotal evidence of other colonies in the San Juans and southern Sawatch ranges in Colorado. The butterfly exists above treeline in patches of its larval host plant, snow willow. The butterfly is most often found on north and east facing slopes, which provide a moist, cool, microclimate. The greatest known controllable threat is butterfly collecting. Climatological patterns, disease, parasitism, predation, and trampling of larvae by humans and livestock might pose additional threats. Because no known occurrences

have been documented and the occurrence of the species in this area is unlikely due to range, elevation and habitat conditions, this species is not considered further.

*Ute ladies-tresses orchid.* Habitat for the Ute ladies-tresses orchid is found below 6,500 feet along streams, lakes or in wetland areas with seasonally saturated or subirrigated soils. The project area is above 7,800 feet and contains no wetland or riparian habitat which could support this species. Specific to the project area, no habitat or occurrence records exist for any federal or state listed wildlife species.

#### *BLM Sensitive Species*

*Harrington's penstemon (Penstemon harringtonii).* The only BLM sensitive plant species with habitat and/or occurrence records in Eagle County is Harrington's penstemon. Harrington's penstemon is found in open sagebrush communities or sagebrush/mixed mountain shrub communities between 6,400 and 10,000 feet. Although there are no known occurrences of Harrington's penstemon within the project area, the area does provide suitable habitat for this species.

*Big River Fishes (Flannelmouth sucker, bluehead sucker, roundtail chub).* The project area is located within ephemeral drainages. Neither of these drainages contains aquatic wildlife. The nearest perennial waters are Big Alkali Creek located within 1.0 mile away, and the Colorado River located within 3 miles away. The Colorado River contains three BLM sensitive fishes: flannelmouth sucker, bluehead sucker, and roundtail chub. Because the proposed project affects only upland habitats these species are not considered further.

*Leopard Frog (Rana pipiens).* Northern leopard frogs are generally found between 3,500 to 11,000 feet in Colorado, in wet meadows and in shallow lentic habitats. Northern leopard frogs require year 'round water sources, deep enough to provide ice free refugia in the winter. The presence of northern leopard frogs has been associated with sites with more herbaceous cover as opposed to sites with earlier successional stages of emergent vegetation. Leopard frogs feed primarily on emergent adults of aquatic insects or on terrestrial insects attracted to the water. Within the GSFO, this species has been documented in various locales. Suitable habitat is abundant within the GSFO, and is located where quality riparian vegetation exists in conjunction with reliable perennial water sources. Larger populations of this species have been documented northwest of King Mountain within the small drainage that feeds and exits King Mountain (Ligon) Reservoir, June Creek and East Divide Creek south of Silt, Colorado, and in portions of the Rifle Creek watershed north of Rifle, Colorado. Population declines have been attributed to habitat alteration and loss, the effects of introduced bullfrogs and gamefish, aerial pesticide applications, and droughts that limit the availability of year 'round water. Because the proposed project affects only upland habitats this species is not considered further.

#### **Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Federally Listed, Proposed or Candidate Species*

*Proposed Action:* Due to a lack of habitat and occurrence records the proposed action would have “No Effect” to any listed species or their habitats.

*Greater sage grouse.* Encroachment by trees such as pinyon or juniper into sagebrush habitats is detrimental to these and other sagebrush-dependent species because it results in the loss or fragmentation of sagebrush habitat (Gillihan 2006). Pinyon-juniper encroachment into sagebrush shrublands has occurred due to numerous factors not discussed in this EA. The presence of relatively young trees in sagebrush habitat suggests a more recent period of establishment. Pinyon-juniper expansion has been identified as a problem for sage-grouse populations throughout Colorado (CDOW 2009). This expansion is slowly reducing the effectiveness of the habitat available for sage-grouse and creating perching locations for raptors that prey on sage grouse. PJ removal from sagebrush communities can be an effective management technique for improving sage grouse habitat (Connelly et al. 2000).

