

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
White River Field Office
220 E Market St
Meeker, CO 81641

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0052-EA

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER: N/A

PROJECT NAME: Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: T 1 S, R 97W, sec. 32, 33
T 1 S, R 98W, sec. 29, 31, 32, 33
T 2 S, R 96W, sec. 31, 32, 33
T 2 S, R 97W, all sections west of CR 5
T 2 S, R 98W, all sections south of CR 24 and west of CR 91
T 2 S, R 99W, all sections south of CR 91 and CR 70
T 2 S, R 100W, all sections south of CR 70 and east of CR 103
T 3 S, R 96W, all sections west of BLM Road 1006
T 3 S, R 97W and R98W
T 3 S, R 99W, all sections east of CR 103
T 3 S, R 100W, sec. 1, 2, 12, 13, 24
T 4 S, R 96W, sec. 4, 5, 6
T 4 S, R 97W
T 4 S, R 98W, all sections north of BLM Road 1000
T 4 S, R 99W, all sections north of BLM Road 1000
T 5 S, R 96W, sec. 32, 33
T 5 S, R 97W, sec. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

APPLICANT: Bureau of Land Management

PURPOSE & NEED FOR THE ACTION: The purpose of the Proposed Action is to utilize prescribed fire and mechanical methods to treat vegetation in an effort to reduce the impacts and risks of an unplanned wildland fire to life, property, and other natural resources and to enhance ecosystems. Within the proposed area of the Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project the Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC; amount of departure from the natural regime) is moderate to high (FRCC 2 or 3). The need for the action is to return the landscape FRCC to moderate to low (FRCC 2 or 1). Rio Blanco County (RBC) is among the top three counties in Colorado for wildfire risk (Neuenschwander et al. 2000) and the proposed project area has the highest frequency of naturally ignited fires within the White River Field Office (WRFO) and also contains a high concentration of oil and gas infrastructure. The Rio Blanco County Wildfire

Protection Plan (CWPP) highlights values at risk within the county. The plan outlines oil and gas producing facilities as a high priority for fuels reduction. Reducing fuel loading through vegetation management is one of the most effective elements of any fire and fuels program. We can begin to manage fire and the risk associated with it by managing fuel loading in an effort to maintain a healthy ecosystem.

Decision to be Made: The WRFO will decide whether to approve the treatment of vegetation across the project area to reduce fuel loading, and if so, under what terms and conditions.

SCOPING, PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AND ISSUES:

Scoping: Scoping was the primary mechanism used by the BLM to initially identify issues. Internal scoping was initiated when the project was presented to the White River Field Office (WRFO) interdisciplinary team on 04/19/2013. External scoping was conducted by posting this project on the WRFO's on-line National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) register on 04/02/2014, as well as issuing a press release. Additionally individual letters were mailed on 04/02/2014 to all parties who are tied to any ownership or involvement within the project boundary.

Issues:

Safety:

- “Wildland fire is WREA’s greatest concern in our efforts to provide consistent and reliable electrical power to our rural consumer, especially the large industrial consumers in the Piceance basin. White River Electric is in favor of fuels reduction in the Piceance basin, especially around critical infrastructure such as our transmission power lines.”
- “Due to safety concerns, particularly for prescribed fire techniques that could significantly impact infrastructure and ongoing operations, Williams would admittedly request, at a minimum, that exclusion buffers be established around our facilities. It is the expectation of Williams that utility locates will be completed prior to any treatment that may involve scouring of the ground surface, root removal, roughening, etc.” This comment is addressed in the design features on page 8.

Archaeological and Cultural Resources:

- “BLM will require notification if human remains, funerary and sacred objects are discovered; if vertebrate fossils and petrified wood are discovered; and that disturbing arch sites and collecting artifacts is prohibited. There is no indication that BLM will conduct site specific paleontological and arch surveys or seek consultation with tribes prior to fuels treatments, all of which are routinely required by WRFO for oil and gas projects.” This comment is addressed in the design features on page 7.

Plants and Weed Management:

- “With respect to T&E plants, the BLM indicates the WRFO Ecologist will be consulted about the growing season prior to treatments to determine if special status plant survey (SSPS) would be required. If surveys are required they must be completed according to the SSPS protocol prior to the beginning of any treatments. If SSPS are found during the

- surveys, a consultation with FWS may be required or special mitigations may be applied to avoid impacting the species. WSCOGA notes that for oil and gas projects, BLM always requires extensive T&E plant and habitat surveys and reports, GIS data, and consultation with USFWS.” This comment is addressed in the design features on page 8.
- “Williams is requesting that a formal agreement be established between an operator and the BLM, to waive the responsibility of re-establishing native vegetation within a treated segment of a ROW. If a treatment area were to impact a ROW that an operator has reclaimed and/or is in the process of reclaiming, the efforts would be compromised. This agreement would waive the obligation to further track the native vegetation and noxious/invasive weed species within a treated segment. This agreement would amend the existing ROW Grant, and an operator would relinquish the responsibility to perform reclamation activities on that treated segment of ROW to the BLM.” This comment is addressed in the design features on page 8.
 - The White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts put a strong emphasis on the removal of the decadent sagebrush. It is important to have varying age classes of the sage brush rather than any single age class. Based on the historical plant communities within Rio Blanco County, all range sites with greater than 20% canopy cover should be treated with the exception of winter range for Greater Sage Grouse. This comment is addressed in the background/introduction section on page 4.
 - The White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts suggests all mechanical treatment options should be considered, including chaining of PJ. This comment is addressed in the alternatives considered but not carried forward on page 10.

Stormwater and Hydrology:

- “Williams is requesting that the formal agreement mentioned in the previous section would include waiving the responsibility of stormwater compliance on a treated segment of ROW. If a treatment area were to impact a ROW that an operator has or is in the process of reclaiming and stabilizing, the efforts would be compromised. This agreement would amend the existing ROW Grant, and an operator would relinquish the responsibility to install and/or maintain stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs) and track the re-establishment of desirable vegetation on a treated segment of ROW to the BLM. If an impacted segment is already covered in an operator’s existing stormwater permit, the segment would be removed from the Stormwater Management Plan, as the operator is no longer responsible for the additional impact.” This comment is addressed in the design features on page 8.
- “WSCOGA requests BLM to clarify statement on page 5: 8. All projects affecting aquatic or riparian habitats would be reviewed and developed in mitigation order to reduce adverse impacts. A 500 ft. buffer strip along all perennial streams would be maintained in areas of vegetation manipulations. Unless a detailed location specific prescription is developed to specifically address riparian vegetation. In addition, there appears to be a conflict on page 5 between 3. The BLM or agent acting on behalf of the BLM would complete all fueling of equipment outside of any drainage and 11. No fueling staging areas or refueling sites would be allowed within 200 feet of any water body.” This comment was addressed and corrected in the design features on page 8.

Protection of Infrastructure and Natural Resources:

- “WSCOGA notes there is no discussion about how the BLM will protect private property, roads, facilities and production sites or if it will conduct and report vegetation monitoring after fuel reduction activities concludes. Similarly there is no discussion of how BLM will reduce impacts to water or wetland areas, wildlife and wildlife habitats.” This comment was addressed in the design features on pages 7-10 as well as in the fire management analysis on page 42.

Project Boundary and Location:

- The White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts encourages the expansion of this EA’s west boundary to the State line or plans for an additional EA in 2015 to cover the west end of the County. This comment is addressed in the alternatives considered but not carried forward on page 10.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES:

Background/Introduction: A programmatic approach for environmental analysis (EA) has been used for several resources within the White River Field Office including herbicide use and mechanical vegetation treatments. Naturally ignited wildfire was analyzed in CO-110-1999-099-EA, but prescribed fire was only mentioned, so to this point each prescribed fire project has been analyzed on an individual basis. In the years from 2003 to 2009, prescribed fires that were less than 4,500 acres were categorically excluded under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003. On August 21, 2009, the BLM distributed IM 2009-199 which discontinued the ability to categorically exclude prescribed fire projects thus requiring all vegetation manipulation projects go through a full environmental analysis.

The WRFO Fire Management Plan (FMP) analyzed the impacts of naturally ignited wildland fire on the landscape but prescribed fire was not adequately addressed. This EA is to analyze in more detail the use of prescribed fire and all methods of mechanical treatments to manipulate vegetation in an effort to reduce fuel loading. Future proposed treatments will be designed with these features and evaluated with a Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA) unless there is a need for additional analysis.

This proposed planning area of 192,418 acres (Figure 1) is predominantly within the D5 Cathedral Bluffs/Roan Plateau Fire Management Polygon (160,382 acres), but also contains the C6 Lower Piceance Basin (26,974 acres) and the B7 Piceance Creek (5,062 acres) Fire Management Polygons. The overall fire management objective within these polygons is to use fire as a tool to promote a vegetation mosaic representing natural distributions of plant communities of varying successional stages. This is to be accomplished through a combination of managing naturally ignited fires, post fire rehabilitation, prescribed fires, and mechanical treatments. In accordance with agency standards, all fuels reduction treatment projects will support resource management objectives as identified in the 1997 White River ROD/RMP.

Additionally, as a means to balance the availability and distribution of successional states in a given vegetation community/habitat type, planned federal vegetation treatments should not

contribute to reductions in later seral basin big sagebrush communities (aka foothill swale range sites) composed of mature basin big sagebrush canopies (e.g., structure and density) that cumulatively exceed 60 percent of that potentially available (all ownerships, excluding irrigated bottoms) at an appropriate watershed scale (generally on a basis no greater than USGS Hydrologic Unit Class (HUC) 6 or the subwatershed level).

Within the project area, there has been vegetation manipulation in the form of both mechanical treatment (chaining and hydro-axing) and fire treatments (both prescribed fires and wildfires).

Proposed Action: The BLM is proposing to treat vegetation across the Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project Area using prescribed fire, mechanical methods, and seeding to restore the landscape to its desired plant community while specifically reducing fuel loading and reducing pinyon-juniper encroachment into sagebrush disclimax parks. A single treatment method may be used within a site or a combination of treatment methods.

Mechanical Vegetation Treatment

Mechanized treatment may be implemented using a fecon, hydro-axe, mower, brush beater, railing, chipper, bull hog, or chainsaw or a combination of these equipment types. Through mechanized fuels reduction in specific target areas (individual treatment sites), the BLM will:

1. Remove up to 95 percent of pinyon-juniper invading sagebrush ecosystem types while limiting sagebrush mortality in those treatment areas to less than 50 percent.
2. Mechanically treat 30 to 60 percent of serviceberry and other deciduous brush species to stimulate sprouting.
3. Limit mortality in mature pinyon-juniper woodland to less than 30 percent.

Design Features:

1. No wheeled equipment will be used on slopes greater than 30 percent. Chainsaws will be used on slopes greater than 30 percent.
2. Mechanical manipulations would be limited to slopes of 20 percent or less.
3. Vegetation removed with chain saws will be either:
 - a. Lopped and scattered to a depth of no greater than 18 inches
 - b. Piled and burned following agency policy
 - c. Chipped and dispersed
 - d. Provided along roadsides for public firewood use if applicable.
4. Edges of the mechanical treatments will be designed to repeat natural lines of similar vegetation contrast and avoid creating straight lines on the edge of the treatments. These measures should be taken in Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class III areas and must be taken in VRM Class II areas.
5. The edges of the treatment boundary will be feathered in VRM Class II mechanical treatment areas with dense pinyon-juniper stands. This means that the pinyon-juniper trees will be thinned from the edge of treatment in less dense to more dense thinning gradient that mimics natural pinyon-juniper encroachment into the treated area.
6. Mastication or hydro-axe type vegetation treatments will not be conducted within the lands with wilderness characteristics unit-5 without additional site-specific analysis in an environmental assessment or a land use decision is made. (The use of chainsaws to

conduct fuels reduction treatments would be permitted without the need for any additional analysis.)

Prescribed Fire Treatment

Prescribed fire treatments (broadcast or slash pile burns) may be implemented using ground and aerial ignition or a combination of these methods. Ground ignitions may include: fusees, drip torches, flares, stubbies, ATV/UTV torches, and terra torch. Aerial ignition will be conducted using Plastic Sphere Dispenser (PSD) or helitorch. Through prescribed fire fuels reduction in specific target areas (individual treatment sites) the BLM will:

1. Remove up to 95 percent of pinyon-juniper invading sagebrush ecosystem types.
2. Remove 60 to 100 percent of basin big sagebrush which dominates ephemeral drainages (with a tolerable deviation of 10 percent due to the unpredictability of using fire).

Design Features:

1. All burn units inside of the project area will be created to match existing vegetation openings in the surrounding environment.
2. Areas within riparian zones that have been completely burned with an intense fire will be reseeded to achieve vegetation objectives.
3. Prescribed fires will be conducted by qualified personnel and with a pre-approved prescribed fire plan.
4. Prescribed fires will be monitored to ensure that objectives are achieved and the fire would not exceed the prescription.
5. All prescribed fire will be conducted in accordance with the State of Colorado Smoke Management Plan and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and will be regulated under Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Air Pollution Control Division.
6. To protect soil productivity, burning will be conducted under conditions when a light burn can accomplish stated objectives. Burning will occur when soil and duff are moist for fragile soils and soils with landslide potential in the effort to maximize moisture retention in duff layers.
7. Do not burn piles of slash within 100 feet of riparian areas or springs. If riparian areas are within or adjacent to the prescribed burn unit, piles will be scattered prior to burning.
8. When preparing the unit for burning, avoid piling concentrations of large logs and stumps; pile small material (3 to 8 inches in diameter). Piles should be burned when soil and duff moisture are high.
9. The location and construction of containment lines will implement methods that result in minimal surface disturbance while effectively controlling the fire. Handcrews shall locate lines to take full advantage of existing land features that represent natural fire barriers. Whenever possible, containment lines should follow the contour of the slope to protect the soil, provide sufficient residual vegetation to capture and retain sediment, and maintain site productivity.
10. Surface disturbances created for containment lines will be rehabilitated by building water bars on slopes greater than 35 percent, replacing topsoil and spreading woody debris as possible. Waterbars will be located to minimize future channeling of runoff and direct the runoff toward areas of natural vegetative filters.

Seeding Treatment

Seeding treatments may be implemented using an aerial application, drill seeding, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs and UTVs), hand application, or a combination of these methods. Through seeding in the specific target area the BLM will return the landscape to, or maintain, its desired ecological condition. Seeding of wildland fires and prescribed fires can help reduce fuels by establishing native plant species vs. invasive (e.g., cheatgrass).

