

# **DRAFT**

## **Bureau of Land Management**

### **Healthy Forests Initiative**

#### **Environmental Assessment Communication Plan**

##### **March 2003**

## **Introduction**

### **History**

The American people, their property, and our environment, particularly the forests and rangelands of the West, are threatened by catastrophic wildland fires. The last several fire seasons are some of the worst in modern history. Hundreds of millions of trees and valuable habitat are destroyed each year by severe wildfires. These unnaturally extreme fires are caused by a crisis of deteriorating forest and rangeland health, the result of a century of well-intentioned but misguided fire management. Renewed efforts to restore our public lands to healthy conditions are needed.

America's public lands have undergone radical changes during the last century due to the suppression of wildland fires. Today, the forests and rangelands of the West have become unnaturally dense, and ecosystem health has suffered significantly. When coupled with seasonal droughts, unhealthy forests and rangelands overloaded with fuels are vulnerable to unnaturally severe wildfires. Currently, 190 million acres of public land are at increased risk of catastrophic wildfires.

### **President's Health Forests Initiative**

In August 2002, President Bush announced the Healthy Forests Initiative, directing the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to develop administrative and legislative measures that will help reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire to America's forests and rangelands. The initiative builds on a historic ten-year plan for reducing wildfire risks adopted last spring by federal agencies in cooperation with western and southern governors, county commissioners, state foresters and tribal officials.

The Healthy Forests Initiative will implement core components of the National Fire Plan's 10-year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan. This historic plan, which was adopted in the spring of 2002 by federal agencies and western governors, in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials, calls for more active forest and rangeland management. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, planned burns and forest restoration projects. In addition, CEQ has issued guidance to Interior and Agriculture establishing an improved and focused process for conducting environmental assessments (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for healthy forest projects. In total, the two agencies will undertake 15 pilot projects to establish the effectiveness of these expedited procedures. The Bureau of Land Management is leading 7 pilot projects, the Forest Service is heading up 5 projects while the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Fish and Wildlife Service are each responsible for 1 pilot project.

### **The Environmental Assessment Pilot Projects**

The EA pilot projects, proposed by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior, focus on priority hazardous fuels treatments. These fuels treatment projects will be accomplished in collaboration with state, local and tribal governments, adjacent private land owners and interested citizens. The proposed fuels treatment projects will not include the construction of new permanent roads or other permanent infrastructure and will only include timber sales if the primary purpose of the proposed project is to reduce hazardous fuels buildup. The proposed procedures will not be used for activities that would have an adverse effect on threatened and endangered species or their critical habitats or archeological or historical sites. In all, these projects will help

in restoring forest and rangeland ecosystems and protecting communities by preventing catastrophic wildfires.

### **Other Components of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative**

In addition to the EA pilot projects, the Healthy Forests Initiative will also contain several administrative and legislative components. These components include:

- Reducing the number of overlapping environmental reviews by combining project analysis and establishing a process for concurrent project clearance by federal agencies.
- Developing guidance for weighing the short-term risks against the long-term benefits of fuels treatment and restoration projects.

On February 13, 2002, Congress authorized agencies to enter into long-term stewardship contracts. Stewardship contracts allow contractors to keep products, such as small diameter wood, in exchange for the service of thinning trees and brush and removing dead wood. Long-term contracts up to 10 years, provide contractors the incentive to invest in equipment and infrastructure needed to productively use material generated from forest thinning, such as small-diameter logs, to make wood products or to produce energy. President Bush will continue to work with Congress on legislation to further accomplish implementation of forest health projects.

Other legislative items being considered include:

- Expedite implementation of fuels reduction and forest restoration projects, particularly in high priority areas, consistent with more targeted legislation passed in July.
- Ensure that judges consider long-term risks of harm to people, property and the environment in challenges based on short-term risks of forest health projects.

These proposals will help land managers work more effectively with the public and improve their ability to protect communities and the environment from devastating wildfires.

## **Audiences**

### **External Audiences**

Specific external audiences at the local and state level will be identified by each project office. Local and statewide audiences for each project should include: Congressional delegations, Governor's offices, county and state government representatives, interested Tribes, other agencies, private landowners, interest groups and interested citizens. At the national level external audiences include: Congressional delegations interested in the HFI, the Western Governors Association, the National Association of Counties Organization, the National Association of State Foresters, the Public Lands Foundation, the Department of the Interior, and other national groups interested in the BLM HFI pilot projects. The primary point of contact for external audiences for each project is the Field Office Manager leading the pilot effort. These are identified below.