#### *BLM Sensitive Species*

Harrington’s penstemon: Suitable habitat for Harrington’s penstemon consists of open sagebrush parks with rocky loam or clay loam soils. Encroaching pinyon pine and juniper trees reduce habitat quality by increasing competition for resources and by altering soil surface chemistry. The proposed removal of pinyon pine and juniper trees would help maintain suitable habitat for Harrington’s penstemon.

Encroaching pinyon and juniper trees would be cut and lopped with chainsaws which should result in minimal soil disturbance and therefore, should create negligible damage to any penstemon plants in the area.

*No Action Alternative:* Under the no action alternative, no tree removal would occur. No impacts or benefits to special status species would result. Habitat conditions for Greater sage grouse and Harrington’s penstemon would continue to slowly decline as the density and canopy cover of trees increases.

**Analysis on the Public Land Health Standard for Threatened & Endangered species:** A formal Land Health Assessment was completed for the area in 2006. The general area was found to be meeting Standard 4 for special status species. The proposed action would benefit greater sage grouse and should contribute to maintenance of this standard.

## **WASTES, HAZARDOUS OR SOLID**

**Affected Environment:** Implementation of the proposed activities would require the use of small amounts of fuel and lubricants to operate chainsaws.

#### **Environmental Consequences:**

*Proposed Action:* Fuel and lubricants would be stored in appropriate containers. Due to the small amount of fuel and lubricants the impact would be negligible.

*No Action Alternative:* Under the no action alternative there would be no fuel or lubricants present.

## **WATER QUALITY, SURFACE AND GROUND (includes an analysis on Land Health Standard 5)**

**Affected Environment:** Proposed activities would be located west of the Town of Bond within an unnamed 66,364 acre 6<sup>th</sup> field watershed. Within the project area are several unnamed ephemeral drainages, some of which are directly tributary to the Colorado River approximately two miles to the northeast.

The State of Colorado has developed *Stream Classifications and Water Quality Standards* (CDPHE, Water Quality Control Commission, Regulation No. 37) that identify beneficial uses of water and numeric standards used to determine allowable concentrations of water quality parameters. The ephemeral drainages mentioned above are within the Upper Colorado River Basin (Region 12) segment 7a that includes all tributaries to the Colorado River from a point above the confluence with the Blue River to a point below the confluence with the Roaring Fork River.

This segment has been classified aquatic life cold 1, recreation 2, water supply, and agriculture. Aquatic life cold 1 indicates that this water course is capable of sustaining a wide variety of cold water biota. Recreation class 2 refers to waters that are not suitable or intended to become suitable for primary contact recreation. In addition, this segment is suitable or intended to become suitable for potable water supplies and agricultural purposes that include irrigation and livestock use. At this time there are no water quality data available for the ephemeral drainages in and adjacent to the project area.

At this time, the ephemeral drainages in and adjacent to the project area have not been listed on the State of Colorado's *303(d) List of Water Quality Limited Segments Requiring TMDLS* (CDPHE, Water Quality Control Commission, Regulation No. 93) that identifies stream segments that are not currently meeting water quality standards with technology based controls alone or the *Monitoring and Evaluation List* (CDPHE, Water Quality Control Commission, Regulation No. 94) that identifies water bodies suspected to have water quality problems.

### **Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* Proposed treatment activities would remove little vegetation and would not alter soil conditions through compaction, displacement, and the development of a hydrophobic soil layer. Soil compaction and displacement from foot travel is expected to be negligible due to the amount of rock present and the low amount of traffic. No potential negative impacts to water quality are anticipated.

*No Action Alternative:* The no action alternative would have no impact on existing water quality.

**Analysis on the Public Land Health Standard for Water Quality:** In 2006, the CRVFO completed the Burns to State Bridge Watershed Land Health Assessment. During the assessment, no drainages within the project area were evaluated. At this time, there is no substantial reason to believe that the proposed action and no action alternative would prevent Standard 5 for Water Quality from being met.