Design Features:

1. Analyze and determine the correct native seed mixture based upon the surrounding vegetation and ecological condition. Apply appropriate standard or modified BLM seed mix based on the range site and or Desired Plant Community (DPC) for the treatment area (e.g., in a rolling loam site, BLM standard seed mix 2 would be used) to meet specified management objectives (e.g., sage-grouse habitat components, special status plants).

Design Features Common with all Treatment Methods:

1. All treatments within the project area will require specific analysis from Field Office specialists.
2. Treatment areas would be monitored for noxious/invasive weed infestations for a minimum of three years post treatment. Any infestations identified will be suppressed/eradicated by the BLM as needed.
3. All spills of fuels, lubricants, etc., will be reported to the WRFO Hazardous Materials Coordinator within 24 hours.
4. Planned projects will undergo cultural resource inventories to identify resources that need to be protected or avoided by fuel manipulation activities.
5. Consultation efforts with Native American Tribes will continue. Inventories in project areas will attempt to locate any sites that the tribes have identified as sensitive and efforts will be made to protect those values.
6. Pursuant to 43 CFR 10.4(g), the BLM project lead will notify the Authorized Officer (AO), by telephone and written confirmation, immediately upon the discovery of human remains, funerary items, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony. Further, pursuant to 43 CFR 10.4(c) and (d), the proponent must stop activities in the vicinity of the discovery and protect it for 30 days or until notified to proceed by the AO.
7. The BLM project lead is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project that they will be subject to prosecution for knowingly disturbing archaeological sites or for collecting artifacts. If archaeological materials are discovered as a result of operations under this authorization, the proponent must immediately contact the WRFO Archaeologist.
8. The BLM project lead is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project operations that they will be subject to prosecution for disturbing or collecting vertebrate fossils, collecting large amounts of petrified wood (over 25lbs./day, up to 250lbs./year), or collecting fossils for commercial purposes on public lands. If any paleontological resources are discovered as a result of operations under this authorization, the BLM project lead must immediately contact the WRFO Paleontology Coordinator.

9. All projects affecting aquatic or riparian habitats would be reviewed and mitigation developed to reduce adverse impacts. A 500 ft. buffer strip along all perennial streams would be maintained in areas of vegetation manipulations, unless a detailed location-specific prescription is developed to address riparian vegetation.
10. ATV, UTV and fire engine travel off existing trails and roads will be limited to the greatest extent practicable. When off-trail and off-road travel is needed, alternating travel routes will be used to avoid creating two-tracks and new trails. Visible tracks will be obliterated when possible.
11. Vegetation treatments in riparian areas shall be by handcrew only and concentrate on areas of heavy fuels. Vehicle entry into the riparian area will be permitted to establish pumping operations and access water only if no bridges or natural stream crossings are in the burn area.
12. No fuel staging areas or refueling sites would be allowed within 200 feet of any water body.
13. All activity shall cease when soils or road surfaces become saturated to a depth of three inches unless otherwise approved by the Authorized Officer.
14. Prior to any treatment activity, the BLM will coordinate with existing right-of-way holders, range permittees, operators, and mineral lessees.
15. The WRFO Ecologist will be consulted the growing season prior to any proposed treatments to determine if special status plant species (SSPS) surveys would be required. If surveys are required they must be completed according to the SSPS protocol prior to the beginning of any treatments. If listed, proposed, or candidate plants are found during the surveys, consultation with FWS may be required and/or special mitigation may be applied to avoid impacting the species.
16. Evidence of the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) and related Federal property boundaries will be identified and protected prior to commencement of any ground-disturbing activity. This will be accomplished by contacting BLM Cadastral Survey to coordinate data research, evidence examination and evaluation, and locating, referencing or protecting monuments of the PLSS and related land boundary markers from destruction. In the event of obliteration or disturbance of the Federal boundary evidence the responsible party shall immediately report the incident, in writing, to the Authorizing Official. BLM Cadastral Survey will determine how the marker is to be restored. In rehabilitating or replacing the evidence the responsible party will be instructed to use the services of a Certified Federal Surveyor (CFedS), procurement shall be per qualification based selection, or reimburse the BLM for costs. All surveying activities will conform to the Manual of Surveying Instruction (Manual) and appropriate State laws and regulations. Local surveys will be reviewed by Cadastral Survey before being finalized or filed in the appropriate State or county office.
17. Range improvement projects within each given project area would be identified and measures taken to prevent damage or to replace the improvement in order to maintain its purpose and function.
18. Where reclamation of oil and gas infrastructure have occurred, mitigation or replacement of wattles, silt fences, hay bales, mulch, hedgerows, and seeded areas will be incorporated into the project development.
19. Should the proposed action occur simultaneous with a wild horse gather, all project-related activities would be coordinated through the WRFO and the gather contractor.

20. To minimize the incidents of young foals becoming dislocated from their mares, project crews would be required to slow or stop when wild horses are encountered, allowing bands to move away at a pace slow enough so that the foals can keep pace and are not separated.
21. During the spring foaling period (March 1 – June 15), if it is determined that wild horses are in the vicinity of proposed project, activities may need to be delayed or modified, as outlined by the White River ROD/RMP, to reduce impacts during this sensitive time period.
22. Disruptive activities will not take place within greater sage-grouse habitat (preliminary priority habitat [PPH] or preliminary general habitat [PGH]) during the reproductive period (lekking, nesting, and brood-rearing) of March 1 – July 15.
23. Consultation with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will be required for those proposed treatments involving sage-grouse habitat (PPH and PGH).
24. Proposed treatments involving sage-grouse habitat (PPH and PGH) will be reviewed and analyzed through subsequent NEPA analysis. Proposed treatments should meet the habitat requirements for sage-grouse outlined in Connelly (2000). If these habitat requirements are currently being met, proposed treatments will not be considered in PPH. Treatments in PPH will be considered if they maintain or enhance sage-grouse habitat (e.g., removal of encroaching pinyon-juniper into sagebrush parks, modifying sagebrush canopies that currently exceed sage-grouse habitat suitability criteria, and restoring native bunchgrass communities in shrublands that are currently dominated by invasive annuals).
25. Treated areas will be rested from grazing for two full growing seasons in sage-grouse PPH, where practical.
26. Surveys for midget faded rattlesnakes will be required if suitable habitat exists within the treatment area. If occupied den/hibernacula are located, activity (vegetation removal, heavy equipment use) will not be permitted within 200 meters of the den from April 15 – August 1.
27. Mature pinyon-juniper and aspen woodlands should be avoided. Future projects involving mature woodland components will be reviewed and designed with the objective of maintaining the extent and continuity of woodland types that provide nesting substrate for woodland raptors and migratory birds that are considered to be pinyon-juniper obligate species.
28. A raptor survey may be required if woodland or cliff habitat capable of supporting nesting functions may potentially be involved. Should an active nest be located the appropriate timing limitations (species dependent) may be applied:
 - a) Listed, proposed, and candidate threatened or endangered species and BLM sensitive species (not including bald eagle or ferruginous hawk): No activities will be allowed from February 1 – August 15 within 0.50 mile of an identified nest.
 - b) All other raptor species: No activities will be allowed from February 1 – August 15 within 0.25 mile of an identified nest.
29. Proposed fuels and mechanical treatments will take place outside of the migratory bird nesting season (May 15 – July 15). Treatments will be permitted from July 16 – May 14. An exception may be granted if it is determined that the proposed treatment can be conditioned so as not to interfere with habitat function or compromise migratory bird nesting functions.

30. Treatments will not be permitted from December 1 – April 30 in mule deer severe winter range. An exception may be granted if it is determined that the proposed treatment could be conditioned so as not to interfere with habitat function or compromise animal condition in the project area.
31. Treatments will not be permitted from May 15 – August 15 in big game summer range. An exception may be granted if it is determined that the proposed treatment can be conditioned so as not to have any additional influence on the utility or suitability of summer range.

No Action Alternative: Under the No Action Alternative, landscape-scale vegetation treatments would not be approved or implemented. However, the BLM could consider future site-specific proposals that would reduce fuel loading. Each target area would be analyzed under an individual environmental assessment rather than a programmatic assessment.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT CARRIED FORWARD:

1. Herbicide treatments on a broadcast scale was considered but eliminated from further analysis due to the inability to achieve hazardous fuels reduction objectives. Using this type of treatment would create pockets of standing dead fuel and increase the chances of a large wildfire.
2. A larger scale project boundary was considered but not carried forward for further analysis due to current WRFO workloads and priorities.
3. A section of the northern project boundary located in Township 2S Range 97W and a portion of Section 18 in T4S R99W was considered but not carried forward due to cultural and sensitive plant concerns.
4. The use of chaining as a mechanical treatment was considered but not carried forward for further analysis because of cultural and soil concerns. In addition the use of chaining creates jackpots of dead fuels that are highly volatile during wildfires.

PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW: The Proposed Action is subject to and has been reviewed for conformance with the following plan (43 CFR 1610.5, BLM 1617.3):

Name of Plan: White River Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan (White River ROD/RMP).

Date Approved: July 1, 1997

Decision Language (Page):

“Sustain a landscape composed of plant community mosaics that represent successional stages and distribution patterns that are consistent with natural disturbance and regeneration regimes and compatible with the goals identified in Standard Three of the Standards for Public Land Health...” (Page 2-10)

“BLM projects and land use approval actions will be designed to maintain a site above its conservation threshold (a point below which soil erosion accelerates beyond the site’s

ability to maintain natural productivity). Any plant cover or community which is capable of maintaining the site above the conservation threshold while meeting other land use objectives will be considered a desired plant community (DPC).” (Page 2-10)

“Acceptable DPCs will be managed in an ecological status of high-seral or healthy mid-seral for all rangeland plant communities. An exception may be provided for wildlife habitat -areas where specific cover types are needed. The required cover type in those wildlife habitat areas will be the DPC. The ecological status of a DPC in specified wildlife habitat areas could be lower than high seral. In which case, the DPC will be managed, at a minimum, to maintain an at risk rating (Table 2-6 of Appendix D) and have a stable to improving trend in ecological status.” (Page 2-10)

“Native plant species will be encouraged in the remainder of the resource area for reseeding disturbed areas that are not threatened by establishment of exotic or noxious plant species. Naturalized plant species will be allowed for reseeding on "at risk" and "unhealthy" rangelands and grazable woodlands.” (Page 2-11)

“Reduce the pinyon-juniper tree components where pinyon or juniper has dominated or is invading other ecological sites.” (Page 2-12)

“Utilize prescribed fire, both natural and management ignited, to protect, maintain and enhance ecosystems, economic values, and multiple use resource management programs.” (Page 2-55)

“Areas within riparian zones that have been completely burned with an intense fire will be reseeded to achieve vegetation objectives...” (Page 2-55)

“Prescribed fires will be monitored to ensure that objectives are achieved and the fire would not exceed the prescription.” (Page 2-56)

“Prescribed fire will be a tool to use to help mitigate fuels and hazards and to benefit other natural resource programs.” (Page 2-56)

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT & ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Standards for Public Land Health: In January 1997, the Colorado BLM approved the Standards for Public Land Health. These standards cover upland soils, riparian systems, plant and animal communities, special status species, and water quality. Standards describe conditions needed to sustain public land health and relate to all uses of the public lands. Because a standard exists for these five categories, a finding must be made for each of them in an environmental analysis (EA). These findings are located in specific elements listed below.

Cumulative Effects Analysis Assumptions: Cumulative effects are defined in the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1508.7) as “...the impact on the environment that results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person

undertakes such other actions.” Table 1 lists the past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions within the area that might be affected by the Proposed Action; for this project the area considered was the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) 4th Level Watershed. However, the geographic scope used for analysis may vary for each cumulative effects issue and is described in the Affected Environment section for each resource.

Table 1. Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Actions

Action Description	STATUS		
	Past	Present	Future
Livestock Grazing	X	X	X
Wild Horse Gathers	X	X	X
Recreation	X	X	X
Invasive Weed Inventory and Treatments	X	X	X
Range Improvement Projects: Water Developments Fences & Cattleguards	X	X	X
Wildfire and Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation	X	X	X
Oil and Gas Development: Well Pads Access Roads Pipelines Gas Plants Facilities	X	X	X
Power Lines	X	X	X
Oil Shale	X	X	X
Seismic	X	X	X
Vegetation Treatments	X	X	X

Affected Resources:

The CEQ Regulations state that NEPA documents “must concentrate on the issues that are truly significant to the action in question, rather than amassing needless detail” (40 CFR 1500.1(b)). While many issues may arise during scoping, not all of the issues raised warrant analysis in an environmental assessment (EA). Issues will be analyzed if: 1) an analysis of the issue is necessary to make a reasoned choice between alternatives, or 2) if the issue is associated with a significant direct, indirect, or cumulative impact, or where analysis is necessary to determine the significance of the impacts. Table 2 lists the resources considered and the determination as to whether they require additional analysis.

Table 2. Resources and Determination of Need for Further Analysis

Determination ¹	Resource	Rationale for Determination
Physical Resources		
PI	Air Quality	See discussion below.
NI	Geology and Minerals	The vegetation treatments of the Proposed Action for fuel reduction would have little to no adverse impacts to the geologic and minerals

Determination ¹	Resource	Rationale for Determination
		resources within the project area. Reduction of fuel loading would benefit the safety and operation of existing mineral facilities near treatment areas.
PI	Soil Resources*	See discussion below.
PI	Surface and Ground Water Quality*	See discussion below.
Biological Resources		
PI	Wetlands and Riparian Zones*	See discussion below.
PI	Vegetation*	See discussion below.
PI	Invasive, Non-native Species	See discussion below.
PI	Special Status Animal Species*	See discussion below.
PI	Special Status Plant Species*	See discussion below.
PI	Migratory Birds	See discussion below.
PI	Aquatic Wildlife*	See Special Status Animal Species as impacts to aquatic wildlife would be identical to those addressed in the Special Status Animal Species – Aquatic analysis.
PI	Terrestrial Wildlife*	See discussion below.
PI	Wild Horses	See discussion below.
Heritage Resources and the Human Environment		
PI	Cultural Resources	See discussion below.
PI	Paleontological Resources	See discussion below.
PI	Native American Religious Concerns	See discussion below.
PI	Visual Resources	See discussion below.
NI	Hazardous or Solid Wastes	No listed or extremely hazardous materials in excess of threshold quantities are proposed for use in this project. While commercial preparations of fuels and lubricants proposed for use may contain some hazardous constituents, they would be in small quantities and would be stored, used, disposed, and transported in a manner consistent with applicable laws, and the generation of hazardous wastes would not be anticipated. Solid wastes would be disposed of properly.
PI	Fire Management	See discussion below.
NI	Social and Economic Conditions	There would not be any substantial changes to local social or economic conditions.
NP	Environmental Justice	According to recent Census Bureau statistics (2000), there are no minority or low income populations within the WRFO.