**Horsethief Hazard Fuels Reduction Project:** Sandy Brooks, Billings Field Manager, 406.896.5013

**Interagency Pahvant Fuels Project:** Rex Rowley, Fillmore Field Manager, 435.743.3100

**Portneuf Fuels Management Project:** Phil Damon, Pocatello Field Manager, 208.478.6364

**Mesquite Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project:** Mark Morse, Field Manager, 702.515.5220

**Rogue River Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project:** Abbie Jossie, Grants Pass Field Manager, 541.618.2303

**Weaver Mountain Fuels Treatment Project:** Teri Raml, Phoenix Field Manager, 623.580.5500

**White River Powerline Project:** Kent Walter, Meeker Field Manager, 970.878.3802

## **Internal Audiences and Points of Contact**

Internally, information regarding each project will be shared among the project offices, state offices where projects are located, the Washington Office Planning Group, Forestry Group, Range/Soils/Water and Air Group, Wildlife and Botany Group, Cultural Heritage Group, and the Director's office.

In addition, specific points of contact for the Office of Fire and Aviation and the Washington Office and a minimum of four points of contact for each pilot project are identified below. These points of contact will be the folks responsible for coordinating information requests received from the Department of the Interior and the Council on Environmental Quality.

### **Washington Office**

Art Dufault, Director Office Fuels Liaison, 202.208.6668  
Anne Jeffery, Deputy Director Office of Fire and Aviation, 202.208.4147  
Jay Thietten, Senior Advisor, 202.208.5099

### **Office of Fire and Aviation, Boise**

Tim Murphy, Deputy Director Office of Fire and Aviation, 208.387.5446  
Wini Sorensen, Group Manager Fire Planning and Resources, 208.387.5154  
Ted Milesnick, Chief Fire Planning and Research, Main EA project point of contact, 208.387.5198  
Deb Rawhouser, Environmental Analyst, EA project - back-up point of contact, 208.387.5165  
Roy Johnson, Chief Fuels Management, EA project - Secondary back-up point of contact, 208.287.5163  
Don Smurthwaite, acting Chief, External Affairs, 208.387.5895

### **Horsethief Hazard Fuels Reduction Project**

Sandy Brooks, Billings Field Manager, primary point of contact, 406.896.5013  
Jay Parks, Billings acting Assistant Field Manager, secondary point of contact, 406.896.5244  
Brad Sauer, Project Lead, third point of contact, 406.538.7461  
Mary Apple, Public Affairs Officer, 406.896.5011

### **Interagency Pahvant Hazard Fuels Reduction Project**

Susan Marzec, State Office Fuels Specialist, primary point of contact, 801.539.4028  
Glen Nebeker, Fillmore Assistant Field Manager, secondary point of contact,  
Diane Freeman, Project Lead, third point of contact, 435.896.1050  
Public Affairs Officer

### **Portneuf Fuels Management Project**

Phil Damon, Pocatello Field Manager, primary point of contact, 208.478.6364  
Bill Swann, Project Lead, secondary point of contact, 208.478.6341  
David Howell, Public Affairs Officer, third point of contact, 208.524.7559  
Sky Huffaker, Public Affairs Officer, 208.478.6352

### **Mesquite Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project**

Butch Hayes, State Fuels Coordinator, primary point of contact, 775.861.6479  
Sandy Gregory, State Fuels, secondary point of contact, 775.861.6414  
Mark Morse, Field Manager, third point of contact, 702.515.5220  
, Public Affairs Officer

### **Rogue River Fuels Reduction Project**

Abbie Jossie, Grants Pass Field Manager, primary point of contact, 541.618.2303

Doug Henry, Project Lead, secondary point of contact, 541.618.2276

Erik Christensen, State Fuels Coordinator, third point of contact, 503.808.6592

Michael Campbell, Public Affairs Officer, 503.808.6031

### **Weaver Mountain Fuels Treatment Project**

Glenn Joki, Fire Management Officer, Project Lead, primary point of contact, 623.580.5513

Sherry Hirst, Planning and Environmental Coordinator, secondary point of contact, 928.692.4435

Teri Raml, Field Manager, third point of contact, 623.580.5500

Nancy Guerrero, Public Affairs Officer, 623.580.5509

### **White River Powerline Project**

Jim Cagney, Meeker Assistant Field Manager, primary point of contact, 970.878.3803

Dan Sokal, Zone Fuels Lead, secondary point of contact, 970.947.2810

Kent Walter, Field Manager, third point of contact, 970.878.3802

, Public Affairs Officer

## **Products**

The following products will be available via internal and external websites by the early March 2003:

- The external audience website that will include: project description fact sheets and maps, photos, external contact list, project action plan and schedule, links to the Council on Environmental Quality and White House websites, links to field office websites when available, an introduction and summary of the BLM implementation of the HFI EA pilot projects. The website will be linked to the NIFC homepage, the Washington Office homepage and HFI homepage.
- The internal audience website will include the above, plus an expanded contact list (showing the extended BLM contact list), talking points, weekly updates, and the communication plan. It will include all national products.
- Fact sheets for all projects. The fact sheet format is found in Appendix A.
- Healthy Forests Initiative EA pilot project Questions and Answers sheet. A general questions and answers sheet is provided in Appendix B.
- A Healthy Forests Initiative power point presentation. The power point field is found in Appendix C. This presentation gives a general overview of the various administrative remedies being taken related to hazardous fuels reduction projects on public lands.

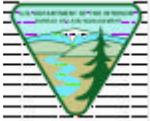
## **Key Messages**

The key messages regarding the EA pilot projects are provided in the bullet statements below and in responses to the questions posed in Appendix B. It is critical that the following messages be presented consistently among offices.

- The EA guidance from CEQ does not circumvent NEPA. It re-enforces the purpose of conducting an environmental analysis and stresses the four required components of the analysis.
- One of the expected products of the pilot projects is a shorter analysis document completed more quickly.

- The BLM has seven pilot projects that will test streamlining the analysis process using the CEQ guidance. BLM will identify what works, what doesn't and will work with other agencies to develop guidance around the lessons learned to improve agency efficiency in the future.
- The process does not lessen public involvement.
- The overall focus is on-the-ground, active management.
- The EA pilot projects are part of overall implementation of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative.

**Appendix A**  
**EA Pilot Project Fact Sheet Format**



## **Rogue River Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project**

### **The President's Healthy Forests Initiative**

In August 2002, President Bush announced the Healthy Forests Initiative, directing the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to develop administrative and legislative measures that will help reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire to America's forests and rangelands. The initiative builds on a historic ten-year plan for reducing wildfire risks adopted last spring by federal agencies in cooperation with western and southern governors, county commissioners, state foresters and tribal officials.

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In December of 2002, the President announced work on the Model Environmental Assessment (EA) component of the Healthy Forests Initiative. The focus of the current EA Guidance is on Forest Health Projects. This included direction from the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) that provides a framework for administratively streamlining the process to allow for more efficient management of fuels reduction efforts and fire-adapted ecosystem restoration projects.

### **Rogue River Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project**

In the Northwest, the Rogue River Hazardous Fuel Reduction Project within the Hellgate Recreation Section of the Rogue National Wild & Scenic River was subsequently chosen as the only project in Oregon.

The purpose of this project is to proactively reduce and manage the wildfire/fuel hazard within the approximately 8,000 acres of public and private land which comprises the Hellgate Recreation Section of the Rogue National Wild & Scenic River. This project will create a sustainable mosaic of vegetation and fuel types/profiles that will facilitate protection of property and the scenic, recreational and fisheries values for which the Hellgate Recreation Section of the Rogue River was designated.

The designated corridor includes portions of three National Fire Plan designated Communities at Risk. Within the designated corridor, there are approximately 190 residences most of which are in 12 localized areas. Two designated National Historic Sites are located within the corridor. The BLM will work closely with Rogue River Wild & Scenic River user groups, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), Josephine County, and residents and private landowners within the project area. Because ODF has fire prevention and suppression responsibilities for the lands in the project area, we anticipate extensively involvement of ODF during neighborhood planning and project implementation.

On BLM lands, project implementation is anticipated to start in the fall of 2003 contingent upon fire season work restrictions. Implementation will focus on the areas identified to have the greatest values at risk. The Medford BLM District Office anticipates completion within two years after beginning their work.

**Appendix B**  
**Healthy Forests Initiative**  
**Focused Environmental Assessment Pilot Project**  
**Questions and Answers**

**Overall Presidential Healthy Forests Initiative**

**1. What is the President's Healthy Forests Initiative?**

The overall purpose of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative is to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildland fires and to improve forest health while strengthening communities. On August 22, 2002, President Bush announced a series of new administrative steps to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires and improve our ability to protect communities and the health of our nation's forests. President Bush met with Interior Secretary Norton, Agriculture Secretary Veneman and Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Chairman James Connaughton and directed them to take several important steps to implement the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. (For a complete copy of the Healthy Forests Initiative and detailed information about the Initiative see: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/healthyforests/>).