## **WILDERNESS**

**Affected Environment:** There are no designated Wilderness areas or Wilderness Study Areas within the proposed project area.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:** The proposed action would not create any negative impacts to wilderness characteristics within the area. Specifically, there will be no long term negative impacts to solitude, naturalness, or opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation.

## **NON-CRITICAL ELEMENTS**

The following elements **must** be addressed due to the involvement of Standards for Public Land Health:

### **SOILS** (includes a analysis on Land Health Standard 1)

#### **Affected Environment:**

According to the *Soil Survey of Aspen-Gypsum Area, Colorado: Parts of Eagle, Garfield, and Pitkin Counties* (USDA 1992), proposed activities would occur on three soil map units: Jerry-Millerlake loams (6 to 25%), Jerry-Millerlake loams (25 to 45%), and Torriorthents-Camborthids-Rock outcrop complex. The majority of the project area and all of the mechanical treatment area is mapped as Jerry-Millerlake loams (6 to 25%). These soil map units are described as having rapid surface runoff and severe water erosion hazard. However, only a small percentage of the project area is on slopes greater than 30% (17°). Following is a brief description of the three soil map units encountered in the project area.

Jerry-Millerlake loams (66) – This soil map unit is found on alluvial fans and valley sides at elevations ranging from 7,500 to 9,500 feet and on slopes of 6 to 25 percent. Approximately 50 percent of this unit is Jerry soil and 40 percent Millerlake soil, with the other 10 percent being a mix of soil types. The Jerry soil is deep, well drained and is derived from sandstone and shale alluvium. Surface runoff is rapid and the water erosion hazard is severe. The Millerlake soil is deep, well drained and is derived from sedimentary rock alluvium. Surface runoff is medium and the water erosion hazard is moderate. Primary uses for this soil map unit include rangeland, pasture, and wildlife habitat.

Jerry-Millerlake loams (67) – This soil map unit is found on alluvial fans and valley sides at elevations ranging from 7,500 to 9,500 feet and on slopes of 25 to 45 percent. Approximately 50 percent of this unit is Jerry soil and 40 percent Millerlake soil, with the other 10 percent being a mix of soil types. The Jerry soil is deep, well drained and is derived from sandstone and shale alluvium. Surface runoff is rapid and the water erosion hazard is severe. The Millerlake soil is deep, well drained and is derived from sedimentary rock alluvium. Surface runoff is rapid and the water erosion hazard is severe. Primary uses for this soil map unit include rangeland, and wildlife habitat.

Torriorthents-Camborthids-Rock outcrop complex (105) – This soil map unit occurs on south-facing mountainsides, hills, and ridges with slopes ranging from 45 to 95 percent. Approximately 45 percent of this unit is Torriorthents, 20 percent Camborthids, and 15 percent Rock outcrop. The Torriorthents are shallow to moderately deep, well drained, and are derived from sedimentary rock. Surface runoff is rapid and the water erosion hazard is severe. The Camborthids are shallow to deep, well drained, and are derived from sandstone, shale, and basalt. Surface runoff is rapid and the water erosion hazard is severe. The Rock outcrop component of this unit consists of exposed sandstone, shale, and basalt. This soil map unit is used primarily for wildlife habitat.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* Proposed treatment activities would remove little vegetation and would not alter soil conditions through compaction, displacement, and the development of a hydrophobic soil layer. Soil compaction and displacement from foot travel is expected to be negligible due to the amount of rock present and the low amount of traffic. No potential negative impacts to soils are anticipated.

*No Action Alternative:* The no action alternative would have no impact on soil resources.

**Analysis on the Public Land Health Standard for Upland Soils:** The proposed action and no action alternative would not likely prevent Standard 1 for Upland Soils from being achieved.

**VEGETATION (includes an analysis on Land Health Standard 3)**

**Affected Environment:**

The Windy Point Project – Handcut Addition area is comprised primarily of big sagebrush, mountain mahogany and serviceberry with encroaching pinyon pine and Utah juniper trees scattered throughout. Understory grasses include bluebunch wheatgrass, Sandberg bluegrass, and prairie junegrass.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* The proposed action would result in the loss of forested vegetation (pinyon pine and juniper trees) in the project area. The removal of competition from the encroaching trees should promote the growth of herbaceous vegetation in the area.