Determination ¹	Resource	Rationale for Determination
PI	Lands with Wilderness Characteristics	See discussion below.
Resource Uses		
PI	Forest Management	See discussion below.
PI	Rangeland Management	See discussion below.
NI	Floodplains, Hydrology, and Water Rights	Vegetation treatments may reduce roughness in floodplains by removing brush and trees, but is unlikely to alter surface hydrology to the point that flood response would change, therefore impacts are not expected. Water used for managing prescribed fire would not impact existing water rights; most of the water used for operations would come from the town of Meeker.
NI	Realty Authorizations	It is unlikely that the Proposed Action would impact realty authorizations because the BLM would coordinate with existing right-of-way holders prior to any vegetation treatment.
PI	Recreation	See discussion below.
NI	Access and Transportation	Implementing the vegetation treatments described in the Proposed Action would not impact public land access or the existing transportation system.
NP	Prime and Unique Farmlands	There are no Prime and Unique Farmlands within the project area.
Special Designations		
NI	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern	The Proposed Action is located just outside the boundary of the East Douglas Creek ACEC, but should have no effect on the ACEC itself.
NP	Wilderness	There are no designated Wilderness areas or Wilderness Study Areas near the Proposed Action.
NP	Wild and Scenic Rivers	There are no Wild and Scenic Rivers in the WRFO.
NP	Scenic Byways	There are no Scenic Byways within the project area.

¹ NP = Not present in the area impacted by the Proposed Action or Alternatives. NI = Present, but not affected to a degree that detailed analysis is required. PI = Present with potential for impact analyzed in detail in the EA.

* Public Land Health Standard

AIR QUALITY

Affected Environment: The White River Field Office is an attainment area for national and state air quality standards. The attainment designation means that no violations of ambient air quality standards have been documented in the area (EPA 2013). Non-attainment areas are designated by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as having air pollution levels that persistently exceed the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) or Colorado Ambient Air Quality Standards (CAAQS). General conformity regulations require that federal activities do not cause or contribute to a new violation of NAAQS; that actions do not cause additional or worsen existing violations of the NAAQS; and that attainment of these standards is not delayed by federal actions in non-attainment areas.

The Proposed Action is within the Western Counties Monitoring Region of Colorado (CAPCD 2013). Local air quality parameters including particulates and ozone are measured at monitoring sites located at Meeker, Rangely, and Dinosaur and near the Flat Tops Wilderness Area. The closest location for an Interagency Monitoring of Protected Visual Environments (IMPROVE) site is near the Flat Tops Wilderness, northeast of the Project Area. IMPROVE sites measure air borne particles that cause impairment to visibility.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The Proposed Action would result in short-term impacts on air quality from equipment used to treat vegetation, vehicles to access sites and manage prescribed fire, and smoke from prescribed fire. Transportation and the use of equipment to accomplish the fuel treatments will generate emissions from internal combustion engines and generate airborne dust during treatments.

Increases in the following criteria pollutants would occur due to combustion of fossil fuels: carbon monoxide (CO), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), and ozone (a secondary pollutant formed photochemically from volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x)).

Particulate matter or dust is made up of soil particles, acidic aerosols (such as nitrates and sulfates), organic chemicals, metals, and allergens (such as fragments of pollen or mold spores). Dust or particulate matter would be produced during treatments by vehicles and mechanical equipment used to implement the treatment and transporting workers to sites. Fine particles (less than 2.5 µm) are very efficient in scattering and absorbing light and are the major contributor to visibility problems. The effects of particulates include visibility degradation, climate change, vegetation damage, and human health impacts.

Prescribed fire will generate particulates and smoke. Prescribed fires would be conducted in accordance with the State of Colorado Smoke Management Plan and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This MOU requires notification and permitting for prescribed burns. Air quality considerations will be addressed during this permitting process, and will be regulated by Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Air Pollution Control Division.

Even with these increased pollutants the Proposed Action is unlikely to result in an exceedance of NAAQS or CAAQS, and is likely to comply with applicable PSD increments and other significant impact thresholds.

Cumulative Effects: Air quality in Region 11 (Western slope of Colorado) is affected by both mobile and stationary emitters of air pollutant. Fugitive dust can come from natural sources that are not preventable, such as volcanic eruptions, large regional dust storms, and wildfires. PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} are also created from windblown dust and soil from fields, agricultural crops, agricultural livestock, paved road re-entrained dust, unpaved roads, construction activities, mining and quarrying, construction sites, automobile and diesel engine exhaust, waste burning, soot from wood fires, and sulfates and nitrates from combustion sources such as industrial boilers (CAPCD 2013). The following criteria pollutants would be emitted during the combustion of fossil fuels: CO, NO₂, SO₂, and ozone.

Downward trends in annual NO₂, CO, and SO₂ have been measured at air quality monitoring sites in the region and are likely the result of national emissions control programs. For example, between 1990 and 2012, national emissions of NO_x and VOC emissions have declined 56 percent and 35 percent, respectively (CAPCD 2013). Decreases in SO_x emissions from diesel fuel and power plants coincides with a decrease in SO₂ measured at IMPROVE and other air quality monitoring programs.

In general, air quality within the region is good due to few emission sources, good dispersion characteristics and national trends showing a decrease in some air pollutants. However, some emissions have caused localized or regional level increases in pollution monitoring values such as ozone and PM_{2.5} within the past ten years. This has led to an increase in air quality monitoring in the region including the BLM supported Federal reference air quality monitoring sites in Rangely and Meeker.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: No increase in impacts to air quality would occur from the No Action Alternative.

Cumulative Effects: Impacts for the Western Slope of Colorado would be similar to those described for the action alternative.

Mitigation: None.

SOIL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has mapped soil resources in most of the WRFO Planning Area and data are available electronically (NRCS, 2008). Soils are the product of the climate, the underlying bedrock lithology, erosional processes and the topography. Many of the soils in the WRFO Planning Area are derived from lithologies such as the sandstones, siltstones, and marlstones associated with the Uinta Formation and the Green River Formation; and the claystones, shale, and sandstones associated with the lower part of the Green River Formation, the Mesaverde Group, the Wasatch Formation, the Fort Union Formation, and the Mancos Shale.

The 1997 White River RMP included a list of fragile watersheds including Black Sulphur Creek, Willow Creek in the Piceance Creek watershed, Piceance Creek, and Yellow Creek. Most of the soils in the project area are channery loam soils which are shale and sandstone derived soils with large rock fragments. Most of the soils in these areas are resilient and only limited areas are of poor soils. Steep slopes can be found throughout the project area. In general, ephemeral and intermittent drainages with greasewood or sagebrush bottoms can be found on tributaries that drain from the Roan Plateau to Piceance Creek. Ridges separate drainage bottoms and are typically wide and dominated by sagebrush or pinyon-juniper woodlands. Valley sides between drainage bottoms and ridge tops are where most of the steep slopes occur.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Fuel projects would be designed to reduce unnecessary damage to soils. The following mechanical vegetation treatment design features would benefit soils:

1. No wheeled equipment will be used on slopes greater than 30 percent.
2. Mechanical manipulations would be limited to slopes of 20 percent or less.

Hand thinning with chainsaws and mechanical treatments will disturb soils temporarily. Spreading woody material after the treatment will likely reduce rain splash erosion and improve the stability of soils overall. Direct impacts to soils would occur from foot traffic to do the chainsaw lop and scatter of pinyon and juniper trees and tracks from heavy equipment used for mechanized treatments. Slope limitations in the Proposed Action will reduce potential impacts to soils from equipment.

Canopy cover from treated brush and trees would be lost during treatment and may increase impacts to soils in some areas. Spreading woody material from trees and brush would provide surface roughness on the soil surface that would reduce the velocity of surface runoff and would in some cases offset the loss of canopy cover. These processes will reduce rain splash erosion in treatment areas and woody material will lose effectiveness as it decomposes but should also help with the establishment of vegetation that will stabilize soils and restore canopy cover.

Prescribed fire impacts to soils occur from the loss of canopy cover from vegetation, potential impacts to biological soil crusts and isolated impacts from soil heating where fuel loads are high. The following prescribed fire design features will benefit soils:

1. All burn units inside of the project area will be created to match existing vegetation openings in the surrounding environment.
2. Areas within riparian zones that have been completely burned with an intense fire will be reseeded to achieve vegetation objectives.
3. Prescribed fires will be monitored to ensure that objectives are achieved and the fire would not exceed the prescription.
4. To protect soil productivity, burning will be conducted under conditions when a light burn can accomplish stated objectives. Burning will occur when soil and duff are moist for fragile soils and soils with landslide potential in the effort to maximize moisture retention in duff layers.
5. Slash burn piles will not be located within 100 feet of riparian areas or springs. If riparian areas are within or adjacent to the prescribed burn unit, piles will be scattered prior to burning.
6. When preparing the unit for burning, avoid piling concentrations of large logs and stumps; pile small material (3 to 8 inches in diameter). Piles should be burned when soil and duff moisture are high.
7. The location and construction of containment lines will implement methods that result in minimal surface disturbance while effectively controlling the fire. Handcrews shall locate lines to take full advantage of existing land features that represent natural fire barriers. Whenever possible, containment lines should follow the contour of the slope to protect

the soil, provide sufficient residual vegetation to capture and retain sediment, and maintain site productivity.

8. Surface disturbances created for containment lines will be rehabilitated by building water bars on slopes greater than 35 percent, replacing topsoil and spreading woody debris as possible. Waterbars will be located to minimize future channeling of runoff and direct the runoff toward areas of natural vegetative filters.

Items 1-3 would generally manage the intensity of fire that is directly related to impacts on soils. Allowing for mosaics that are similar to existing vegetation patterns would leave patches of unburned vegetation that can help buffer impacts from burned areas and serve as a source of seed and inoculates for biological soil crusts. Items 4-6 will generally limit localized impacts from intense heating of soils that can occur due to the burning of dense fuels at the soil surface. Soil heating can change the physical and chemical properties of soils. In some cases the biological component of soils may be damaged. These impacts are usually isolated to the first few inches of the soil layer and are not likely to be extensive over the landscape. With management of vegetation and fire intensity during prescribed burns loss of soil productivity is likely to be temporary and isolated to localized areas.

Cumulative Effects: Oil and gas exploration and development in the WRFO will result in road and pad construction, pipeline installation, drilling and completion activities that have the potential to impact soils. Livestock grazing occurs on public and private lands in the area and these activities may reduce canopy cover and lead to localized erosion in some reclamation areas. There is some dispersed recreation, mostly hunting, that disturb soils, result in changes in surface runoff, create some localized erosion and decrease the productivity and stability of soils in some locations. This action is not likely to add to or reduce overall cumulative effects. Permitted activities may reduce soil productivity in localized areas of disturbance, but are unlikely to impact overall soil productivity.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Activities considered in the Proposed Action may be permitted after an individual NEPA analysis.

Cumulative Effects: Same as those described for the Action Alternative.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for upland soils: This action is unlikely to reduce the productivity of soils impacted by surface disturbing activities.

SURFACE & GROUND WATER QUALITY

Affected Environment: The project area is located within three fifth level hydrological unit boundaries in the White River Basin (Yellow Creek, Outlet Piceance Creek, and the Headwater of Piceance Creek). A small segment of the project area extends south to encompass portions of the Roan Plateau in Garfield County. Streamflows in these drainages are dominated by groundwater inputs from precipitation that occurs on the Roan Plateau to the southwest and in

general drains to Piceance and Yellow Creek to the north. Upper elevations are mountain shrubs with small pockets of aspen and conifers. Ridgetops between drainages have pinyon-juniper woodlands as they drop in elevation with sagebrush openings. Drainage bottoms are often dominated by greasewood and riparian features occur in response to groundwater inputs.

Colorado Department of Health and the Environment (CDPHE) establishes water quality classifications for stream segments in Colorado. These classifications are generally for cold water aquatic life in the headwaters and warm water aquatic life in the lower elevation segments. The monitoring and evaluation list for water bodies that are impaired includes four river segments that are at least partially within the project area. The mainstem of Piceance Creek from Willow Creek to Hunter Creek is listed for iron. The mainstem of Piceance Creek from Ryan Gulch to the confluence with the White River and Black Sulphur Creek are both provisionally listed for aquatic life. Ryan Gulch is listed for *E.coli*.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts with regard to surface disturbance and potential erosion are described in the Soil Resources section. With the design features these activities are unlikely to contribute measurable changes in water quality with the exception of prescribed fire. No impacts are expected to *E.coli* colonies in Ryan Gulch. Prescribed fire is known to cause increases in iron in the first flushes but not likely to result in a long term increases in iron below prescribed fire treatments.

Prescribed fire is likely to have short-term impacts to water quality downstream and aquatic life and it is possible that some riparian vegetation would be burned in these drainages. Any impacts would occur in the first year of the fires and during intense local storms, long-term impacts may include increased sedimentation and nutrients. With the limited extent and intensity of prescribed fires planned it is unlikely impacts would be long-term or measurable in Piceance Creek. Black Sulphur could have more direct impacts if the riparian vegetation is burned, but there may also be long-term beneficial impacts to aquatic life due to increase nutrients.

Groundwater occurs naturally through springs that originate from confined bedrock aquifers and unconfined alluvial aquifers occur near the land surface. The primary aquifers in the project area are the A and B Groove that are in the Greenriver formation and localized aquifers in the overlying Uinta formation. Groundwater contributes to the baseflow of streams and creates springs, where the water is available for plants, wildlife and livestock. No impacts to groundwater are anticipated.

Cumulative Effects: Oil and gas exploration and development will result in road and pad construction, pipeline installation, drilling and completion activities that have the potential to impact both surface and groundwater. There are surface water withdrawals for oil and gas activities including drilling, domestic use, construction, dust abatement, well completion activities, and hydrostatic testing of pipelines. There are stormwater containment features (e.g., wattles, hedgerows, mulch, silt fences, hay bales, and seeded areas) for these oil and gas activities that may be damaged during fuel treatments, when possible these features would be avoided or repaired, but impacts are not likely and would be isolated. No increase in sedimentation from these construction sites with stormwater features is likely.

Livestock grazing occurs on public and private lands in the area and these activities may reduce canopy cover and lead to localized erosion in some reclamation areas. There is some dispersed recreation, mostly hunting and livestock grazing that disturb soils, result in changes in surface runoff, and create some localized erosion. This action is not likely to add to or reduce overall cumulative effects. Permitted activities may reduce soil productivity in localized areas of disturbance, but are unlikely to impact water quality.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Activities considered in the Proposed Action may be permitted after an individual NEPA analysis.

