



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Ely Field Office
HC33 Box 33500 (702 N. Industrial Way)
Ely, Nevada 89301-9408
<http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en.html>



In Reply Refer to:
9214 (NV-044)

Decision Memorandum on Action and for Application of: Categorical Exclusion 1.12

Sacramento Pass Wildland/Urban Interface Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Ely Field Office
White Pine County, Nevada**

Purpose and Need for the Action and Description of the Proposed Action

The purpose and need for the Sacramento Pass Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI) Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project is to: 1) Create a fuel break to reduce the risk of wildfire damage to privately owned property (homes) and public infrastructure (highway) within the vicinity of the project by reducing the wildfire fuel loading within the area; 2) Reduce the threat of stand replacing fire within pinyon/juniper forestland ecological sites (woodlands) by creating openings in the project area disrupting the continuity of the trees.

The area identified for treatment occurs immediately south of Highway 50/6 on the west side of Sacramento Pass in the Snake Range between Spring Valley and Snake Valley approximately 40 to 50 miles southeast of Ely, Nevada. The proposed project treatment area (see attached map) is located at the following legal land descriptions:

Township 15 North, Range 68 East, Sections 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21

The proposed action is to conduct a vegetation thinning project over approximately 500 acres of public land in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) near Sacramento Pass. The treatment is planned to take place within pinyon/juniper and sagebrush vegetation directly to the south and east of US highway 50/6 (Map 1). Tree density would be reduced to approximately 20 to 25 trees per acre. This would result in a tree being left approximately every 42 to 47 feet. Trees left would consist of the larger mature trees greater than 12 inches in diameter at root collar. The smaller saplings and immature trees would be targeted for removal. Manual (chainsaw) and/or mechanical methods (bull hog, feller buncher, or similar piece of equipment that masticates trees) could be used to reduce the tree density.

A phased treatment approach would be used to reduce hazardous fuels within the project area. The phases would involve the use of manual methods to remove excess ladder fuels and prescribed burning.

Phase 1 would involve the manual removal of ladder fuels, primarily single leaf pinyon (*Pinus monophyllus*) and Utah juniper (*Juniperus osteostipa*) that occur in close proximity to privately owned property in the Sacramento Pass Urban Interface area. Pinyon/juniper that occurs within the project area would be thinned to approximately 20-25 trees per acre. Mechanical methods would be used primarily throughout the project area. On steeper slopes hand cutting with chainsaws would be used and slash consisting of small branches (diameter of two inches or less) would be left to degrade naturally.

Phase 2 would involve the removal of slash/biomass created as a result of mechanical methods depending on the type of equipment used in phase 1. If a masticating type of equipment is used, the residue created would be left on site to degrade naturally. If equipment is used that cuts the trees whole, all or a portion of the trees could be piled and disposed of through prescribed burning or usable tree portions could be hauled off site for biomass utilization while unusable portions would be left to degrade naturally or later burned. If slash piles are created they would be removed as soon as possible through the use of prescribed fire. This would reduce the likelihood of the piles becoming infested with insects. The burning would likely occur when there is snow on the ground or after a precipitation event to limit extreme soil heating.

Phase 3 would involve seeding with desirable perennial species adapted to the site conditions. Steep slopes and/or areas identified as having limited seed banks as a result of low understory species density, or areas with high cheatgrass would be seeded using certified weed-free seed. These areas would be identified after collecting pre-treatment inventory data. If mechanical equipment is used that results in skidding of trees, these areas would be seeded and scarified and/or covered up through back dragging. Seed would be broadcasted aerially or with an all terrain vehicle (ATV).

Implementation of these phases could occur simultaneously throughout the project area. For example, if Phase 1 was completed on a portion of or an entire area and if the conditions and prescriptions were acceptable, Phase 2 may be started while Phase 1 is being completed or in progress on another portion of the project area. Treatments identified above could be implemented in future years as maintenance treatments to maintain original project objectives.

The project resource goals are:

1. Reduce the risk of wildfire damage to privately owned property within the vicinity of the project by reducing the wildfire fuel loading within the area.
2. Reduce the threat of stand replacing fire within pinyon/juniper forestland ecological sites, and mountain brush/sagebrush ecological sites by creating openings in the project area disrupting the continuity of the trees, while protecting areas of mountain brush/sagebrush sites within the project area.