Overall vegetative canopy and ground cover should remain the same or increase following treatment.

*No Action Alternative:* The no action alternative would have no impact on vegetation.

**Analysis on the Public Land Health Standard for plant and animal communities** (partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Terrestrial): A formal Land Health Assessment was completed for the area in 2006. The general area was found to be meeting Standard 3 for healthy plant and animal communities but with certain issues noted. These issues were related primarily to heavy browsing of shrubs by big game animals (leading to decadence and/or mortality of shrubs) and encroachment of pinyon-juniper trees into sagebrush parks. Some areas lacked diversity and cover of herbaceous species. The proposed action would change the composition of the vegetative community by removing trees but would maintain or increase overall canopy and ground cover as understory vegetation becomes established in the area formerly occupied by trees. The action would result in maintaining the land health standard.

#### WILDLIFE, AQUATIC (includes an analysis on Standard 3)

**Affected Environment:**

The project area is located within ephemeral drainages. Neither of these drainages contains aquatic wildlife. The nearest perennial waters are Big Alkali Creek located within 1.0 mile away, and the Colorado River located within 3 miles away. Portions of Big Alkali Creek contain rainbow and brown trout, speckled dace, and suckers. The Colorado River in the vicinity of the project contains brown and rainbow trout, mountain whitefish, speckled dace, and carp. Both waters also contain aquatic insects.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* The removal of encroaching pinyon pine and juniper trees from the sagebrush park would have negligible impacts on aquatic species due to the distance from water and the low amount of disturbance created by hand cutting trees.

*No Action Alternative:* Under the no action alternative, no tree removal would occur. No impacts to aquatic wildlife would result.

**Analysis on the Public Land Health Standard for plant and animal communities** (partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Terrestrial): A formal Land Health Assessment was completed in the project area in 2006. At that time the area was meeting Standard 3 for aquatic wildlife. The proposed action should have little bearing on the watershed's ability to continue to meet the Standard.

#### WILDLIFE, TERRESTRIAL (includes an analysis on Standard 3)

**Affected Environment:**

The project area is comprised primarily of sagebrush and pinyon pine with an understory of native grasses. Some scattered junipers are present. Given the mixes of vegetation, the project area provides cover, forage, and nesting habitat for a variety of big game, small game, and non-game mammals and birds. The area is mapped as big game winter range.

**Environmental Consequences/Mitigation:**

*Proposed Action:* The removal of PJ from the sagebrush park should benefit resident wildlife in the long-term, especially sagebrush dependent species that require larger blocks of intact habitat. Big game browse located within important winter ranges will be enhanced as foraging areas are maintained and improved through treatment. Abundant thermal and hiding cover in the form of dense PJ is located adjacent to the project to the west. It is likely that the use of heavy equipment during tree removal will result in some short term disturbance to resident wildlife. Some species will be temporarily displaced from the area to adjacent habitats. If treatments were conducted during the critical winter months, impacts to wintering wildlife and big game in particular could result due to noise, and human presence in areas where animals are concentrated on limited winter range. Impacts would include displacement of animals to less preferred habitats, and increased energy consumption due to accelerated heart and metabolic rates due to human induced stressors. This could ultimately result in reduced winter survival and herd productivity.

*No Action Alternative:* Under the no action alternative, no tree removal would occur. No impacts or benefits to resident wildlife would result.

**Analysis on the Public Land Health Standard for plant and animal communities**

(partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Aquatic): A formal Land Health Assessment was completed for the area in 2006. The general area was found to be meeting Standard 3 for healthy plant and animal communities. The proposed action would benefit wildlife and should contribute to meeting this standard.

**Other Non-Critical Elements:** For the following elements, those brought forward for analysis will be formatted as shown above.