Cumulative Effects: Impacts would be similar to those described for the action alternative.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard #5 for Water Quality: With the design features for soils and water, long-term impacts to surface or groundwater quality are not expected.

WETLANDS AND RIPARIAN ZONES

Affected Environment: There are several perennial streams that support riparian communities within the project area. Based on stream health assessments conducted by BLM staff members, these systems are classified as being in one of three categories: properly functioning condition (PFC), functioning at risk (FAR) or non-functional (NF). Classification is based on the interaction of a stream’s hydrologic, vegetative and landform/soils components. Table 3 identifies the perennial streams, along with their classification that are located within the project area.

Table 3. Perennial streams located within the project area.

Stream Name	Classification	Length (miles)
Black Sulphur Crk. (Reach 1)	PFC	0.47
Black Sulphur Crk. (Reaches 2 -4)	FAR	2.72
Black Sulphur Crk. (Reach 5)	NF	0.52
Swizer Gulch	FAR	1.16
Fawn Creek	PFC	1.0
East Fawn Creek	FAR	0.48
West Fawn Creek (Reaches 1, 3 and 4)	FAR	2.44
West Fawn Crk. (Reach 2)	PFC	1.15
East Willow Creek	FAR	2.28
West Willow Creek	FAR	1.10
Cutoff Gulch	FAR	1.22
West Stewart Gulch	FAR	0.93

Stake Springs	FAR	0.85
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Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Proposed mechanical treatments have the potential to crush, alter or directly remove riparian vegetation. Similarly prescribed fires may result in the direct loss or modification of riparian vegetation. Removal or modification of riparian vegetation could influence channel stability (lead to increased sedimentation, increased bank erosion, etc.) and may indirectly influence some aquatic species (see discussion in Special Status Animal Species section) if habitat quality or prey availability is negatively influenced.

Mitigation incorporated into the Proposed Action (e.g., 500 foot buffer along perennial streams) would be expected to avoid or minimize impacts to riparian communities. Furthermore, each individual project will be reviewed by WRFO staff. If it is determined to impact riparian communities, additional mitigation may be applied.

Cumulative Effects: Although there are several other management actions that occur within the project area (oil and gas development, power lines, weed treatments, etc.), grazing would most likely have the most substantial impact on riparian habitats. The Proposed Action when coupled with other actions may potentially result in the incremental removal of riparian vegetation; however, vegetation removal associated with this project would be expected to be short term in nature.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to riparian communities would be similar to those discussed above under the Proposed Action; however each proposed project would be analyzed through a stand-alone environmental assessment.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be identical to those discussed above under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard #2 for Riparian Systems: Riparian condition/health varies throughout the project area; with several systems not considered to be meeting Standard #2 (see Table 3). If design features outlined in the Proposed Action are adhered to, proposed treatments (both mechanical and prescribed fire) would not be expected to detract from the continued meeting of the land health standards, nor lead to additional deterioration in those systems that currently are not meeting land health standards.

VEGETATION

Affected Environment: The proposed planning area is predominantly in the D5 Cathedral Bluffs/Roan Plateau, the C6 Lower Piceance Basin, and a small amount in the B7 Piceance Creek Fire Management Polygons. Across these polygons vegetation is predominantly dense mountain shrub, pinyon/juniper woodland, and big sagebrush plant communities with variable herbaceous understories. There is a component of weedy native and non-native annual species

throughout many of the plant communities, especially in areas that are accessible foraging areas for livestock.

Table 4 lists the plant community appearance for the ecological sites or woodland types along with the predominant plant species composition of the more dominant plant communities present throughout the proposed planning area. Forb species, though important to the diversity of a community and making up to 25 to 30 percent of the composition of several of the plant communities listed, are not presented in the following table because they generally are not contributors to the appearance or the dominance of the community.

Table 4. Plant Communities

Ecological Site / Woodland Type	Plant Community Appearance	Predominant Plant Species in the Plant Community
Brushy Loam	Deciduous Shrub/Grass Shrubland	Serviceberry, oakbrush, snowberry, mountain brome, slender wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, Letterman and Columbia needle grasses
Loamy Slopes	Mix Shrub/Grass Shrubland	Mountain mahogany, bitterbrush, serviceberry, mountain big sagebrush, beardless bluebunch wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, June grass, Indian rice grass
Pinyon/Juniper	Pinyon/Juniper Woodland	Pinyon pine, Utah juniper, mountain mahogany, bitterbrush, serviceberry, Wyoming big sagebrush, beardless bluebunch wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, June grass, Indian rice grass, mutton grass
Mountain Loam	Grass/Open Shrub Shrubland	Mountain brome, slender wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, Letterman and Columbia needle grasses, mountain big sagebrush, bitterbrush, low rabbitbrush, snowberry, serviceberry
Mountain Swale	Grass/Open Shrub Shrubland	Basin wildrye, slender wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, Letterman and Columbia needle grasses, sedges, rushes, mountain big sagebrush, rubber rabbitbrush, snowberry
Rolling Loam	Sagebrush/Grass Shrubland	Wyoming big sagebrush, winterfat, low rabbitbrush, horsebrush, bitterbrush, western wheat grass, Indian rice grass, squirreltail, June grass, Nevada and Sandberg bluegrass
Foothill Swale	Grass/Open Shrub Shrubland	Basin wildrye, western wheatgrass, slender wheatgrass, streambank wheatgrass, Indian rice grass, Nevada bluegrass, basin big sagebrush, fourwing saltbush, rubber rabbitbrush
Stony Foothills	Grass/Open Shrub Shrubland	Beardless bluebunch wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, needle-and-thread, June grass, Indian rice grass, fringed sage, Wyoming big sagebrush, black sage, serviceberry, pinyon and juniper
Deep Loam	Grassland	Bluebunch wheatgrass, muttongrass, needle-and-thread, western wheatgrass, slender wheatgrass, big sagebrush, serviceberry, snowberry

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Direct impacts of vegetation treatments include short-term loss of mostly woody vegetation and the modification of plant community structure, species composition, and a short-term reduction of basal and aerial vegetative cover. Plant communities

would temporarily be set back to an earlier, more herbaceous dominated seral state. Over time treated sites would progress toward the potential natural community. Treatment of vegetation (via fire or some form of mastication) will also result in increased soil exposure, short-term loss of wildlife habitat, reduced plant diversity, and some short-term loss of livestock forage. Indirect impacts include the increased potential for non-native/noxious plant establishment and introduction, accelerated wind and water erosion, possible changes in water runoff, soil impacts that affect plant growth (soil erosion or siltation), shifts in species composition and/or changes in vegetative density, and changes in visual aesthetics. Depending on the site, reestablishment of pinyon and juniper may not begin for more than 20 years. Native mixed-shrub communities would likely begin to return immediately for re-sprouting species such as serviceberry or within five to ten years depending on the treatment method and site conditions for non-resprouting species such as sagebrush.

Cumulative Effects: The proposed project, when added to other projects and developments, throughout the overall project planning area would result in an increase in short-term removal of existing vegetation on predominantly public land. Long-term changes in plant community composition and structure would also occur on those project sites and on a broader scale from activities such as livestock grazing. Of the total potential vegetation treatments throughout the planning area and the Piceance Basin, the proposed fuels treatments would not result in a noteworthy increase in vegetation disturbance or long-term changes in plant community with the exception of a slight increase in the diversity of plant community age structure.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The impacts under this alternative would be similar to those under the Proposed Action because fuels treatment projects would still be proposed, analyzed, and implemented. The principal difference being that analysis would be done on a project by project basis.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be essentially the same as under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard #3 for Plant and Animal Communities:

Overall, public lands within the project area are meeting Standard 3. With implementation of mitigation measures and successful re-vegetation, the proposed fuels treatments would have no effect on the status of Land Health Standard 3 in the project planning area or at a landscape scale and this standard would continue to be met.

INVASIVE, NON-NATIVE SPECIES

Affected Environment: Throughout the overall treatment area there are several weed species; some are present in specific locations while others are more widely spread. The principal noxious weeds with potential to establish/proliferate in fuels treatment areas are spotted and diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa* and *Centaurea diffusa*), musk and bull thistle (*Carduus*

nutans and *Cirsium vulgare*), houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*), yellow toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*), and leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*). These species occur in and are well adapted to the pinyon-juniper, big sagebrush, mountain shrub vegetation types and precipitation ranges. These same plant communities are also suited for establishment of the invasive alien cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). Russian thistle (*Salsola iberica*) is also becoming more widely spread in the general project area and readily establishes on disturbed sites.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Where fuels treatment projects coincide with known weed infestations there is potential for spread and proliferation of the weeds. Aggressive revegetation followed by onsite monitoring to detect noxious weed establishment and treatment of occurrences will prevent long term establishment of noxious weeds in treatment areas. Establishment of desirable vegetation through seeding and or protection of the treatment area to allow for natural regeneration will typically provide sufficient competitive plant cover to prevent noxious/invasive plant proliferation.

Cumulative Effects: Overall, treatments followed by revegetation and grazing deferment practices such as those proposed in this plan would promote maximum plant vigor, production, and age class diversity. This should result in plant communities that are more resilient and resistant to noxious weed/cheatgrass invasion.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The impacts under this alternative would be similar to those under the Proposed Action because fuels treatment projects would still be proposed, analyzed, and implemented. The principal difference being that analysis would be done on a project by project basis.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be essentially the same as under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

SPECIAL STATUS ANIMAL SPECIES

Affected Environment: There are no threatened or endangered animal species that are known to inhabit or derive important use from the project area. Greater sage-grouse, a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and a BLM sensitive species, occur within the project area.

Greater sage-grouse populations generally require large expanses of intact sagebrush habitat (Connelly et al. 2004). Sage-grouse nests are generally found under shrubs with larger canopies and within of stands greater shrub canopy cover (Connelly et al. 2000). Height and structure of herbaceous vegetation is an important component in nesting habitat and can influence sage-grouse nest site selection, nest success, and chick survival. Habitat requirements typically vary depending on season of use. Sage-grouse begin nesting from mid-April through mid-May with chicks appearing from mid-May through mid-July; peaking from mid to late June. There are

roughly two dozen active and historic leks scattered throughout the project area, however, only 10 (2 active, 8 historic) are located on BLM administered lands.

Based on recent (2012) Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) mapping efforts, sage-grouse habitat has been classified into two types: 1) preliminary priority habitat (PPH) and 2) preliminary general habitat (PGH). Preliminary priority habitat represents areas having the highest conservation value in maintaining sustainable sage-grouse populations, including breeding, later brood-rearing, and winter concentration areas. Preliminary general habitat represents occupied or recently occupied habitats that are outside priority habitat. These two habitat categories conform well to former mapping that emphasized suitable habitat within 4 miles of current or recently active leks. There is approximately 28,700 BLM administered acres of PPH and 18,000 BLM administered acres of PGH within the project area. This is confined to a band along the southern boundary of the project area with finger-like extensions along the ridges.

There are several BLM sensitive species that are known to inhabit or may be found within the project area including: northern goshawk, Brewer's sparrow, midget faded rattlesnake, northern leopard frog, mountain sucker, Colorado River cutthroat trout (CRCT), fringed myotis, big free-tailed bat and Townsend's big-eared bat.

Sensitive Aquatic Species

CRCT are confined to the upper reaches of Black Sulphur Creek. This species are generally found in small, higher elevation streams. They require cold, clear running water (54 – 59 F) with a rocky (cobble/boulder/gravel) substrate.

Mountain sucker are located along the lower reaches of Black Sulphur Creek and throughout Piceance and Fawn Creeks. This species is typically found in small streams with a gravel, sand or mud substrate. They are fairly tolerant of low water quality and warmer temperatures.

Northern leopard frogs are documented on BLM administered portions of Piceance Creek, approximately 8.5 river miles downstream from the project area. It is suspected that they occur throughout the privately-owned portions of Piceance Creek that makeup the northeast boundary of the project area.

Northern Goshawk

Based on BLM's experience, goshawks nest at low densities throughout the WRFO in mature pinyon-juniper woodlands above 6,500 ft. and Douglas-fir and aspen stands. These habitats are well distributed in higher elevation woodlands and forests in East Douglas Creek and its tributaries and near the White-Colorado River divide. Goshawks establish breeding territories as early as March and begin nesting by the end of April. Nestlings are normally fledged and independent of the nest stand by mid-August. There are two documented goshawk nests within the project area.

Brewer's Sparrow

Brewer's sparrows are common and widely distributed in virtually all big sagebrush, greasewood, saltbush, and mixed brush communities throughout the planning area. These birds are typically one of the most common members of these avian communities and breeding

densities generally range between 10-40 pairs per 100 acres. Although most abundant in extensive stands of sagebrush, the birds appear regularly in small (one to two acre) sagebrush parks scattered among area woodlands. Typical of most migratory passerines in this area, nesting activities normally take place between mid-May and mid-July. These birds would be expected to be found in sagebrush habitats throughout the project area.

Sensitive Bats

Although the distribution of bats in the WRFO is not completely understood, recent acoustic surveys in the Piceance Basin and along the lower White River have documented the localized presence of Townsend's big-eared and big free-tailed bats along larger perennial waterways. These bats typically use caves, mines, bridges, and unoccupied buildings for night, nursery, and hibernation roosts, but in western Colorado, single or small groups of bats use rock crevices and tree cavities. Although rock outcrops and mature conifers that could serve as temporary daytime roosts for small numbers of bats are widely available in the project area, and relatively extensive riparian communities are available along Piceance Creek and Black Sulphur Creek, there are no underground mines or known caves, and unoccupied buildings are extremely limited in the project area. Birthing and rearing of young for these bats occur in May and June, and the young are capable of flight by the end of July. The big free-tailed bat is not known to breed in Colorado.

