

**United States Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management**

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**Determination of NEPA Adequacy  
DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2014-0039 DNA**

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**September 2014**

**North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan  
Phase 5 Implementation**

*Location: Gunnison Sage-grouse Area of Critical Environmental Concern*

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**Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA)**

NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2014-0039 DNA

PROPOSED ACTION TITLE: North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, Phase 5 Implementation

LOCATION/LEGAL DESCRIPTION: New Mexico Principle Meridian  
T50N R7W Sec. 6,  
T50N R8W Sec. 1, and  
T51N R7W Sec. 31

APPLICANT: USDOJ, Bureau of Land Management, Uncompahgre Field Office

Background: The proposed action would occur within the Gunnison sage-grouse ACEC. The ACEC was designated to specifically manage for a declining population of Gunnison sage-grouse which occur on the north rim of the Gunnison Gorge in the Crawford area. It is believed that the decline in the Crawford area sage-grouse population reflects a larger decline in the health of the natural landscape in this area.

The site identified has deep soil and is formerly a sagebrush community that now through succession can be equally considered a young piñon-juniper stand. Past management activities including fire suppression and selective livestock grazing appear to have created conditions suitable for establishment of young piñon and juniper trees which are slowly encroaching into sagebrush areas on the landscape. These sites still exhibit woody and herbaceous plant characteristics of sagebrush communities. The proposed action is designed specifically to address declines in habitat suitability, expand the suitable extent of sage-grouse habitat by substantially reducing the piñon and juniper component in former sagebrush communities and preempt the progressive conversion of this former sagebrush disclimax to a piñon-juniper woodland site.

**A. Description of the Proposed Action and any applicable mitigation measures**

The proposed action is to continue to implement the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan; specifically 435 acres (see map, page 3) of young piñon-juniper woodland would be slashed, using chainsaws, to promote accelerated sagebrush community development. The existing sagebrush and mountain shrub community would be avoided to the greatest extent practicable.

Appropriate design features listed in the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, Environmental Assessment number DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA, would be followed. Vegetation treatment objectives (Sage Grouse Emphasis Area) outlined in the DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA would be followed.

All project activities would occur well after the nesting and brood rearing season to ensure all young of the year bird species potentially occurring within the project area could effectively move and avoid operating equipment. Project dates as planned would be September 15-December 31. Depending on conditions (e.g. drought), project dates may be delayed further to ensure that equipment does not potentially cause a wildland fire.

The treatment areas would be inventoried for noxious and invasive weeds prior to treatment. All noxious and invasive weeds would be treated before and after treatment has occurred.

## **B. Land Use Plan (LUP) Conformance**

Name of Plan: Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Resource Management Plan

Date Approved: November 5, 2004

The proposed action is in conformance with the applicable LUP because it is specifically provided for in the following LUP decisions:

Decision Number/Page: VEG-C-17& SSS-C-1 (2-17& 2-19), SMA-C-3& SMA-C-4 (2-26 & 2-27)

Decision Language: BLM will continue to manage habitat for special status species, including listed species, BLM sensitive species, rare endemic species, and other species of special concern.

Public lands in Management Unit 4 (22,200 acres) will be designated and managed as the Gunnison Sage-Grouse ACEC/IBA. Management and protection of the Gunnison sage grouse and its habitat will be emphasized in this management unit.

This RMP adopts and incorporates the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan, Crawford Area, Colorado (Crawford Sage-Grouse Partnership 1998), as part of the management Objectives and direction for Management Unit 4.



**C. Identify applicable National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents and other related documents that cover the proposed action.**

Name of Document: North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, Environmental Assessment number DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA

Date Approved: July, 2011

From the EA, page 4, specific language:

**Sage Grouse Emphasis Area**

The focus of this area is to enhance habitat for Gunnison sage grouse and improve ecosystem health. The Sage Grouse Emphasis Area covers approximately 4,500 acres of BLM lands. This emphasis area has 3 life cycle habitats: Leks, Nesting, and Brood Rearing habitats, each with different objectives. Objectives were developed from Appendix H of the GUSG Structural Habitat Guidelines (Gunnison Sage-grouse Range-wide Steering Committee [GSRSC], 2005).

**Vegetation Treatment Objectives:**

Treat 10-30% of the total Sage Grouse Emphasis Area for approximately 450-1,350 acres of treatment. Use the following criteria to determine whether to treat an area:

Treatment would only occur in areas where the understory has been degraded, in areas where sagebrush cover is not within acceptable ranges, or in areas which are currently being invaded by pinyon or juniper trees.

**Nesting Habitat**

Sage grouse habitat used for nesting, which is generally sagebrush communities within approximately 4 miles of a lek (GSRSC, 2005).

Maintain conditions to provide patches of sagebrush canopy cover and horizontal grass and forb canopy cover sufficient to provide suitable nesting sites. Habitat would provide good hiding and nesting cover and high levels of succulent forbs as well as insects.