The actions included in the Healthy Forests Initiative are expected to reduce unnecessary red tape and needless delays that have often delayed efforts to reduce the threat devastating wildfires and insect infestations that damage both public and private lands. The new procedures will ensure that needed environmental reviews and public review processes are conducted in the most efficient and effective way possible.

**2. What administrative actions are taking place that could affect the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) hazardous fuels treatment or fire rehabilitation projects?**

Several administrative actions are taking place to implement the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. Those related to BLM hazardous fuels treatment projects and/or BLM wildland fire rehabilitation projects include the following:

**Focused Environmental Assessment Guidance from CEQ**

- CEQ provided guidance for the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to develop an improved and more focused process for reviewing forest health projects. The agencies within the departments will review 15 hazardous fuels treatment projects to demonstrate the effectiveness of these new procedures.

**Categorical Exclusions**

- Two "Categorical Exclusions" proposed by the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior related to hazardous fuels reduction and restoration/stabilization of areas burned by wildland fire. The proposed notice was in the December 16, 2002 Federal Register. Comments received from the public are currently being analyzed. A final decision based on comments received is expected in mid to late April 2003.

## Proposed Notice Regarding Hearings and Appeals

This action was taken on December 16, 2002, to promote early and more meaningful public participation and timely decisions regarding forestland, rangeland and woodland health projects. Public comments about the proposed notice are currently being analyzed and a decision based on comments received is expected mid to late April 2003.

## Fuel Treatment Reviews and the Endangered Species Act

- The Departments of the Interior and Commerce will also work closely together to improve the process for reviewing fuels treatment projects affected by the Endangered Species Act. This will help expedite fuel treatment projects while providing wildlife protection and restoring habitats.

## **2. Why is the President's Healthy Forests Initiative being given so high a priority?**

The 2002 fire season was one of the worst in the last 50 years. More than 7.2 million acres burned almost twice the ten-year average. America's public lands have undergone radical changes during the last century due to the suppression of fires and a lack of active forest and rangeland management. Many forests and rangelands have become unnaturally dense, and are vulnerable to severe wildfires. Currently, 190 million acres of public land and nearby communities are at increased risk of extreme fires.

Land managers must do more to reduce the threat of catastrophic fires. Despite record levels of federal support for firefighting, efforts to tackle the root cause of these fires through active forest management are too often hindered by unnecessary procedural delays and litigation. One agency, the USDA Forest Service, estimates that planning and assessment consumes 40 percent of its budget at the national forest level. Clearly, the environmental analysis process must be expedited, freeing funds for more field work.

The combination of catastrophic fire potential, the need to reduce fuels, and administrative procedures that impede forest health work on-the-ground is why the HFI is such a high priority.

## **BLM Focused Environmental Assessment Pilot Projects**

### **1. Why is BLM taking the lead on 7 hazardous fuels reduction pilot projects?**

In December of 2002, CEQ Director James Connaughton sent a memo to the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior that provided guidance and an outline for environmental assessments (EAs) of forest health projects. CEQ had been directed by President Bush to develop a model for EAs dealing with forest health projects. The CEQ guidance states, "Field staff ... will use the EA outline in the field over the next several months to complete EAs for different types of forest and rangeland health projects." Based on that direction, the fire management agencies were asked to select fuel reduction projects that could incorporate the guidance.

The BLM submitted several projects for consideration as pilot projects. Other fire-management agencies also submitted projects for consideration. The DOI selected seven BLM projects. The

Forest Service is leading 5 pilot projects. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service each have one pilot project.

## **2. Where are the Bureau of Land Management's pilot projects?**

BLM has seven pilot projects. They are the:

- Arizona: Weaver Mountain Fuels Treatment Project in the Phoenix Field Office,
- Colorado: White River Powerline Project in the Meeker Field Office,
- Idaho: Portneuf Fuels Management Project in the Pocatello Field Office,
- Montana: Horsethief Hazard Fuels Reduction Project in the Billings Field Office,
- Nevada: Mesquite Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project in the Las Vegas Field Office,
- Oregon: Rogue National Wild & Scenic River Hellgate Recreation Section Hazardous Fuel Reduction and Management Project in the Grants Pass Field Office, and the
- Utah: Interagency Pavhant Hazard Fuels Reduction Project in the Fillmore Field Office.

## **3. Can BLM use the new CEQ EA Guidance on other projects?**

Yes. BLM offices can use the focused EA guidance recently received from CEQ as long as the office ensures compliance with existing BLM regulations and policies in the BLM National Environmental Policy Act Handbook (H-1790-1).