Midget Faded Rattlesnake

The midget faded rattlesnake (MFR) is the smallest member of the western rattlesnake species complex. This subspecies is thought to be generally confined to the Green River geologic formation in southeast Wyoming, eastern Utah and western Colorado, and appears to have very narrow preference for bedded sandstone outcrops with fallen mid-slope slabs on south to southeast exposures below 7,000 feet in elevation. Midget faded rattlesnakes occur in small discrete groups and exhibit classic metapopulation distribution. These snakes display strong fidelity to and remain closely associated with hibernacula for overwintering and reproductive activities. These snakes emerge from their dens in late April or early May and remain in close proximity to the den until late May/early June. Gravid females and juveniles remain within 200 meters of dens throughout the year, while mature males and nongravid females disperse an average of 1,000 meters from dens from June through September. Concentrated year-round association with the den sites makes these snakes particularly vulnerable to vehicle-caused mortality. Little is known about the snakes distribution in the project area, however there is potential for this species to occur at lower elevations in suitable habitat.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to special status animal species would vary depending on the size and location of the treatment, habitat type and species involved, and the type and timing of the treatment. In general, impacts to special status species would be similar to those discussed below in the Migratory Bird and Terrestrial Wildlife sections. Mechanical treatments would result in direct habitat loss or alteration of predominately woody vegetation with minimal ground cover removal. Prescribed burns would result in the loss of both woody and herbaceous types (as a forage or cover source). Impacts to special status animal species can be both short term and long term and would greatly depend on the species and vegetative

community involved. Individual special status wildlife species will be discussed in further detail below.

Greater sage-grouse

In general, impacts to sage-grouse would be similar to those discussed below in the Terrestrial Wildlife section. It would be difficult to determine the impacts to sage-grouse without knowing the exact location and extent of the treatment area, treatment type (mechanical vs. fire) and type of habitat involved (breeding, brood-rearing or winter). Proposed treatments should be designed to meet the seasonal habitat requirements for grouse outlined in Connelly (2000). The type of habitat involved (breeding, brood-rearing, or winter) may determine the treatment method (mechanical vs. fire) used. All proposed burns or mechanical fuels treatments within PPH and PGH should have identified sage-grouse habitat objectives and should consider existing sagebrush communities, site conditions and site potential in treatment design. Prescribed burns and mechanical fuels treatments will only be considered if they are shown to maintain or improve the quality and quantity of greater sage-grouse habitats. This would be determined on a case-by-case basis and appropriate design features will be applied.

Connelly et al. (2000) recommends that breeding habitat support 15-25 percent sagebrush canopy cover, with perennial herbaceous cover averaging 18 cm in height or greater. Canopy cover should be 15 percent or greater for perennial grasses and 10 percent or greater for forbs. Sagebrush is the key component of winter habitat. As such, winter habitat should support sagebrush stands with a 10 – 30 percent canopy cover with minimal heights of 25 – 35 cm. Treatments in PPH should be designed to meet these criteria. Where sagebrush is limited on the landscape, the use of prescribed fire and other sagebrush reduction projects should be avoided in PPH and PGH that currently meet greater sage-grouse breeding or winter habitat requirements. This would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Removal of larger tracts of sagebrush would be expected to adversely affect sage-grouse. There have been several studies that showed no adverse effects to breeding grouse populations from fire (Gates 1983, Martin 1990 and Bensen et al. 1991). However, Connelly et al. (1994, 2000) showed a >80 percent decline in a sage-grouse breeding population following prescribed burning of Wyoming sagebrush. Nelle et al. (2000) also showed a long term negative impact on sage-grouse nesting and brood-rearing habitats following burning of mountain sagebrush stands. Similarly, the use of fire has been shown to negatively affect sage-grouse brood-rearing habitat (Connelly and Braun 1997, Fisher et al. 1996). Future projects will be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, but in general fire is not recommended in PPH dominated by big sagebrush types, as fire is often difficult to control.

Often, invasive species occupy an area following disturbance. Design features regarding monitoring, evaluation and reseeding post treatment are incorporated into the Proposed Action and would be expected to minimize the potential for invasion of annual species (cheatgrass).

Treatments that maintain or enhance sage-grouse habitat such as removal of encroaching pinyon-juniper, modification of sagebrush canopies that currently exceed sage-grouse habitat suitability criteria, and restoration of native bunchgrass communities in shrublands that are currently dominated by invasive annuals will be considered.

Sensitive Aquatic Species

Removal or modification of riparian vegetation from treatments could result in increased erosion, loss of stream bank cover, an increase in water temperature due to loss of shading, reduction in prey availability, and a reduction in stream habitat quality due to an increase in sediment loading. Impacts would vary depending on the species, with some being less tolerant to change than others. For example, trout are extremely vulnerable to changes in water temperature and quality as they rely on clean, cold water. Increases in water temperature may affect survivorship and reproduction for certain aquatic species with little impact to others.

Removal or alteration of upland vegetation (particularly resulting from a fire) may lead to increased runoff, and an increase in erosion and sediment loading. Increased sediment could silt in spawning areas, fill in pools, and reduce productivity of macroinvertebrates that serve as prey for many aquatic species. Impacts to aquatic species and habitats would vary greatly depending on fire intensity, proximity to the stream, slope etc. Fire intensities are generally low with prescribed burns so impacts to aquatic habitats, particularly from sedimentation would be reduced. Design features outlined in the Proposed Action (e.g., 500 foot buffer along perennial streams) should limit involvement with riparian habitats and aquatic systems that support aquatic wildlife.

Northern Goshawk

Impacts to northern goshawk would be similar to those discussed for other woodland raptors in the Terrestrial Wildlife section.

Brewer's Sparrow

Impacts to Brewer's sparrow would be similar to those discussed for other migratory bird species in the Migratory Bird section.

Midget Faded Rattlesnake

Impacts to rattlesnakes would be similar to those discussed below in the Terrestrial Wildlife section. In general, treatments that take place in or around MFR denning/hibernacula sites should be avoided during the reproductive period (generally April 15 – August 1). Surveys may be required if the proposed treatment occurs in habitats capable of supporting MFR.

Sensitive Bats

Impacts to bats would be similar to those discussed in the Terrestrial Wildlife section.

Cumulative Effects: It would be difficult to assess the impacts to special status species without knowing the acreage of the treatment, treatment type (mechanical vs. fire), type of species and habitat involved, and where the treatment is located in relation to other disturbances. There are several other management actions that could potentially occur in the project area, but those resulting in substantial loss or reduction of forage and cover resources are generally limited to oil and gas development, grazing, and rights-of-way. The Proposed Action would result in the incremental loss of forage and cover habitat for special status animal species, however, these treatments are not expected to have a substantial influence on local special status wildlife populations in the long term.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to special status animal species would be similar to those discussed above under the Proposed Action. The greatest difference would be that each proposed project would be analyzed through a stand-alone environmental assessment.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be identical to those discussed above under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard #4 for Special Status Species: While there are likely inclusion of annual dominated areas that would not be considered to be meeting land health standard #4, the project area on a whole is generally considered to be meeting the land health standards for special status species. Neither the Proposed Action nor the No Action Alternative should detract from the continued meeting of this standard.

SPECIAL STATUS PLANT SPECIES

Affected Environment: Dudley Bluffs bladderpod (*Physaria congesta*) and Dudley Bluffs twinpod (*Physaria obovata*) have occupied habitat that occurs near the Proposed Action. There is mapped suitable habitat for both *Physaria* spp. within the Proposed Action area. The two threatened federally listed species are badland or rock outcrop soil associates, and are considered “oil shale endemics” or edaphic (soil-related) endemic species. The bladderpod grows on barren white shale outcrops on tongues of the Green River Formation where it has been exposed along down-cut drainages or windswept ridges. It often grows on level surfaces at the points of ridges or in pinyon-juniper savannah areas where outcrops of the white shale geology has been exposed. The twinpod also grows on barren white shale outcrops on tongues of the Green River Formation where it is exposed along down-cut drainages, sometimes occurring below, or interspersed with the bladderpod habitats. The Black Sulphur tongue and the Parachute Creek member of the Green River Formation are present within the project area. The Black Sulphur tongue is considered suitable habitat for both the Dudley Bluffs bladderpod and twinpod. The Parachute Creek member is suitable habitat for Dudley Bluffs twinpod.

Potential and occupied habitat for Cathedral Bluffs dwarf gentian, Piceance bladderpod, and Cathedral Bluffs meadow rue are also found in the vicinity of the Proposed Action. Cathedral Bluffs dwarf gentian, Piceance bladderpod, and Cathedral Bluffs meadow rue are BLM sensitive and occur on shale slopes of the Green River Formation. A list of special status plant species affected is provided in Table 5.

Table 5. Special Status Plant Species affected by Proposed Action.

Name	Species	Status	Habitat
Dudley Bluffs bladderpod	<i>Physaria congesta</i>	Threatened	Barren, white shale outcrops of the Green River and Uinta Formations (6,000-6,700 ft.)

Dudley Bluffs Twinpod	<i>Physaria obcordata</i>	Threatened	Barren, white outcrops and steep slopes of the Parachute Creek Member of the Green River Formation (5,900-7,500 ft.)
Cathedral Bluff dwarf gentian	<i>Gentianella tortuosa</i>	Sensitive	Barren shale knolls and slopes of the Green River Formation (8,500-10,800 ft.)
Piceance bladderpod	<i>Lesquerella parviflora</i>	Sensitive	Shale outcrops of the Green River Formation, on ledges and slopes of canyons in open areas (6,200-8,600 ft.)
Cathedral Bluff Meadow- ruc	<i>Thalictrum heliophilum</i>	Sensitive	Sparsely vegetated, steep shale talus slopes of the Green River Formation (6,300-8,800 ft.)

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Any type of surface disturbance treatments can negatively impact special status plant habitat directly and indirectly by generating fugitive dust, trampling and/or removing plants, removing and/or disturbing pollinator habitat, and contributing to the spread of noxious weeds. However, it is not the BLM's intention to impair or harm SSPS habitat. The removal of thick overgrowth may allow for a more biologically diverse understory which will assist in expanding pollinator habitat. A reduction in fuel loading may also lessen the intensity of a potential fire in treatment areas which would increase the likelihood that the current seedbank would be preserved.

Cumulative Effects: The increase in disturbance can increase the spread and abundance of noxious weeds which is a cumulative impact on SSPS. Additionally, landscape fragmentation because of treatments can cumulatively impact pollinator habitat and the persistence of special status plant species if the fragmentation affects the plants ability to expand their range.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The No Action Alternative would have no conceivable influence on special status plant species or their associated habitats.

Cumulative Effects: The No Action Alternative would have no conceivable cumulative effect on special status plant species or their associated habitats.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard #4 for Special Status Species: The Proposed Action and the No Action Alternative should have no influence on populations or habitats of plants associated with the Endangered Species Act or BLM sensitive species and, as such, should have no influence on the status of applicable Land Health Standards if mitigation/design features are followed.

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Affected Environment: The Proposed Action spans a wide array of vegetation types and elevation ranges (6,000 – 8,400 ft.). In general, the project area is largely comprised of basin, Wyoming, and to a lesser extent mountain big sagebrush communities, mountain shrub communities (serviceberry, snowberry, Gambel oak, bitterbrush), pinyon-juniper woodlands and small, isolated pockets of aspen woodlands (see Vegetation section for a more detailed description).

These communities support a variety of migratory bird species including but not limited to Bewick's wren, black-throated gray warbler, pinyon jay, gray flycatcher, ash-throated fly catcher (pinyon and juniper associates), orange-crowned warbler, Virginia's warbler, MacGillivray's warbler, blue-gray gnatcatcher, spotted towhee (mountain shrub associates), Vespers sparrow, western meadowlark, Brewer's sparrow, sage thrasher, green-tailed towhee (sagebrush associates), warbling vireo, house wren, red-naped sapsucker (aspen associates) and song sparrow and yellow warbler (riparian associates). Species considered birds of conservation concern (BCC) by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) that may occur in the project area include pinyon jay, juniper titmouse, and Brewer's sparrow (also BLM sensitive species). These birds typically return in April and begin nesting in earnest in mid-May. Most young have fledged by mid to late July.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to migratory birds would vary depending on the size and location of the treatment, habitat type involved and the type and timing of treatment. Proposed mechanical treatments would result in the loss or modification of mostly woody vegetation (pinyon-juniper, big sagebrush or mountain shrub species). Shrubland communities generally take 5 to 30 years (depending on the community type) to return to a mature state, while pinyon-juniper woodlands can take several hundred years (depending on stand age). Pinyon-juniper habitat supports the largest nesting bird species list of any upland vegetation type in the West (Colorado Partners in Flight Conservation Plan 2000). Treatments involving a mature component would be expected to have more substantive impacts to pinyon-juniper associates than those involving immature or encroaching pinyon-juniper due to the length of time it takes to return to mature conditions. In general, woodlands that are targeted in the Proposed Action are younger-aged, encroaching types generally do not support the full contingent of pinyon-juniper or sagebrush associate bird species. In the long term, removal of invading pinyon-juniper from these sagebrush parks would likely benefit those sagebrush obligate species.

Crushing of herbaceous vegetation would likely occur from use of heavy equipment but these treatments would not be expected to result in substantial groundcover loss. Impacts to migratory birds would largely depend on the time of year treatments are applied. As stated above, mechanical treatments would result in both short and long term loss of habitat, but would not be expected to have a direct influence on migratory bird nesting activities if conducted outside of the breeding season. Treatments conducted during the nesting season (typically May - July) would likely result in avoidance of functional habitats, displacement/disruption of birds, nest abandonment and possible mortality of nestlings.

Depending on the extent, severity and location, fuels treatments would result in the loss or degradation of habitats that support migratory birds. Similar to mechanical treatments discussed above, impacts to migratory birds would depend on timing of the proposed treatment. In most cases, fuels treatments would return all or a portion of the area treated to an early successional state. This would be an expected benefit those bird species that depend on younger seral stages (e.g., lark sparrow, vesper's sparrow, and mountain blue bird).

Of concern would be the potential for the invasion of undesirable plant species. In general, annual dominated/degraded communities provide little in the way of forage or cover resources for migratory bird species. Design features outlined in the Proposed Action would be expected to reduce the spread of noxious weeds and other annual species.

Cumulative Effects: It would be difficult to assess the impacts without knowing the acreage of the treatment, treatment type (mechanical vs. fire), type of habitat involved, and where the treatment is located in relation to other disturbances. There are several other management actions that could potentially occur in the project area, but those resulting in substantial loss or reduction of forage and cover resources are generally limited to oil and gas development, grazing, and rights-of-way. The Proposed Action would result in the incremental loss of migratory bird nesting and foraging habitat. In general, these treatments are not expected to have a substantial influence on local bird populations. Treatments would be expected to provide both short and long term benefits to migratory birds (depending on species).