The project resource objectives are:

Short Term (immediately post treatment)

1. Reduce pinyon and juniper tree density to 20 to 25 trees per acre within approximately 500-acre area near Sacramento Pass.

Long Term (five to ten years post treatment)

1. Reduce the risk of wildfire to the private property and improvements near Sacramento Pass;
2. Improve understory composition of desirable perennial species by 25% within a 500 acre area near Sacramento Pass;
3. Obtain Fire Regime Condition Class 1 within the project area.

Pre-treatment inventory data would be collected prior to implementing treatments to establish baseline vegetation conditions, to determine avoidance and target areas, and to determine which areas would need to be seeded after thinning has occurred. Inventory and monitoring data would be collected using BLM approved methods. The project area would also be monitored during and after the thinning treatment. A monitoring plan for the project area would be developed prior to conducting treatments.

Before treatment, vegetation density data would be collected in the project area. These data would be collected at plots that would be either established randomly or by choosing areas that represent the typical vegetative conditions. Photo plots would also be established in addition to data collection plots.

Photographs would be taken of thinning operations. Within the first year after the treatments, post-treatment effects would be documented at the monitoring points with photos. Post-treatment monitoring would be conducted at the plots established during the pre-treatment inventory. The same data collected at the plots prior to the treatment would be collected beginning the first growing season after the treatment. Monitoring would continue for 3 to 5 years to determine if objectives have been met.

The thinning treatment would use natural fluctuations in vegetation density as guidelines to determine which portions of the treatment area need thinning and to what extent. Large tree retention practices would be used by removing ladder fuels around large trees, but leaving the larger trees intact. Priority trees to be left on site would be those measuring greater than 12 inches in basal diameter. Thinning within view of major roads (i.e. US Highway 93) would be conducted in a manner to minimize appearance of disturbance.

All treatment actions would comply with the *Ely District Policy Management Actions for the Conservation of Migratory Birds* (Instruction Memorandum NV-040-2001-02) (2001).

A cultural survey of the treatment area would be conducted and appropriate site documentation would be completed prior to project implementation. National Register eligible cultural resources would be avoided or impacts would be mitigated as necessary before treatments are implemented.

No new roads or trails would be created. Some off-road travel could occur to facilitate access to treatment sites. Off-road travel would be limited to that necessary to safely and practically achieve resource objectives.

The *Ely District Noxious Weed Prevention Schedule and Policy* (1999) would be adhered to during project treatments. A Weed Risk Assessment would be performed and recommendations contained in the Weed Risk Assessment for the project would be followed.

Plan Conformance

The proposed action is not specifically identified in the *Schell Management Framework Plan* (MFP) (1983) but is in conformance with Forest Management Objective FM-6 which provides for the protection of all forest types from destruction or unnecessary damage by man, fire, insects or disease.

On July 29, 2005, the Ely Field Office, Bureau of Land Management began a 120 day public comment period for the *Ely District Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* (Ely RMP/EIS). When complete, the Ely RMP/EIS will replace the *Schell Management Framework Plan*. A new RMP/EIS is currently being developed, while not yet an approved LUP the proposed action is within conformance. The proposed action is also consistent to the maximum extent possible with Federal, State and local policies and plans.

The proposed action is also consistent with the following:

- *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, Ten-Year Comprehensive Strategy* was a policy developed in 2001 that placed emphasis on reducing risk to communities and the environment by managing wildland fire, hazardous fuels and ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation on both forests and rangelands. Three of the four goals outlined in this policy include: (1) Improve fire prevention and suppression; (2) Reduce hazardous fuels and (3) Restore fire adapted ecosystems.
- The *Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA)* (2003) was signed into law on December 3, 2003. It is designed to improve the capacity of the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture to implement the *National Fire Plan* (2002) and to conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects to protect communities, watersheds and other at-risk lands from catastrophic wildfire.

- The *Healthy Forests Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities* was announced by President Bush on August 22, 2002. The Healthy Forests Initiative implements core components of the Cohesive Strategy agreed to by Federal, State and local agencies as well as Tribal Governments and stakeholders. The purpose of the Cohesive Strategy is to ensure a coordinated effort to provide fire protection for communities while improving the health of watersheds and vegetative communities.

