

Buckskin Valley Vegetation Treatment Project

Finding of No Significant Impact

DOI-BLM-NV-C020-2011-0009-EA

September 2011



Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Sierra Front Field Office is proposing vegetation management treatments designed to restore a balance of sagebrush and woodland ecosystems important for wildlife habitat. The treatments would be implemented over a 10-year period on 7,000 acres of public land on the east side of the Pine Nut Mountains in Lyon and Douglas Counties of western Nevada.

The treatments are needed to restore balance between sagebrush, riparian, and woodland plant communities, all of which provide certain resource values to the landscape including habitats essential for a wide variety of wildlife. As a result of unchecked expansion of pinyon pine and junipers growing into historic sagebrush and riparian sites, the shrub and riparian hardwood communities are at risk of being lost from the landscape, and all three types of plant communities are at risk of catastrophic effects of wildfire.

Sagebrush habitats required for the sage-grouse and other important wildlife species are being lost due to a shift from sagebrush to woodlands and are at risk to exposure to large, intense fires. The sage-grouse, a BLM sensitive species, is also a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act. The *Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan for the Bi-State Plan Area of Nevada and Eastern California* (hereafter referred to as the Bi-State Plan) states that pinyon-juniper encroachment is an existing and foreseeable risk affecting sage-grouse habitat quality and quantity in the Pine Nut Population Management Unit (PMU), and impacts are likely to become permanent and irreversible without appropriate management. The Bi-State Plan recommended conservation action to reduce pinyon and juniper acreage in the Pine Nut PMU and to reclaim approximately 30,000 acres of sagebrush habitat with treatments producing a mixed-age mosaic of sagebrush habitat.

Riparian vegetation is also at risk from being crowded out by conifers and catastrophic fire, and water availability to support riparian plants has been greatly reduced by conifer expansion. Woodlands are threatened by wildfire, and many acres of woodland adjacent to the project area have been severely burned in recent wildfires. Recovery of all plant communities from the impacts of catastrophic fire takes many years, especially for woodland and riparian tree stands such as aspens and cottonwoods.

Land Use Plan Conformance

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Carson City Field Office Resource Management Plan (CRMP) adopted in 2001.

The following decisions in the CRMP pertain to the Proposed Action:

Wildlife -- Desired Outcomes

- Maintain and improve wildlife habitat, including riparian/stream habitats, and reduce habitat conflicts while providing for other appropriate uses. (*Page WLD-2*)

Forestry -- Desired Outcomes

- Forest and woodland management will be based on the principles of multiple use, sustained yield, and ecosystem management. *(Page FOR-1)*
- Sell green pinyon and juniper for fuelwood and fence posts, for personal use, at the rate of up to 5,000 cords and 1,000 posts annually...only in areas where there would be no conflicts, or in areas where the conflicts could be mitigated. *(Page FOR-1)*
- Implementation Level Decisions -- Vegetation manipulations such as chaining, burns, and chemical treatments will be allowed only after attempts have been made to sell or dispose of forest products through forestry sales programs. *(Page FOR-2)*

Fire

- Restore fire as an integral part of the ecosystem, improve the diversity of vegetation and reduce fire hazard fuels. *(Page FIR-2)*

Livestock Grazing

- Maintain or improve the condition of the public rangelands to enhance productivity for all rangeland and watershed values. *(Page LSG-1)*
- Maintain a sufficient quality and diversity of habitat and forage for livestock, wildlife, and wild horses through natural regeneration and/or vegetation manipulation. *(Page LSG-2)*

Riparian

- Prescribe management for riparian and wetland values that is based upon site-specific characteristics and settings. *(Page RIP-1E)*

Finding

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts in the *Buckskin Valley Vegetation Treatment Project Environmental Assessment* (DOI-BLM-NV-C020-2011-0009-EA), I have determined that the Proposed Action would not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, the preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required.

Context:

The affected area of the Proposed Action is 7,000 acres of sagebrush, woodland, and riparian plant communities on the east side of the Pine Nut Mountains. The project area lies entirely within the Pine Nut PMU for sage-grouse and is distant from any developed urban and suburban residential areas. Resource uses in the area are livestock grazing and extensive outdoor recreation. Native Americans highly value the area for traditional cultural uses. The project has been planned with input from the interested public and users of public land and resource management agency wildlife specialists.

Intensity:

1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The Proposed Action is predominantly beneficial; improvements in wildlife habitat and environmental quality are anticipated to occur as a result of implementation of the project. Adverse impacts to wildlife are expected to be short-term and relatively minor in character due to temporary disturbance. Historic and prehistoric cultural resources would be identified through systematic inventories prior to implementation of treatments. Any potentially adverse effects of the Proposed Action will be resolved per Sections 106, 110(f) and 111(a) of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) through application of a Programmatic Agreement (PA) with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer and other stakeholders, which has been signed by all participating parties.

2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

At present, thousands of acres of historically sagebrush plant communities are being converted to woodlands because expansion of woodlands is not being checked by the natural process of wildfire. Fuel loads are so high now in plant communities that the effects of uncontrolled wildfire are expected to be detrimental to natural resources and hazardous to fire personnel and the public. The Proposed Action would resolve this issue and enhance public safety by reducing the risk of catastrophic fire.

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.

No wetlands, park lands, prime or unique farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecological critical areas, or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern would be adversely affected by the Proposed Action. Historic and prehistoric cultural resources would be inventoried and protected by avoidance or modification of the treatments as needed.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The Proposed Action is predominantly beneficial; improvements in resource condition and environmental quality are anticipated to occur as a result of the project's implementation.

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The BLM and other resource management agencies have sufficient experience in implementing vegetation treatments to produce favorable results without high or uncertain risks to resources and the ecosystem.

6) The 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 would not establish a precedent for future actions. Any future proposals to manage vegetation on BLM-managed lands would require separate project-specific NEPA analysis.

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

The Proposed Action is not related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

Historic and prehistoric resources would be identified through systematic inventories as part of the Proposed Action. Any adverse impacts to them from the proposed treatments would be resolved in advance of implementation per Sections 106, 110(f) and 111(a) of NHPA through application of the PA and continued consultation with the Yerington Paiute Tribe. Potential loss of scientific, cultural, and historical resources would be minimal and not significant.

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 ESA of 1973.*

The Proposed Action will have no effect on any federally listed species or their critical habitat.

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

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the CRMP. The Proposed Action would not violate or threaten to violate any federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.


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Date