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to migratory bird species would be similar to those discussed above under the Proposed Action. The greatest difference would be that each proposed project would be analyzed through a stand-alone environmental assessment.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be identical to those discussed above under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

TERRESTRIAL WILDLIFE

Affected Environment: The Proposed Action spans a wide array of vegetation types and elevation ranges (6,000 – 8,400 ft.). In general, the project area is largely comprised of basin, Wyoming, and to a lesser extent mountain big sagebrush communities, mountain shrub communities (serviceberry, snowberry, Gambel oak, bitterbrush), pinyon-juniper woodlands and small, isolated pockets of aspen woodlands (see Vegetation section for a more detailed description). The project area is largely encompassed by mule deer winter range, with a small portion along Piceance Creek and Ryan Gulch classified by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) as severe winter range – a specialized component of winter range that virtually supports an entire herd during the most extreme conditions (snow depth, temperature etc.). These ranges are most heavily used from December through April. Additionally a small band of big game summer range encompasses the higher elevations along the southern boundary of the project area.

Mature components of pinyon-juniper woodlands, mature aspen stands, dead standing trees, and cliff/rock outcrops may provide suitable nest substrate for several raptor species including red-tailed hawk, golden eagle, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, northern goshawk and several owl species. Breeding dates vary, depending on the species but generally most species in the area nest from February through August. There are dozens of known raptor nests within the project area.

Small mammal populations are sparsely documented in the WRFO, however, recent BLM and CPW surveys found all shrub-steppe communities in this Field Office dominated by deer mouse and least chipmunk. The remaining species that are likely to occur in this area (e.g., montane vole) are less common, but display broad ecological tolerance and are widely distributed throughout the region. No narrowly distributed or highly specialized species or subspecific populations are known to inhabit this area.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to wildlife would vary depending on the size and location of the treatment area, habitat type involved and the type and timing of the treatment. Mechanical treatments would result in the removal or alteration of predominately woody vegetation as forage or cover resource for terrestrial wildlife species. Generally these shrubland communities can take anywhere from five years to several decades to return to a state functionally capable of providing cover or forage for local wildlife. Mechanical treatments would likely result in the crushing of herbaceous vegetation, but would not be expected to result in a substantial loss of ground cover. Although not specifically targeted (see Proposed Action), mature components of pinyon-juniper woodlands provide nesting habitat for many woodland raptors. Proposed treatments will be reviewed and analyzed to minimize or avoid involvement of mature woodland types which have the potential to support raptor nesting functions.

Noise from the equipment would likely result in the displacement of wildlife in and around the treatment area. This would likely be localized and short term and in most cases, local wildlife would be expected to return to the surrounding area once the treatment is complete. Avoiding treatments during critical timeframes (big game calving and winter periods, raptor breeding) would minimize impacts to local wildlife.

In general, fuels treatments can have short term impacts on terrestrial wildlife by removing or degrading habitat, displacing wildlife, causing avoidance of otherwise functional habitats in close proximity to the treatment area and causing changes in movement patterns. There would also be potential for injury or mortality, particularly to slow-moving species. Conversely, fuels treatments may provide short term benefits to those species that depend on younger seral stages and in the long term may lead to an increase in herbaceous plant productivity and diversity, resulting in additional or better quality forage and cover resources for both big game and nongame species. For those species that rely on woody species (big sagebrush and mountain shrub communities) benefits may not be realized for several years to several decades.

The invasion of undesirable plant species would be of concern for both fire and mechanical treatments. Noxious and invasive plant species are generally of lower value to wildlife

nutritionally and functionally (as a form of cover). Design features outlined in the Proposed Action would be expected to reduce the spread of noxious weeds and other annual species.

Cumulative Effects: It would be difficult to assess the impacts without knowing the acreage of the treatment, treatment type (mechanical vs. fire), type of habitat involved, and where the treatment is located in relation to other disturbances. There are several other management actions that could potentially occur in the project area, but those resulting in substantial loss or reduction of forage and cover resources are generally limited to oil and gas development, grazing, and rights-of-way. The Proposed Action would result in the incremental loss of forage and cover habitat for big game and nongame species. In general, these treatments are not expected to have a substantial influence on local big game and nongame wildlife populations in the long term. Treatments would be expected to provide both short term and long term benefits, depending on the species.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts to terrestrial wildlife would be similar to those discussed above under the Proposed Action. The greatest difference would be that each proposed project would be analyzed through a stand-alone environmental assessment.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be identical to those discussed above under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard #3 for Plant and Animal Communities: There are likely annual dominated (cheatgrass) inclusions within the project area that do not meet land health standards however, on a landscape scale, the project area is generally meeting the land health standards for terrestrial wildlife communities. As mitigated (see mitigation and design features outlined in the Proposed Action), neither the Proposed Action nor the No Action alternative would be expected to detract from the continued meeting of these standards.

WILD HORSES

Affected Environment: The project area is located near the southern most boundary of the Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area (HMA) and includes approximately 3,700 acres (or roughly two percent) of the approximate 190,130 acre HMA. This portion of the HMA, which contains prime summer-long wild horse habitat, is comprised of several different range sites including pinyon-juniper woodlands. Pinyon-juniper woodlands provide cover habitat required by horses. Use of this cover type is more predominant during the summer months for shade and during severe winter storms.

The movement of wild horses in the HMA is largely influenced by seasonal factors, fences, access to water supplies, and available forage. Wild horses tend to concentrate on windswept ridges and south-facing slopes during periods of deep snow. During summer and early fall, water availability influences wild horse movement.

Forage competition between wild horses, livestock, and wildlife species exists throughout the project area. Fecal studies conducted by Colorado State University in 1974 determined that the diet of wild horses within the Piceance Basin herd consisted of the following main plant species: sedge, needle-and-thread grass, wheatgrass, and prairie junegrass. A comparison of the diets among wild horses, cattle, and mule deer in the Piceance Basin showed a dietary overlap of 71 percent between wild horses and cattle, and 11 percent between wild horses and mule deer in the mountain shrub vegetation type. Within pinyon-juniper communities, comparison of these diets showed a 59 percent dietary overlap between wild horses and cattle, and a two percent dietary overlap between wild horses and mule deer (BLM 1981).

The current appropriate management level (AML) range for the Piceance-East Douglas HMA is 135-235 wild horses. Based on population models for the herd, an estimated population for the herd is around 300 animals. To maintain the AML, the BLM occasionally gathers wild horses and offers them to the public through an adoption program. The next wild horse gather for this HMA may be in 2015.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The proposed project will affect the HMA wild horse herd; however, the Proposed Action is not expected to impact the herd population to drop to levels below the AML range of 135-235 wild horses. Potential impacts to wild horses from this fuels reduction project would be within the 3,700 acres (including approximately 1,370 acres of private) of the HMA but only in the short term and would be comparable to those large mammals (e.g., elk, mule deer, and cattle) that are also dependent upon similar habitats and forage within the project area.

Implementation of the Proposed Action could result in direct and indirect impacts to wild horses in the project area. Surface-disturbing activities associated with the proposed area could result in the direct, initial loss of up to 2,330 acres of habitat, cover and forage in that portion of the HMA in the short term. Other direct and indirect impacts to wild horses would be the additional presence of people to the area for the short term. Wild horses that do not avoid the area during the proposed activities could have an increased potential for injuries because of their flight tendencies (e.g., running through fences, jumping off ledges, or trapped within a given area of fire). Further, increased traffic on access roads in the project area could also increase the potential for harassment of, and vehicle collisions with wild horses. Increased traffic on project area roads could also result in young foals becoming dislocated from their mares and/or bands.

Impacts to wild horses would likely be greatest if increased human presence associated with the associated project activities were to take place during the foaling period (March 1 through June 15) or during the next potential gather. Proposing the project outside of the window from March 1 through June 15, as outlined by the White River ROD/RMP, would reduce impacts during this sensitive time period. Further, project activities may need to be adjusted around a wild horse gather if scheduled during the same time as a gather operation.

If successful rehabilitation (native plant seeding) of all acres associated with the proposed project could be realized on the undertaking either from the mechanical or fire prescription activities wild horses would receive a benefit in additional available preferred forage. Without some form

of rehabilitation within the pinyon/juniper areas the potential for additional available preferred forage could be lost because of the lack of natural understory vegetation necessary for natural rehabilitation in the long term. Until the treatment is undertaken within this portion of the HMA the complete picture of the impacts are unknown. Successful rehabilitation of all treatment locations could restore any lost wild horse habitat and forage acres until the pinyon/juniper encroachment once again begins to occupy those acres.

Cumulative Effects: Combined with other ongoing activities in the proposed project area this could further habituate the wild horses in this area to the increased presence of humans that currently has minimal activities compared to than other locations ultimately affecting their wild behavior. Reseeding of those locations that receive treatment in this portion of the HMA would be a benefit with the addition of available, desirable forage for wild horses and other large mammals while pockets of cover also could remain available.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: There will be no change from the current condition. Pinyon-juniper encroachment would continue to increase which could reduce sagebrush and grass communities. The potential for wildfires in the area could increase with those results unknown at this time on the impact to wild horses in this area.

Cumulative Effects: Potential for reduced available, desirable forage while pockets of cover could remain available to wild horses.

Mitigation: None.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: It is generally accepted that humans have occupied North America and northwest Colorado for at least 13,000 years (c. Reed and Metcalf 1999, Church *et al* 2007). Manifestations of human occupation and use of the landscape can take many forms, some quite subtle and not obvious to the untrained eye. Within the Piceance Creek drainage, which includes the project area, there is, currently, a very high known density of various cultural resources. These resources may represent all phases of human occupation of the area. Cultural resources may be as simple as a few artifacts scattered on the surface, representing a very short term limited activity or may include substantial evidence of occupation such as architectural elements such as roads, historic brush fences, historic homestead cabins or Native American rock art or habitation structures – often referred to as wickiups. Some cultural resources may be readily visible on the ground surface and some may be masked by a layer of soil.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Direct and indirect impacts to cultural resources from vegetation manipulation depend on the type of cultural resource present and the particular manipulation of vegetation used. For example, fire has a particularly destructive effect on wooden features and sites. Wood burns which destroys the feature such as a brush fence or log cabin. If fire is close enough and of sufficient heat and duration it can cause spalling of rock faces that might contain rock art. Depending on duration and fire intensity some features such as

lithic scatters may not be affected at all. However, in heavy fuels, such as brush piles or slash piles (where intensity and duration of fire are high), substantial destructive effects on artifacts may occur.

Impacts from a vegetation mastication machine such as a fecon or a hydro-ax can have impacts to all types of surface remains if they are not avoided. Wooden features are easily ground up and dispersed, destroying any archaeological or historic values or information that might have been present. In addition, as the equipment works it can cause ground/soil disturbance which can crush artifacts and through soil displacement destroy features such as hearths or other in ground features.

Studies conducted in the WRFO and KFO (Hadden 2001 compliance dated 1/9/2001, Rupp, 1990) have indicated that a brush-hog drawn by a rubber tired tractor or brush railings conducted in the winter when the ground is frozen have virtually no impacts to cultural resources. Standing features such as brush fences or cabins are readily avoided by these treatment actions while lithic scatters do not seem to be affected.

Using natural features and breaks in vegetation to construct containment lines limits or eliminates the potential for impacting cultural resources during line construction. During line construction there is a small potential for impacting previously unidentified subsurface remains that could not be identified during surface inventory for the control lines.

Piling or lopping and scattering vegetation could potentially affect cultural resources if standing wooded structures such as wickiups are not identified prior to the any activity. Piling has the potential to create small areas of high fire intensities that could adversely impact cultural resources if the pile should coincide with the location of a cultural resource. In either case the increased activity could pose a threat to resources due to the increased activity in the vicinity which could lead to trampling of resources and features if not properly identified during project inventory.

Regardless of the treatment method chosen the increased human activity and presence in the area could lead to increases in unlawful collection of artifacts. In some cases the increase in collection will be due to the increased ground visibility in the area which could be attractive to collectors as artifacts might become more visible after vegetation is removed.

Using naturally occurring ignitions for fuel management purposes presents the greatest threat to standing wood features as they likely would not be identified prior to the fire and would not be protected by fire breaks or other means during the burning activity. This would constitute a major loss of data from the regional archaeological database. However, it is important to note that this process has been a natural part of the landscape for centuries and cannot be adequately quantified or documented at this time.

Cumulative Effects: Even with mitigation measures there is a potential for loss of cultural resources in the project area. Some loss of cultural resource values will be inadvertent such as when natural ignitions are allowed to burn under the prescribed conditions. Other inadvertent losses could occur as previously undetected subsurface remains are disturbed by

some types of mechanical treatment such as the use of a hydro-ax. Loss of cultural resource values could occur as a result of unlawful collecting after vegetation is removed making artifacts and cultural features more visible to collectors.

Any loss of cultural resources, artifacts or features, represents a long term, permanent, irreversible and irretrievable loss of data from the regional archaeological database. Cumulatively these losses make understanding human occupation and use of the landscape more difficult.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the No Action Alternative individual projects would continue to be evaluated on a project specific basis, except for natural ignitions. Appropriate mitigation would be designed at the time of individual project identification/initiation. Total impacts to cultural resources would likely be similar to those described under the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative impacts to cultural resources would likely be similar to those described under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

PALEONTOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: In general, the upland areas of the project area are mapped as the Uinta Formation while the stream bottoms are mapped as Quaternary Alluvium (Tweto 1979). This mapping was at a large scale, 1:500,000 and while adequate for general planning does not necessarily identify small outcrops of exposures of the interfingering shale units of the Green River Formation (cf. Duncan 1976a, 1976b). Quaternary Alluvium has been categorized by the BLM as a Potential Fossil Yield Classification (PFYC) 2 formation indicated that it is not expected to produce fossil resources though subsurface archaeological remains are expected (Berry *et al* 2012 compliance dated 10/12/2012). The BLM has categorized the Uinta and Green River formations as PFYC 5 formations indicating that they are known to produce scientifically noteworthy fossil resources; vertebrae, invertebrate and plants (cf. Armstrong and Wolny 1989).

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Vegetation manipulation impacts to fossil resources are variable and may depend on a number of factors such as whether or not outcrops are exposed in the manipulation area and the type of manipulation to be employed. Should the cutter head of the fecon or hydro-ax contact exposed rock outcrops fossils, particularly smaller ones, could be impacted or completely destroyed as the rock is ground up.

Fire, with long residence time and high intensities, can cause spalling of portions of exposed fossil remains or, on vertical rock exposures, the exfoliation of rock faces which could cause heat shattering of fossils or spalling of rock surfaces to expose previously unknown fossil resources. Thermal shattering of fossils is considered a permanent, long term, irreversible and irretrievable

loss of scientific data from the regional database while exposure of new fossils might be perceived as a positive impact to the regional fossil database.

In the event control line construction extends deep enough to reach the underlying sedimentary rock formation there is a potential to expose and perhaps result in scraping of the rock surface there is a potential to impact, by crushing or displacing smaller and more fragile fossil elements.