The hazardous fuels reduction portion of the strategy states, "Assign the highest priority for hazardous fuels reduction to communities at risk, readily accessible municipal watersheds, threatened and endangered species habitat and other important local features where conditions favor uncharacteristically intense fires." (*Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems: A Cohesive Strategy*, page 9)

The Sacramento Pass Wildland/Urban Interface Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project responds to the fuels reduction element of the Cohesive Strategy.

Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act

The proposed action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA) (1969, as amended) in accordance with 516 DM 2, Appendix 1, 1.12. This determination is based on the following rationale: the project includes mechanical treatments of 1,000 acres or less, and does not involve herbicide treatment or construction of new roads or infrastructure, and is not within wilderness or wilderness study areas. The project area has been rated in Fire Regime Group II, and FRCC 3. The project was also identified through an interdisciplinary scoping process and was developed in coordination with interested public.

The application of this categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having affects which may significantly effect the environment. As shown in the checklist of the categorical exclusion document, none of the exceptions as listed in 516 DM Chapter 2, Appendix 2 apply to this project.

The project size, proposed method of implementation and associated mitigation measures were considered during the design of project activities. Due to the above considerations and project design, there will be no potential for significant effects to the human environment by implementing the proposed action.

Persons and Agencies Consulted

A letter describing the project proposal was mailed to groups and individuals on December 14, 2006 who have expressed an interest in participating in habitat improvement and hazardous fuels reduction projects, as well as State and Federal wildlife agencies. The project proposal was also posted on the Ely Field Office website at <http://www.nv.blm.gov/ely> on December 14, 2006. The project was also presented at the tribal coordination meeting held at the Ely Field Office on January 17, 2007. Press releases were issued to local radio and newspaper media on December 22, 2006. During the scoping period, comments were received from the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah and Nevada State Clearinghouse indicating they had no objections pertaining to the project.

The Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah asked to be informed of any changes or updates to the project and informed of any cultural information found in the project area.

A letter and copy of the draft categorical exclusion was mailed to all interested public on September 5, 2007. The draft categorical exclusion was also posted on the Ely Field Office website on September 10, 2007 for a public comment period, which ended on September 24, 2007.

During the public comment period, no comments and questions were received.

Decision and Rationale on Action

I have decided to implement the proposed action and mitigation measures as identified above under the Purpose and Need for the Action and Description of Proposed Action. These actions meet the need for the action. In addition, I have reviewed the plan conformance statement and have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the approved *Schell Resource Management Plan* and that no further environmental analysis is required.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented on or after November 15, 2007 when weather conditions permit.

John Ruhs, Field Office Manager

Date

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Within 30 days of receipt of this decision, parties who are adversely affected and believe it is incorrect have the right to appeal to the Department of the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with regulations at Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 4. If an appeal is taken, follow procedures outlined in the attached form "Information on taking appeals to the Board of Land Appeals". An appeal should be in writing and specify reasons, clearly and concisely, as to why the decision is in error. Please provide this office with a copy of the Statement of Reasons. Also, within 30 days of receipt of this decision, appellants have a right to file a petition for stay (suspension) of the decision together with an appeal, in accordance with regulations at 43 CFR 4.21. The petition must be served upon the same parties identified in items 2, 3 and 4 of the attached form "Information on taking appeals to the Board of Land Appeals". The appellant has the burden of proof to demonstrate that the stay should be granted.