Table 2. Other Resources Considered in the Analysis.			
Resource	NA or Not Present	Present and Not Affected	Present and Affected
Access and Transportation		X	
Cadastral Survey	X		
Fire/Fuels Management		X	
Forest Management	X		
Geology and Minerals	X		
Law Enforcement	X		
Paleontology	X		

Noise	X		
Range Management		X	
Realty Authorizations	X		
Recreation	X		
Socio-Economics	X		
Visual Resources		X	
Water Rights	X		

**CUMULATIVE IMPACTS SUMMARY:**

Cumulative impacts are the incremental effects caused by management actions considering all past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions affecting a resource. These can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taken over time and the effects can be either additive or subtract from the effects of other actions.

*Wildlife.* Cumulatively many of the future actions planned on private and other lands may have some undetermined effect on wildlife including special status species habitat. The proposed action is not anticipated to result in negative cumulative impacts to wildlife when viewed in conjunction with those activities currently occurring and reasonably certain to occur on adjacent private/other lands. In summary, the proposed action would contribute to; reversing the effects of many years of sagebrush conversion and degradation by pinyon-juniper woodlands and offsetting some of the development-loss of habitat occurring on private property.

**PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED:**

Liza Rossi, Species Conservation Biologist, CDOW, Steamboat Springs  
 Brian Woodrich, District Wildlife Manager, CDOW, Eagle North District

**REFERENCES:**

Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW 2009). Website:  
<http://wildlife.state.co.us/Research/Birds/GreaterSageGrouse/>. Accessed on 5-3-2010.

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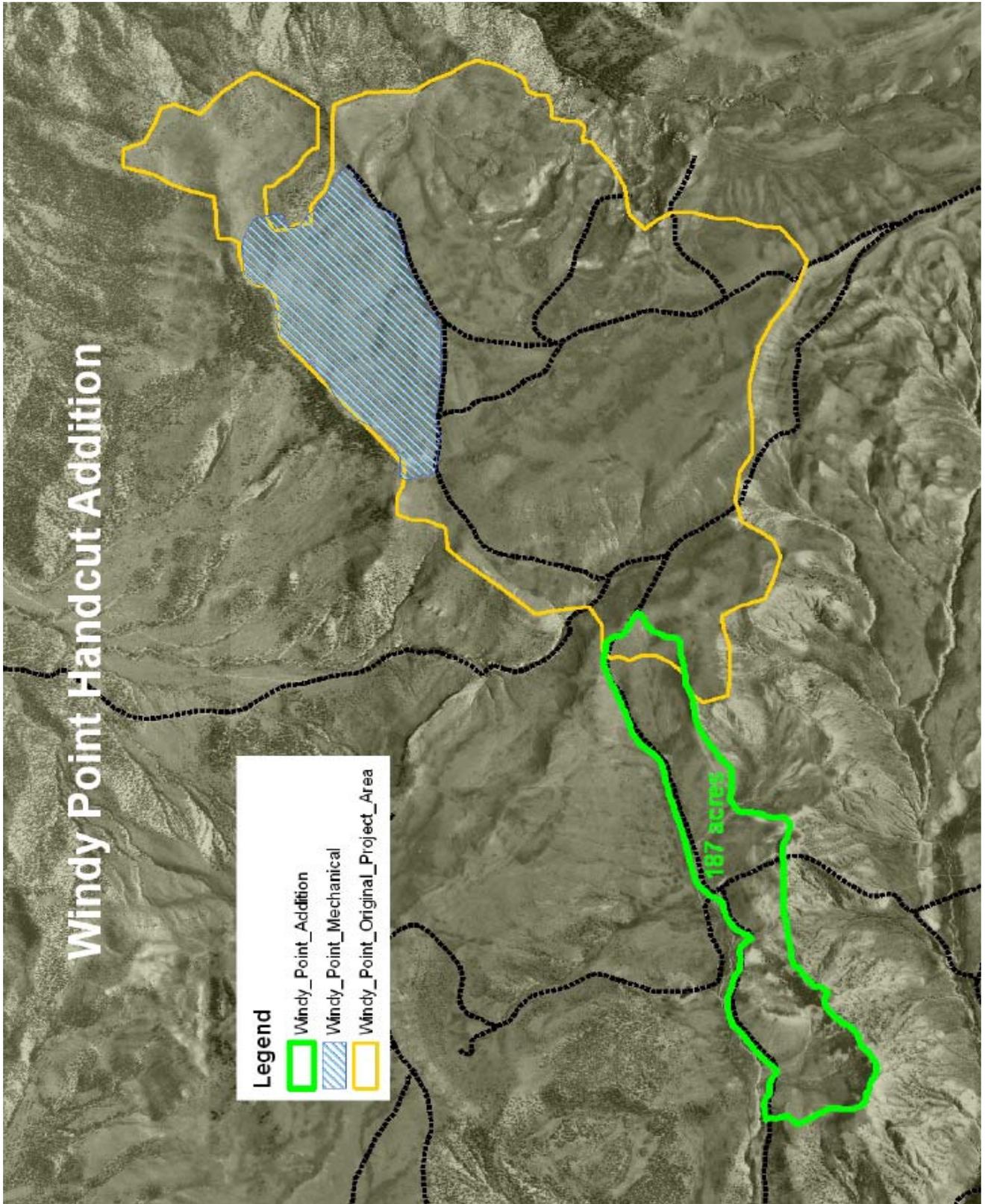
Connelly, J. W., M. A. Schroeder, A. R. Sands, and C. E. Braun. 2000. Guidelines to manage sage grouse populations and their habitats. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 28:967-985.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW:**

