

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

Proposed Action & Alternatives for Scoping

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

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 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 and PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT:

Scoping is the primary mechanism used by the BLM to identify issues. Internal scoping was initiated when the project was preliminarily presented to the WRFO interdisciplinary team on January 7, 2014 for an initial review. External scoping is being conducted by posting this project on the WRFO's on-line National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) register on April 1, 2014, for 15 days. During scoping, the BLM is looking for feedback from the public regarding issues, impacts, and potential alternatives that should be addressed in the environmental assessment (EA).

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 193,384 acres (Figure 1) is predominantly within the D5 Cathedral Bluffs/Roan Plateau Fire Management Polygon (160,546 acres), but also contains the C6 Lower Piceance Basin (27,472 acres) and the B7 Piceance Creek (5,369 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. 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, 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.

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 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 or maintain the landscape to its desired ecological condition. Seeding of wildland fires and prescribe 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 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 site-specific analysis from Field Office specialists, but may be able to meet NEPA requirements through a DNA.
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. The BLM or agent acting on behalf of the BLM would complete all fueling of equipment outside of any drainage.
4. Report all spills of fuels, lubricants, etc. to the WRFO Hazardous Materials Coordinator within 24 hours.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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.
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.
9. ATV, UTV and fire engine travel off existing trails and roads will be limited to the greatest extent practicable. When off trail and 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.
10. 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.
11. No fuel staging areas or refueling sites would be allowed within 200 feet of any water body.
12. All activity shall cease when soils or road surfaces become saturated to a depth of three inches unless otherwise approved by the Authorized Officer.
13. Prior to any treatment activity, the BLM will coordinate with existing right-of-way holders.
14. 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 SSPS are found during the surveys, a consultation with FWS may be required or special mitigations may be applied to avoid impacting the species.

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:

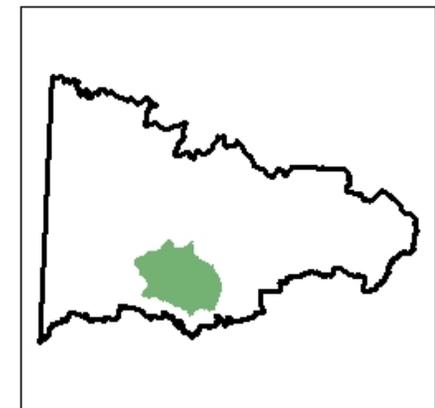
1. Herbicide treatments on a broadcast scale was considered but eliminated from further analysis due to the inability to achieve hazardous fuels reduction objectives. Using this type of treatment would create pockets of standing dead fuel and increase the chances of a large wildfire.
2. A larger scale project boundary was considered but not carried forward for further analysis due to the current WRFO workloads and priorities.
3. A Section of the northern project boundary located in Township 2S Range 97W was considered but not carried forward due to multiple resource concerns.

Southern Piceance Fuels Reduction Project (193,384 Acres) Figure 1

Legend

- County
- State
-  Considered/Eliminated
-  Boundary

0 20 40 80 Miles



Sources:
BLM, USGS, CDOW, etc.

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