Contact Person

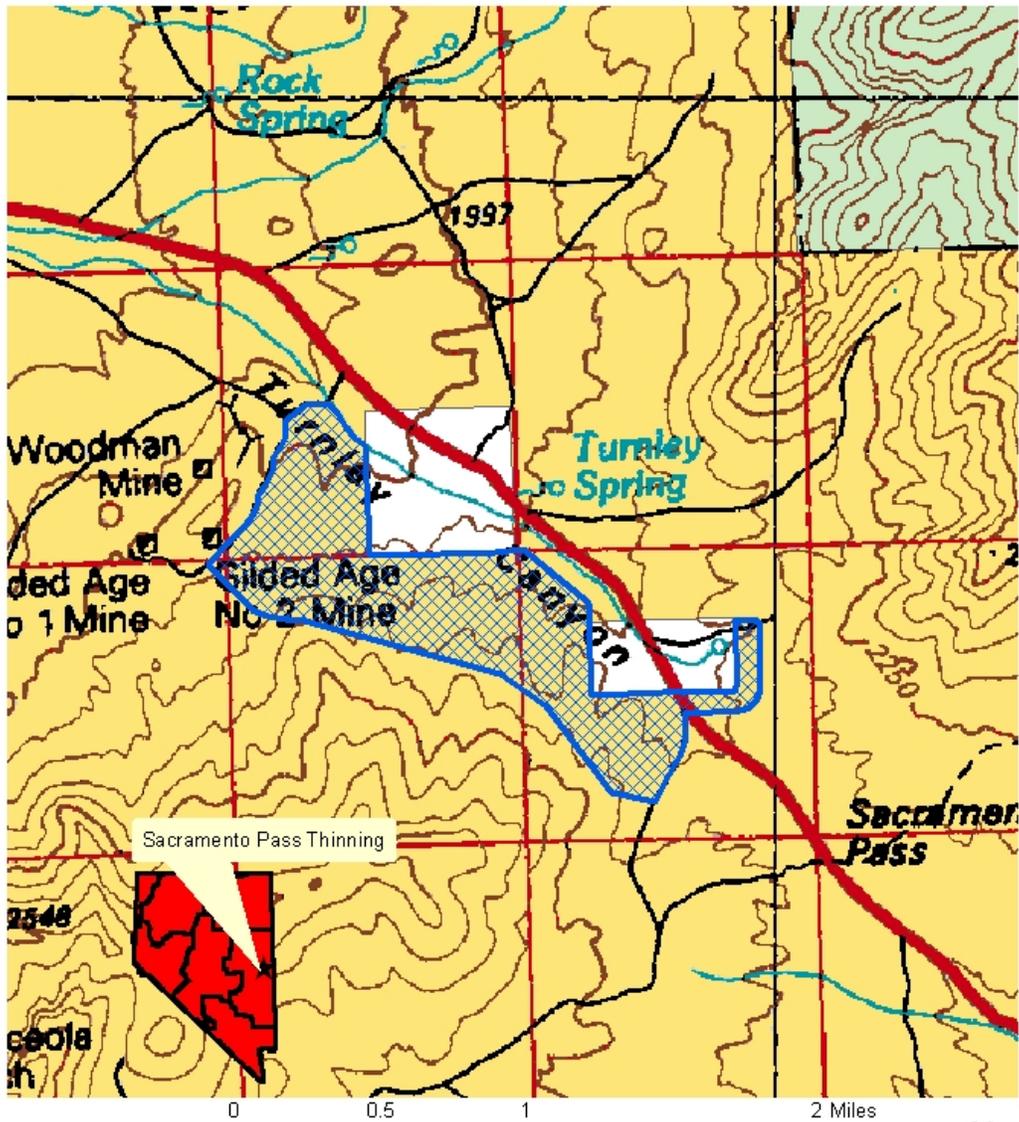
For additional information concerning this decision, please contact:

Nicholas Brunson
Fire Management Specialist
Ely Field Office
HC 33 Box 33500
Ely, NV 89301
(775) 289-1800

References Cited:

1. Ely District Policy Management Actions for the Conservation of Migratory Birds (Instruction Memorandum NV-040-2001-02) (2001)
2. Ely District Noxious Weed Prevention Schedule and Policy (1999)
3. Ely District Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Draft)
4. Schell Resource Management Plan (1983)
5. A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, Ten-Year Comprehensive Strategy (2001)
6. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act (2003)
7. National Fire Plan (2002)
8. The Healthy Forests Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities (2002)
9. Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems: A Cohesive Strategy (2000)
10. National Environmental Policy Act (1969, as amended)

Sacramento Pass Thinning



Sacramento Pass Thinning

Scale: 1:32,000

Date: June 2007

Township: 15 N

Range: 68 E

Sacramento Pass Thinning

BLM Ely Field Office

Section: 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

Thinning Project (467 Acres)

Nicholas Brunson

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data