Name	Title	Responsibility
Brian Hopkins	Wildlife Biologist	NEPA Lead, Migratory Birds, T&E Wildlife, Soil, Air, Water, Geology
Cheryl Harrison	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources and Native American Concerns
Mike Kinser	Rangeland Management Specialist	Invasive, Non-native Species
Carla DeYoung	Ecologist	ACEC, Special Status Plants, Vegetation, Land Health Stds
Kimberly Miller	Outdoor Recreation Planner	WSR, Wilderness
Gregory Wolfgang	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Travel Management, Recreation, VRM
Mike Kinser	Rangeland Management Specialist	Wetlands and Riparian Zones, Range Management
Ody Anderson	Fuels Specialist	Fire and Fuels Management

APPENDICES: Project Area Map

# Windy Point Handcut Addition



**UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Colorado River Valley Field Office**

Windy Point Pinyon-Juniper Tree Removal – Hand-cut Addition  
**DOI-BLM-CO140-2010-0048-EA**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

I have reviewed the direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the proposed action documented in the EA. Implementing regulations for NEPA (40 CFR 1508.27) provide criteria for determining the significance of the effects. Significant, as used in NEPA, requires consideration of both *context* and *intensity*. The proposed action with the proposed mitigation measures will result in a Finding of No Significant Impact on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary to further analyze the environmental effects of the proposed action.

**DECISION RECORD**

**DECISION:** It is my decision to implement the vegetative treatment project with the proposed mitigation measures as identified below.

**RATIONALE:** The proposed project is consistent with the current land use plan and the North Eagle South Routt Greater Sage Grouse Conservation Plan. It will benefit greater sage grouse - a candidate species. The following mitigation measures are included in my decision to eliminate or reduce environmental impacts that have been identified in this EA.

**MITIGATION MEASURES : Mitigation for Cultural/Native American Concerns:**

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.

**Mitigation for Invasive, Non-Native Species:** Fire crew vehicles associated with the proposed action would be washed before transported to the project site to remove any noxious weed seeds. Monitoring for an increase in weed populations would occur for 3 consecutive years after the project by BLM personnel. BLM would be responsible for treating any infestations.

NAME OF PREPARER: Brian Hopkins

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICER:

*Michael R. Kinser*

Michael R. Kinser  
Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist  
Colorado River Valley Field Office

*5/4/2010*

Date

*Acting*