Any activity that improves visibility of the surface and exposed rock formations has the potential to attract collectors who might engage in the unlawful removal of vertebrate or scientifically noteworthy plants or invertebrate fossils.

In general, though, most vegetation manipulation activity is not expected to have any impacts to fossil resources.

Cumulative Effects: Incorporation of design features in the Proposed Action and proper project planning with inventory and relocation work as needed should serve to limit the adverse impacts to fossil resources. The only impact that may not be mitigated would be unlawful collection. Any loss of fossils and the contextual information associated with them would constitute a permanent, long term, irreversible and irretrievable loss of scientific data from the regional database. With proper project design the loss of scientific data would be so small as to be difficult to quantify, likely negligible.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the No Action Alternative individual fuels management projects would likely continue to be introduced from time to time. Impacts from individual projects would likely be similar to those described under the Proposed Action above.

Cumulative Effects: Under the No Action Alternative the long term cumulative impacts of individually proposed fuels management projects would likely be similar to those described for the Proposed Action above.

Mitigation: None.

NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS CONCERNS

Affected Environment: On March 25, 2014 representatives of the three Ute Tribes of Colorado and the Wind River Band of the Shoshone were initially contacted via letter to notify them of the Proposed Action and solicit any concerns they might have. The BLM has not received any written responses as of May 29, 2014. Follow up via email has been completed as of June 3, 2014.

To date the tribes have not identified any specific Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) or other areas of critical concern. Generally the concern is that wickiup sites be avoided and the visual qualities and setting around the sites not be impaired.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: At the present time there are no anticipated direct or indirect impacts to any identified areas of tribal concern.

Cumulative Effects: Should any areas or sites be impacted by any fuels management activities it would constitute an adverse impact to those values described to the sites by Native American groups. This would constitute a long term, permanent, irreversible and irretrievable impact to the cultural properties important to Native American groups.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the No Action Alternative individual vegetation manipulation and fuels reduction projects would likely continue to be introduced over time. Over the long term impacts to Native American concerns would likely be the same as those described for the Proposed Action above.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative impacts would likely be the same as those described for the Proposed Action above.

Mitigation: None.

VISUAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: Visual resources are the visible physical features of a landscape that convey scenic value. The BLM developed the Visual Resource Management system to identify and evaluate an area's scenic value. The visual resource inventory (VRI) process described in BLM Manual H-8410-1 establishes VRI classes, which are used to assess visual values for areas of the landscape. VRI Classes II, III, and IV are determined by using a combination of three components: scenic quality, sensitivity level, and distance zones, with Class II having a higher level of value and Class IV having the least visual value. VRI Class I areas are assigned to special management areas, such as Wilderness Study Areas, which are the most valued landscapes. The VRI classes are the baseline from which environmental effects are measured. The vast majority of the Proposed Action is located in Visual Resource Inventory Class IV, which means this area is a lesser valued scenic landscape. The area of the landscape where the Proposed Action is located was placed into VRI Class IV as a result of a composite of the three above mentioned components. The area received a low Scenic Quality scoring of C (A, B, and C type rating). Other determining factors for the VRI Class IV rating for this area were a result of the Sensitivity Level rating as moderate value to the public, and the project being located in a Distance Zone of Background.

The BLM also maintains four Visual Resource Management (VRM) classes used to describe the level of acceptable change allowable at a given location. Scenic values in the BLM White River Resource Area have been classified according to the Visual Resource Management (VRM) system into four Visual Resource Management Classes (I-IV), and corresponding VRM objectives were established in the 1997 White River ROD/RMP. VRM Class I are the most restrictive with VRM Class IV being the least restrictive for the amount of allowable change to occur on the landscape. The VRM objectives provide the amount of allowable change and are considered a resource-allocation. The vast majority of the Proposed Action is located within a

VRM Class III area. The objective of the VRM III classification is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape in VRM Class III areas should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape. Approximately 6,000 acres near the southwestern end of Rio Blanco County Road 144 (Wagon Road Ridge) of the Proposed Action are located in VRM Class II. The objective of the VRM II classification is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristics landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in characteristic landscape.

The Proposed Action is located in the southwestern portion of the Piceance Basin. This landscape consists of gently sloping nearly flat parallel ridges with steep side slopes. These ridges and drainages generally go from higher elevations of approximately 8,000 feet in the southwestern portion of the Proposed Action to lower elevations of approximately 6,200 feet in the northeastern portion of Proposed Action. Nearly all drainages flow northeast into Piceance Creek. Color and texture are the dominant forms of the landscape and consist of dark green pinyon juniper scattered throughout and contrasting with lighter green sage brush and buff colored soils. This landscape consists of large naturally appearing areas without any development mixed with roads and trails, dispersed range improvements for livestock grazing, and areas with dense oil and gas development.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The type of vegetation treatment that is least likely to contrast with the existing characteristic landscape would be prescribed fire. This would mimic a naturally occurring process and would likely be unnoticeable as human caused impact on the landscape. Mechanical vegetation treatments are likely to be noticeable for a short duration (two to three growing seasons) in areas with grasses and shrubs. Mechanical vegetation treatments in pinyon-juniper stands will likely be noticeable for longer periods of time, potentially over a decade until shrubs and trees begin to establish within the area. In order to blend mechanical treatments with the surrounding landscape and make the treatments less noticeable to casual observers, it is recommended the edges of the treatments repeat natural lines of similar vegetation contrast and avoid creating straight lines on the edge of the treatments. These measures should be taken in VRM Class III areas and must be taken in VRM Class II areas on order to management objectives. Also, to not attract attention of casual observers in VRM Class II areas, retain the existing character of the landscape and reduce visible vegetative contrasts, it is recommended that in treatment areas with dense pinyon-juniper that the edges of the treatment boundary be feathered. This means that the pinyon-juniper trees will be thinned from the edge of treatment in lighter to more heavy thinning gradient that mimics natural pinyon-juniper encroachment into the treated area.

Cumulative Effects: Combined with other management activities and potential wildland fires, the Proposed Action will not likely create any additional impacts to casual observers that are perceived as noticeable or attracting much attention. The Proposed Action and incorporated

mitigation measures will likely result in future vegetation treatment projects that blend with the existing character of the landscape.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: This alternative would result in no new impacts to visual resources or attract any new attention from the casual observer in the project area.

Cumulative Effects: None identified as a result of this alternative.

Mitigation: None.

FIRE MANAGEMENT

Affected Environment: The total acreage of the proposed planning area is 192,418 acres. The planning area is predominantly within the D5 Cathedral Bluffs/Roan Plateau fire management polygon (160,382 acres), but also contains the C6 Lower Piceance Basin (26,974 acres) and the B7 Piceance Creek (5,062 acres) Fire Management Polygons.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Implementation of prescribed fires or other fuels management treatments would directly achieve desired resource management objectives within each FMU. The primary objective within the B7 polygon is to protect private land and structures along with threatened and endangered plant communities. Primary objectives within the C6 and D5 polygons are 1) enhance deer winter range and 2) promote a vegetation mosaic representing natural distributions of plant communities of varying successional stages. Indirectly, the interruption of continuous fuel beds would enhance the ability for fire suppression resources to protect agricultural lands, residences, communication sites, oil and gas facilities, and infrastructure scattered throughout the unit when threatened by public land fires. Desired effects could be accomplished through a combination of managing naturally ignited fires, conducting prescribed fires, and implementing mechanical treatments.

Cumulative Effects: Long range effects of conducting various fuels treatments over staggered timeframes would achieve the resource objectives of creating natural distributions of plant communities over varying successional stages and convert moderate and high (FRCC 2 or 3) areas to moderate to low (FRCC 2 or 1).

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: There will be no change from the current condition. The FRCC levels in each of the included FMUs would likely remain unchanged or convert to the next higher level condition class. Pinyon-juniper encroachment would continue to reduce sagebrush communities. A wildfire impacting the area would likely be more difficult to control and thus more expensive.

Cumulative Effects: Vegetation treatments, both mechanical and prescribed fire, enhance the BLM's ability to manage fire across the landscape. This ability allows the agency to protect resources it deems a priority. Without these fuel bed transitions, it may be increasingly difficult

to allow fire to play a natural role within these polygons and protect natural resources, adjacent private lands, residences, communication sites, oil and gas facilities, and various infrastructure.

Mitigation: None

LANDS WITH WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

Affected Environment: In accordance with the Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA), through the land use planning process, the BLM is required to consider all available information in order to determine the mix of resource use and protection that best serves the multiple-use and sustained-yield mandate. In accordance of Section 201 of the FLPMA, which requires the Secretary of the Interior to “Prepare and maintain on a continuing basis an inventory of all public lands and their resource and other values,” and the BLM Land Use Planning Handbook, the WRFO has identified and completed an assessment of BLM-managed lands with wilderness characteristics outside of existing Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). The process entailed the identification of wilderness inventory units, an inventory of roads and wilderness character, and a determination of whether or not the area meets the overall criteria for wilderness character (naturalness, outstanding opportunities for solitude, and primitive and unconfined types of recreation). BLM Manual 6310 (Conducting Wilderness Characteristics Inventory on BLM Lands), provides the guidance for the wilderness characteristic inventory process.

There is one wilderness inventory unit that has been identified within Proposed Action as having wilderness characteristics. Lands with wilderness characteristics unit-5 (Galloway Gulch) is approximately 5,200 acres and is located in the northwestern portion of the Proposed Action. The BLM has discretion as to how and if these units are managed to retain wilderness characteristics, but this is a land use planning decision. The decision on the management of this unit has not yet been made.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Of all of the activities and treatments in the Proposed Action, those that would have the greatest potential to impact wilderness characteristics in unit-5 would be certain types of mechanical vegetation treatment. Mechanical treatments such as mastication, hydro-axing, or other similar treatment methods have the potential to create long-term impacts to the naturalness characteristics of this unit. Naturalness is defined in BLM Manual 6310 as “affected primarily by the forces of nature.” Areas that have received a mastication or hydro-axe type vegetation treatment are largely perceived as unnatural in appearance and may take several growing seasons to appear largely natural again. To mitigate this long term impact on the naturalness of unit-5, it is recommended that, until a management decision is made on unit-5, that mastication or hydro-axe type vegetation treatments not be conducted within lands with wilderness characteristics unit-5. Other types of vegetation treatments and prescribed fires should blend with the naturalness of the landscape with unit-5 and not impact other wilderness characteristics over long term periods. There are no anticipated long-term impacts to the other wilderness characteristics such as size, solitude, or primitive recreational opportunities as a result of the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Effects: Combined with other activities within the Proposed Action there are no anticipated cumulative long-term impacts to lands with wilderness characteristics as a result of this alternative.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: By not implementing the Proposed Action, there would be no impacts to lands with wilderness characteristics as a result of this alternative.

Cumulative Effects: None identified as a result of this alternative.

Mitigation: None.

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Affected Environment: The Proposed Action is located within both productive and dry exposure stand classes of pinyon-juniper, forest interface and pinyon woodlands as defined by a survey performed in 2003-2005 by White River Field Office personnel. Productive exposure types occur on primarily lower gradient slopes and on north and east aspects. Growth rates are higher in these areas due to soil features which allow for effective use of precipitation. Dry exposure types occur when slopes and soil features do not allow for the retention of precipitation. The growth rates within these areas are low and most generally the trees present are mature. These habitat types are further broken down based on the age class of the stand. In this case the affected stands are mature, young, disturbed, and old growth. Mature pinyon-juniper trees on productive exposure establish themselves as the dominant plant community on the site. Young pinyon-juniper trees are a component of the plant community or encroach into sagebrush and mountain shrub communities in the absence of reproduction through time and will eventually establish as the dominant plant community. Old growth stands feature trees that have lived a full life expectancy in the absence of fire or other disturbance. Mature stands are valuable locally as a source of fire wood. Encroachment sites of young pinyon trees are valuable for Christmas tree harvest and posts for fence construction.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: At this time it is uncertain how many acres of woodlands will be removed as a result of the Proposed Action treatments. When treatment areas are selected, a more accurate acreage calculation of woodlands removed will be performed.

Following reclamation of treatments sites it is expected that pinyon-juniper will again invade sites within 50-70 years and would develop into mature stands within 200-300 years. Impacts would be long-term until woodlands regenerate successfully. However, if treatment areas are followed up on with additional treatments, woodlands will not fully regenerate within the area.

Cumulative Effects: Removal of mature and middle-aged woodlands would reduce the potential for outbreak of woodland diseases and pest infestations. By reducing the stand size of juniper trees in areas historically included in sagebrush and grass communities, it would increase the open areas preferred as foraging areas by wildlife and livestock. Increasing the open areas would additionally increase pollinator habitat for SSPS.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The No Action Alternative would have no conceivable influence on woodlands.

Cumulative Effects: The No Action Alternative would have no conceivable cumulative effect on woodlands.

Mitigation: None

RANGELAND MANAGEMENT

Affected Environment: The proposed planning area overlaps varying portions of several grazing allotments as shown in Table 6. Livestock operators are authorized to graze livestock in their respective allotments from the spring through in some cases mid-winter. These are typical seasons of use for the big sagebrush, pinyon/juniper, and mountain-shrub dominated rangelands of the proposed project planning area. These rangeland types also have a relatively high probability of burning in wildfire events. There are various range improvement projects such as fences, springs, ponds, storage tanks, windmills, other water developments, water lines, and livestock handling facilities throughout the proposed planning area.

Table 6. Livestock Grazing Allotments Overlapped by Project Area

Allotment Name	Allotment Number	Total BLM Acres in allotment	Livestock Operator	Total BLM Authorized AUMs
Piceance Creek	02789	8,880	Piceance Creek Ranch	1,043
W Stewart Gulch	02822	19,680	Oldland Brothers Ranch	2,016
MTW	02935	17,750	MTW Ranch	1,399
Slash EV	06023	30,680	Slash EV Ranch	3,836
Fawn Creek	06024	19,270	LOV Ranch	1,749
Black Sulphur	06029	15,770	Vaughn, LOV, and Mantle Ranches	1,189
Square S	06027	59,740	LOV Ranch and Mantle Ranch	3,522
Reagles	06026	18,960	WPX and Mantle Ranch	952

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Where prescribed fire projects are implemented in the short term there would be a temporary loss of forage for two to three growing seasons until seeded and existing native forage species establish and recover. Livestock grazing would generally be deferred or modified in treatment areas during this period requiring grazing permittees to make adjustments in their livestock management. Range improvement projects could be damaged or destroyed by fire. Where mechanical treatments are implemented there would be less if any short term forage loss and deferral periods could be shorter depending on existing herbaceous vegetation in treatment areas and the extent of follow-up seeding. Impacts to range improvements would be minimal and avoidable with mechanical treatments.