- 1) Mechanically remove invading piñon and juniper from nesting habitat, including snags, which act as raptor perches.
- 2) Avoid treatments during nesting season (April 15 to June 30)
- 3) Augment vegetation composition by seeding to restore native grasses and forbs (CDOW 2005, Braun et. al 1977).
- 4) Strive for sagebrush height of 1 - 2.5 feet, 15 - 25% canopy cover.

### Brood Rearing Habitat

Sage grouse brood rearing habitat is habitat is used primarily for the rearing of chicks. It is vegetation communities that include sagebrush, agricultural fields, and wet meadows within 6 miles of lek sites. It also includes some mountain shrub habitat.

- 1) Create small (3 - 5 acre), open patches of early and early mid-succession habitat by removing tall, old shrubs, covering no more than 1/3 of the area of the brood rearing habitat.
- 2) Improve grass and forb cover (>15% canopy cover) of taller (>15 inch) grasses and forbs in treated areas.
- 3) Maintain suitable escape cover, shade, and moisture capture areas in close proximity to treated patches. (i.e. sagebrush height >15", 10-15% canopy cover). Some areas should exceed 20% total shrub canopy cover.
- 4) Utilize mechanical treatments and prescribed fire to achieve objectives.
- 5) Avoid treatment during the summer and early fall to avoid negative impacts to grouse.

### **D. NEPA Adequacy Criteria**

**1. Is the new proposed action a feature of, or essentially similar to, an alternative analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s)? Is the project within the same analysis area, or if the project location is different, are the geographic and resource conditions sufficiently similar to those analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s)? If there are differences, can you explain why they are not substantial?**

The proposed action is in direct conformance as stated above. The project falls within the sage-grouse emphasis area established in the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan EA. The project as proposed conforms to the criteria established in the EA for sage-grouse habitat restoration.

**2. Is the range of alternatives analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s) appropriate with respect to the new proposed action, given current environmental concerns, interests, and resource values?**

Yes, the alternatives analyzed were appropriate given that the new proposed action is essentially a continuation of the proposed action analyzed in the subject EA.

**3. Is the existing analysis valid in light of any new information or circumstances (such as, rangeland health standard assessment, recent endangered species listings, updated lists of**

**BLM-sensitive species)? Can you reasonably conclude that new information and new circumstances would not substantially change the analysis of the new proposed action?**

Yes. The existing analysis is valid. Upon completion of similar projects completed in FY 2011 and 2012, radio and GPS collared birds were observed moving back into the treated areas, and they have essentially remained in the treatments since completion, suggesting the efficacy of the activity and validity of the analysis. Similar results are expected for the proposed action. Table 1, below, further supports the validity, as the EA provided for a range of 450-1,350 acres of sagebrush restoration within the sage-grouse emphasis area. To date 745.7 acres of the emphasis area has been completed, or are in progress, in accordance with the EA. With the proposed action of 434.6 acres, the total would become 1180.3 acres treated within the sage-grouse emphasis area and would still remain below the high range desired future condition described for the sage-grouse habitat restoration emphasis area.

**Table 1: Acres treated and/or approved under the plan in 2011-2013**

| <b>Emphasis Area</b> | <b>Acres</b> |
|----------------------|--------------|
| Big Game             | 6.9          |
| Sage Restoration     | 2199.9       |
| Sage-grouse          | 745.7        |
| WUI                  | 383.6        |
| Elk                  | 16.3         |

**4. Are the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects that would result from implementation of the new proposed action similar (both quantitatively and qualitatively) to those analyzed in the existing NEPA document?**

Yes, all direct, indirect, and cumulative effects are expected to be similar. Additionally, a greater expanse of more suitable habitat for sage-grouse is expected to develop as a result of the proposed action. Based on tracking of the birds inhabiting the area, it would appear that the birds favor less tree covered habitats in the North Rim area, thus the proposed action is expected to have a net cumulative positive effect for sage-grouse and other sage obligate species as additional habitat is expected to be made available to exploit and fulfill life processes while avoiding predators.

**5. Are the public involvement and interagency review associated with existing NEPA document(s) adequate for the current proposed action?**

Yes, scoping for the subject EA revealed no written comments in opposition to the project. Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Crawford Sage-grouse working group, and US Geological Survey and grazing permittees have reviewed the proposed action and subject EA and are in strong support for the project.

**E. Persons/Agencies /BLM Staff Consulted**

| <u>Name</u>   | <u>Title</u>          | <u>Resource/Agency Represented</u> |
|---------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Nate Seward   | Terrestrial Biologist | Colorado Parks and Wildlife        |
| Doug Homan    | Coordinator           | Crawford Sage-grouse Working Group |
| Doug Orin     | Researcher            | USGS                               |
| Mark LeValley | Rancher               |                                    |

The following are agencies/entities were consulted for the EA:

- Black Canyon Audubon Society
- Black Canyon Land Trust
- Colorado Division of Wildlife
- Colorado State University – Extension Service
- Crawford Gunnison Sage-Grouse Working Group
- Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture –Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests, Paonia Ranger District
- Grazing Permittees
- Local Private Landowners
- National Park Service –Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area
- Natural Resources Conservation Service, Delta Conservation District
- U.S. Geological Survey
- Western Area Power Administration
- Interested Members of the Public
- Uncompahgre Plateau Project

**REMARKS:**

Cultural Resources: Cultural Resource inventory for the integrated project was completed in 2011 and 2012. All recommendations for cultural resource avoidance will be followed and no further work is required.