## **4. What is the purpose of these EA pilot areas?**

The BLM pilot areas are simply, test projects to determine how best to implement the focused Environmental Assessment guidance outlined by CEQ. All proposed projects are hazardous fuels reduction actions designed to better protect communities, natural and cultural resources, and make conditions safer for the public and firefighters. The focused analysis process will allow us to initiate needed fuel reduction work in these areas in 2003.

## **5. How were these projects selected?**

BLM offices were asked to nominate hazardous fuels reduction projects. Among the criteria considered by the DOI in selecting projects were the severity of hazardous fuel accumulations; communities needing protection from catastrophic wildland fire; and proximity to community watersheds. The preliminary review of the projects had to suggest that Environmental Assessment level analysis would be necessary for the project. The project also had to be a new project where NEPA analysis beyond the initial issue identification stage had not been conducted.

## **6. What guidance did CEQ provide?**

The CEQ guidance stresses the need for focused environmental analysis. It reminds agencies that the purpose of an Environmental Assessment (EA) is to determine whether or not the proposed action and its alternatives will have a significant effect, (as defined by NEPA), on the human environment. If a significant effect is found, the agency must modify the proposal or conduct an Environmental Impact Statement. If a significant impact is not found, the agency

signs a "Finding of No Significant Impact" and makes its decision using the agency appropriate document. The guidance stresses that an EA by regulation only requires four specific sections:

1. The Purpose and Need of the proposed action,
2. Alternatives considered and analyzed,
3. Impacts associated with the proposed action and alternatives, and
4. People and agencies consulted during the analysis.

The guidance reminds agencies that only alternatives meeting the purpose and need should be analyzed; that if there is no controversy over the proposed action, alternatives to the proposed action do not need to be analyzed and that the EA document should only be 10 - 15 pages in length. The guidance also emphasizes that the impact analysis should be geared toward determining whether or not there would be a significant impact from the proposed action and/or alternatives.

#### **7. When will the pilot project decisions be made on the BLM?**

The preliminary environmental analysis under the NEPA will be complete for the BLM pilot projects in May 2003 and June 2003. The public will be given a 30 day review and comment period. Following the public review, if there is a "Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)" related to implementation of the selected alternative, the Field Office Manager will sign the FONSI and Decision Record.

Decisions Records and FONSI's are expected to be signed for the projects in Idaho, Nevada, Oregon and Utah in June 2003. The Decision Records for projects in Arizona, Colorado and Montana will be signed no later than July 2003.

#### **8. Will the pilot projects cost more money?**

Extra funding has not been allocated for the pilot projects. Since these are an extremely high priority for the DOI and the BLM, funding for the pilot projects will come through a shifting of BLM fuels treatment priorities. Overall the focused EA process is expected to reduce the amount of time to prepare the actual EA document itself. This will result in a minor savings of dollars that can be used in support of additional hazardous fuels treatment projects.

#### **9. What is a "categorical exclusion"?**

The Council on Environmental Quality allows actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant impact on humans or the environment to be "categorically excluded" from extended environmental analysis. Two new categorical exclusions are proposed by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior – one for addressing hazardous fuels reduction projects and the other addressing rehabilitation and stabilization projects.

#### **10. Are categorical exclusions designed to circumvent the law and allow agencies to conduct activities without full environmental review?**

No. Categorical exclusions will be applied only after strict criteria have been met. A process has been set up by the DOI and Department of Agriculture to identify and prioritize hazardous fuel treatment projects. Projects will not be selected if they have an adverse affect on public

health, threatened and endangered species, historical or cultural resources, watersheds or other extraordinary circumstances. Further, all activities falling under the proposed categorical exclusions must be consistent with agency and departmental procedures, applicable land-use management plans, and meet all federal, state and tribal laws or requirements. Proper consultation with state and federal agencies, such as those required by the Endangered Species Act or National Historic Preservation Act, also must be conducted.

**11. Can categorical exclusion decisions be appealed?**

No. Categorical exclusions are the environmental review documents used by the decision maker in deciding what action to take on-the-ground. The NEPA document itself is not a decision document and therefore cannot be appealed. However, the Decision Record signed by the manager that makes the on-the-ground decision is a document that can be appealed.

**12. Question: Is biomass utilization a consideration in the pilot projects?**

Answer: We won't know the answer for the seven BLM pilot projects until the environmental assessments are completed. It appears that some of the pilot projects may be capable of producing biomass that can be used for commercial purposes.

Certainly, some future fuels reduction projects will produce quantities of biomass that can be used for a variety of non-commercial and commercial purposes. Part of the Bush Administration's Healthy Forests Initiative is to boost local economies through better use of biomass, so that will be an important consideration in future fuels reduction projects.