Cumulative Effects: As discussed in the WRFO Normal Year Fire Rehabilitation Plan EA (CO-110-2005-038-EA), historically, grazing preference on allotments has not been adjusted upward as a result of either prescribed or substantial wildfire burns. Under the Proposed Action, burns would not be assessed for an increase in grazing preference on the allotment on which they occurred because such fires merely compensate for the rate of forage loss which continues to occur as a result of big sagebrush and juniper encroachment and other land use and management practices particularly oil and gas exploration and development. Relative to this, there would be no considerable difference in livestock grazing between the No Action Alternative and the Proposed Action.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The impacts under this alternative would be similar to those under the Proposed Action in the short term because fuels treatment projects would still be proposed. The principal difference being that analysis would be done on a project by project basis.

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be essentially the same as under the Proposed Action.

Mitigation: None.

RECREATION

Affected Environment: The Proposed Action occurs within the White River Extensive Recreation Management Area (ERMA) which covers the entire WRFO. The BLM custodially manages the ERMA to provide for unstructured recreation activities such as hunting, dispersed camping, hiking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, and off-highway vehicle use. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) is used by the BLM to provide a framework for integrating recreation opportunities and non-recreation activities on public lands so that managers can make sound land use decisions. The BLM approach to ROS applies criteria to a land area's physical, social, and managerial parameters to describe the existing conditions that define a land area's capability and suitability for providing a particular range of recreational experience opportunities. The Proposed Action is located mostly in the ROS classification area of Semi-Primitive Motorized. Areas within this classification are characterized by a largely natural appearance and are accessible by foot, horseback, bike or motor vehicle generally on native-surfaced roads or gravel. Interaction with other visitors is relatively low. There are a few small areas along Piceance Creek and Willow Creek within the Proposed Action located in the ROS classification area of Rural (R) which consists of a substantially modified natural environment. Resource modification, development, and use are obvious in these rural areas. There are also a few small portions of the Proposed Action in Black Sulphur Creek, Hunter Creek, and Willow Creek areas located in Roaded Natural ROS classification which means setting consists of areas near improved and maintained roads. While these areas are mostly natural in appearance, some human modifications are evident, with moderate numbers of people, visible management controls, and developments. The primary recreation activity in these areas is upland big game hunting and associated dispersed camping from late August through December of each year with peak use from mid-October through mid-November. The Proposed Action is located within the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Game Management Unit (GMU) 22,

which is a somewhat popular big game hunting area where hunters have good opportunities to pursue both mule deer and elk. There are 13 Special Recreation Permits (SRPs) for commercially outfitting and guiding for mountain lion hunting which are permitted for all BLM lands within the WRFO. There are four SRPs for commercially outfitting and guiding for big game permitted on extensive public lands within the proposed project area. Viewing wild horses as a recreational activity does occur in these areas, but at a relatively low level. Off highway vehicle (OHV) recreational riding occurs at a fairly low level within the Proposed Action during the spring and summer months as well.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Mechanical vegetation treatments, prescribed fire, and seeding treatments could impact the quality of desired big game hunting experiences if conducted at the location these recreational activities are taking place and at the same time. The proposed vegetation activities could have potential to displace big game and also affect the quality of dispersed camping. It is likely that the proposed activities will be conducted within the project area in relatively small areas of 5,000 acres or less and of relatively short temporary duration. If this is the case, then those associated with big game hunting should have opportunities to pursue big game in areas on public lands within GMU 22 that are not near the vegetation treatment activities. It is expected that there may be a small number of those associated with big game hunting that are temporarily displaced from small localized areas for one hunting season if vegetation treatments are located in the same place and at the same time of their hunting season. For other recreational activities within the project area there may be minor impacts such as minor travel route delays but these impacts are expected to be rare, temporary and very short in overall duration and of relatively small size. After a vegetation treatment there are not any expected direct impacts to recreational opportunities or experiences. The indirect impacts to recreationalists post-treatment may be beneficial. These proposed vegetation treatments are planned to result in less fuel loading and a healthier ecosystem. This should result in a safer environment to recreate in and improved wildlife habitats which could result in improved long term hunting opportunities.

Cumulative Effects: Combined with other activities occurring within the project area, the Proposed Action may incrementally contribute to temporary increased impacts on recreational opportunities and experiences in relatively small localized areas over short time periods.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative:

Direct and Indirect Effects: By not implementing the Proposed Action there would be no direct impacts to existing recreational opportunities and experiences. Indirectly, by not implementing vegetation treatments in this area, this could result in increased fuel loads and unimproved wildlife habitat. This could result in a somewhat less safe environment to recreate in and no improvement to long term hunting opportunities.

Cumulative Effects: None identified.

Mitigation: None.

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TRIBES, INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, OR AGENCIES CONSULTED:

Southern Ute Indian Tribe: Jimmy Newton, Jr. Chairman

Southern Ute Indian Tribe: Alden Naranjo, NAGPRA Coordinator

Ute Mountain Ute Tribe: Gary Hayes, Chairman

Ute Mountain Ute Tribe: Terry Knight, SR., NAGPRA Representative and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO)

Uintah and Ouray Business Council: Gordon Howell, Chairman

Uintah and Ouray Ute Tribe: Betsy Chappoose, NAGPRA coordinator

Shoshone Business Council: Darwin St. Clair, Jr., Chairman

Wind River Shoshone Tribe: Wilfred Ferris, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer.

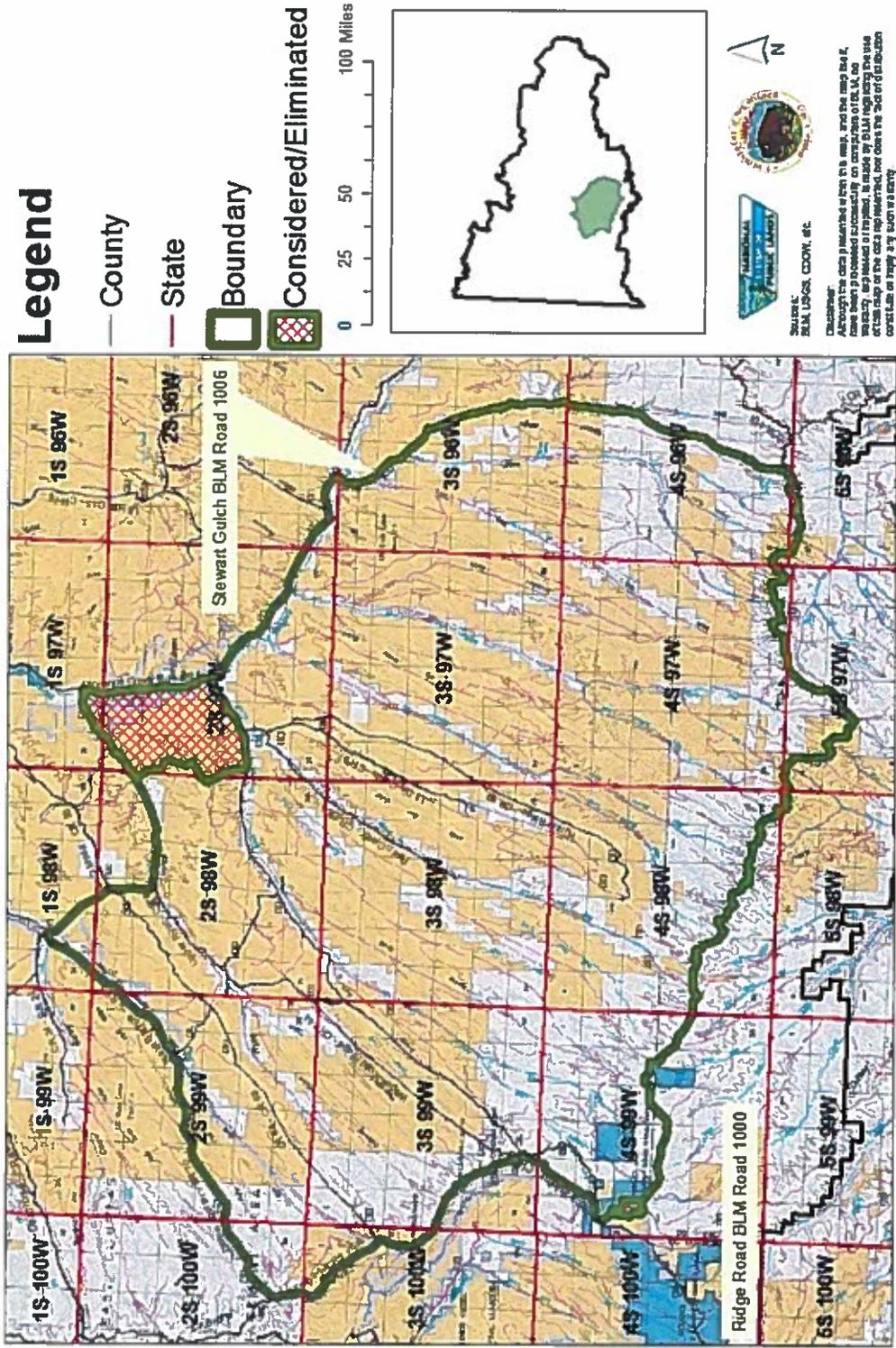
INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW:

Name	Title	Area of Responsibility	Date Signed
Bob Lange	Hydrologist	Air Quality; Surface and Ground Water Quality; Floodplains, Hydrology, and Water Rights; Soils	05/19/2014
Heather Woodruff	Ecologist	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern; Special Status Plant Species; Forest Management	04/08/2014
Michael Selle	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources; Native American Religious Concerns; Paleontological Resources	5/29/2014
Mary Taylor	Rangeland Management Specialist	Invasive, Non-Native Species; Vegetation; Rangeland Management	05/07/2014
Lisa Belmonte	Wildlife Biologist	Migratory Birds; Special Status Animal Species; Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife; Wetlands and Riparian Zones	06/26/2014
Kyle Frary	Natural Resource Specialist	Hazardous or Solid Wastes	04/29/2014
Aaron Grimes	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Wilderness; Visual Resources; Access and Transportation; Recreation,	05/09/2014
Kyle Frary	Fire Management Specialist	Fire Management	01/27/2014
Paul Daggett	Mining Engineer	Geology and Minerals	04/22/2014
Stacey Burke	Realty Specialist	Realty	04/25/2014
Melissa J. Kindall	Range Technician	Wild Horse Management	03/31/2014
Kyle Frary	Fire Management Specialist	Project Lead – Document Preparer	07/01/2014
Heather Sauls	Planning & Environmental Coordinator	NEPA Compliance	07/13/2014

ATTACHMENTS:

Figure 1: Map of the Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project

Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project (192,418 Acres) Figure 1



**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
White River Field Office
220 E Market St
Meeker, CO 81641**

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0052-EA**

BACKGROUND

The BLM is proposing to treat vegetation across the Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project Area using prescribed fire, mechanical methods, and seeding to restore the landscape to its desired plant community while specifically reducing fuel loading and reducing pinyon-juniper encroachment into sagebrush disclimax parks. A single treatment method may be used within a site or a combination of treatment methods.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the Proposed Action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. An environmental impact statement is therefore not required.

Context

The project is a site-specific action directly involving BLM administered public lands that do not in and of itself have international, national, regional, or state-wide importance.

Intensity

The following discussion is organized around the 10 Significance Criteria described at 40 CFR 1508.27. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this Proposed Action:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The benefit of the reduction of hazardous fuels and reducing pinyon-juniper encroachment is high. The adverse effects of fuels reduction may potentially remove pollinator habitat and nesting sites causing indirect impacts to certain species.

2. The degree to which the Proposed Action affects public health or safety.

Reducing fuels allows fire personnel to have more control over the management of wildfires and improves the ability to protect life and property.

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

Within the project area there are numerous cultural resources. These will be mitigated through multiple design features and mostly avoided.

4. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The Proposed Action poses a very low effect on the human environment. The project is not controversial. The hazardous fuels reduction program is in wide use in the WRFO and across the nation, for the protection of resources.

5. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk.

No highly uncertain or unknown risks to the human environment were identified during analysis of the Proposed Action.

6. Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The Proposed Action neither establishes a precedent for future BLM actions with significant effects nor represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. The process for fuels treatments is outlined in the 1997 WRFO RMP (page 2-12).

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

The Proposed Action is not related to any other actions that are currently being considered.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Cultural sites will be identified prior to any treatment and will be avoided.

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

No endangered or threatened species or its habitat will be adversely affected as a result of this Proposed Action.

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

Neither the Proposed Action nor impacts associated with it violate any laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:



Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

07/16/14

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
White River Field Office
220 E Market St
Meeker, CO 81641**

DECISION RECORD

PROJECT NAME: Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0052-EA

DECISION

It is my decision to implement the Proposed Action as mitigated in DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0052-EA, authorizing the use of hazardous fuels reduction in the Southern Piceance.

Mitigation Measures

Design features that minimize impacts from the project have been incorporated into the Proposed Action.

COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS & CONFORMANCE WITH THE LAND USE PLAN

This decision is in compliance with the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. It is also in conformance with the 1997 White River Record of Decision/Approved Resource Management Plan.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The Proposed Action was analyzed in DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2014-0052-EA and it was found to have no significant impacts, thus an EIS is not required.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

External scoping was conducted by posting this project on the WRFO's on-line National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) register on 04/02/2014 and a press release was issued. Additionally individual letters were mailed on 04/02/2014 to all parties who are tied to any ownership or involvement within the project boundary. Comments were addressed through analysis.

RATIONALE

Analysis of the Proposed Action has concluded that there are no significant negative impacts and that it meets Colorado Standards for Public Land Health. Reducing fuel loads helps implement decisions from both the RMP and FMP regarding the management of wildfires.

ADMINISTRATIVE REMEDIES

Any appeal of this decision must follow the procedures set forth in 43 CFR Part 4. Within 30 days of the decision, a Notice of Appeal must be filed in the office of the Authorized Officer at White River Field Office, 220 East Market St., Meeker, CO 81641 with copies sent to the Regional Solicitor, Rocky Mountain Region, 755 Parfet St., Suite 151, Lakewood, CO 80215,

and to the Department of the Interior, Board of Land Appeals, 801 North Quincy St., MS300-QC, Arlington, VA, 22203. If a statement of reasons for the appeal is not included with the notice, it must be filed with the Interior Board of Land Appeals at the above address within 30 days after the Notice of Appeal is filed with the Authorized Officer.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:

Kent E. Walter

Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

07/16/14