Native American Religious Concerns: There are none known for this area. If the remaining inventory discovers any such Sacred sites and/or Traditional Cultural Properties, consultation with the appropriate tribes will be implemented and the sites will be avoided.

Threatened and Endangered Species: With the exception for Gunnison sage-grouse no federally listed or BLM sensitive species are known to inhabit or derive important use of the proposed project area.

**MITIGATION:** Mitigation beyond that incorporated into the proposed action is not needed.

### Conclusion

Based on the review documented above, I conclude that this proposal conforms to the applicable land use plan and that the NEPA documentation fully covers the proposed action and constitutes BLM's compliance with the requirements of the NEPA.

Name of Project Lead: Kelly Homstad

Signature of NEPA Coordinator *[Signature]* Date 9-4-14

Signature of the Responsible Official *[Signature]*  
Barbara Sharrow  
Field Manager  
Uncompahgre Field Office

Date 9-22-14

**Note:** The signed Conclusion on this Worksheet is part of an interim step in the BLM's internal decision process and does not constitute an appealable decision. However, the lease, permit, or other authorization based on this DNA is subject to protest or appeal under 43 CFR Part 4 and the program-specific regulations.

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
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Montrose, CO 81401**

**Decision Record**

**(DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2014-0039 DNA)**

PROPOSED ACTION TITLE: North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, Phase 5 Implementation

DECISION: It is my decision to continue to implement the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan; specifically 435 acres (see map, page 3 of the EA) of young piñon juniper woodland will be slashed, using chainsaws, to increase herbaceous ground cover and to promote accelerated sagebrush community development. The existing sagebrush and mountain shrub community will be avoided to the greatest extent practicable.

Apply all appropriate design features listed in the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, Environmental Assessment number DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA. Adhere to the vegetation treatment objectives (Sage Grouse Emphasis Area) outlined in DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA.

All project activities will occur well after the nesting and brood rearing season to ensure all young of the year bird species potentially occurring within the project area could effectively move and avoid operating equipment. Project dates as planned will be September 15- December 31. Depending on conditions (e.g. drought), project dates may be delayed further to ensure that equipment does not potentially cause a wildland fire.

Treatment areas will be inventoried for noxious and invasive weeds prior to treatment. All noxious and invasive weeds will be treated before and after treatment has occurred.

MITIGATION MEASURES: Mitigation beyond the Design Features shown in EA DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 is not needed.

MONITORING: The project manager will ensure compliance with design features when implementing the project.

The completed projects will be mapped using a Geographic Positioning System (GPS). A photo point(s) will also be established prior to commencing the project.

The proposed project will be monitored at intervals (currently 2 years and 5 years following treatment) identified by the Uncompahgre Field Office vegetation treatment monitoring protocol.

Monitor project sites for the spread of weeds, and spot treat as needed for a three-year (minimum) period.

Monitor all areas of soil surface disturbance for signs of accelerated soil erosion. Monitoring will occur for a minimum of three years or until disturbed soils are stabilized by established vegetation.

RATIONALE: This project is in compliance with the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area RMP. The Proposed Action does not constitute a major federal action having significant effect on the human environment. The proposed action will continue to implement the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan. The project serves to improve habitat suitability for Gunnison Sage-grouse within the project area.

COMPLIANCE WITH MAJOR LAWS: The decision is in compliance with applicable laws, regulations and policy, including the Endangered Species Act, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT: A Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was prepared for EA # DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA (North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan), based on the information contained in that EA and consideration of criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27). The conclusion in that FONSI, dated July 11, 2011, remains valid, and a new FONSI does not need to be prepared. It is my determination that: 1) the implementation of the proposed action will not have significant environmental impacts; 2) the Proposed Action is in conformance with the Gunnison Gorge NCA Resource Management Plan; and 3) the Proposed Action does not constitute a major federal action having significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.

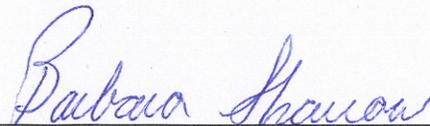
APPEALS: Within 30 days of receipt of this decision, you have the right of appeal to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations at 43 CFR 4.400. Appeal and stay procedures are outlined in Form CO-050-1842-1.

NAME OF PREPARER: Kelly Homstad

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR:  Bruce Krickbaum

DATE 9-4-2014

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL



Barbara Sharrow  
Field Manager  
Uncompahgre Field Office

DATE SIGNED 9-22-14