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## **1.0 - PURPOSE AND NEED**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to disclose and analyze the environmental consequences of the Seep Ridge Road Paving Project as proposed by Uintah County (hereafter referred to as the county). The EA is a site-specific analysis of potential impacts that could result with the implementation of the Proposed Action or an alternative to the Proposed Action. The EA assists the BLM in project planning and in making a determination as to whether any “significant” impacts could result from the analyzed actions. An EA also provides evidence for determining whether a statement of “Finding of No Significant Impact” (FONSI) will be prepared or whether an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will be required. A FONSI is a document that briefly presents the reasons why implementation of the Proposed Action or alternatives would not result in “significant” environmental impacts. If the decision maker determines that this project has no “significant” impacts following the analysis in the EA, a Decision Record and FONSI would be prepared approving the selected alternative. If the project is found to have “significant” impacts, an EIS would be prepared.

### **1.2 BACKGROUND**

Seep Ridge Road, located in Uintah County, also known as Uintah County Road (UCR) 2810, has been historically used for public purposes, such as hunting, recreation, oil and gas exploration, and livestock grazing. Uintah County currently has a BLM right-of-way (ROW), UTU-69125-35, issued in perpetuity for the road across public lands. The existing grant authorizes a 66-foot width. The road is currently composed of dirt or native material and several segments of the existing road do not meet current federal and state road design standards for public safety. All projections indicate a continued substantial increase in light and heavy vehicle traffic on the road, primarily associated with energy development in the Book Cliffs area. Uintah County seeks to amend their existing ROW to address these issues.

### **1.3 PURPOSE & NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION**

BLM’s purpose is to consider amending the county’s existing ROW, as outlined in the application, while also preventing unnecessary degradation to public land. The BLM would decide whether to grant the ROW amendment, and if so, under what terms and conditions.

BLM’s need for the project is to respond to the applicant’s proposal. Access to public lands via public roads is allowed in conformance with the Land Use Plan. Maintenance of roads which provide access to public lands is consistent with the mission of the BLM. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) mandates that the public lands be managed in a manner that will provide for outdoor recreation and human occupancy and use (Sec. 102(a)(8) 43 U.S.C. 1701).

### **1.4 CONFORMANCE WITH BLM LAND USE PLAN(S)**

The management of public lands under the jurisdiction of the BLM and resources within the Project Area is directed and guided by the Vernal Field Office (VFO) Record of Decision (ROD) and Resource Management Plan, approved October 2008 (BLM 2008a). As stated in the VFO Approved RMP, the BLM’s primary management objectives for the lands and realty programs are to:

- Accommodate community growth and development when it is determined that it is in compliance with other goals and objectives of the plan;

- Process applications, permits, operating plans, mineral exchanges, leases, and other use authorizations for public lands in accordance with policy and guidance; and
- Manage public lands to support goals and objectives of other resources programs, respond to public requests for land use authorizations.

Specific lands and realty management decisions pertinent to this proposal include:

- **LAR-15:** All applications to pave routes will be evaluated in site-specific NEPA analysis to determine the need for fencing.
- **LAR 41:** These approved transportation/utility corridors are the preferred location for future major linear ROWs which meet the following criteria: Paved routes or routes consisting of more than two lanes.
- **LAR 42:** Major linear ROWs meeting the above thresholds that are proposed outside of the preferred, designated corridors may require a plan amendment.

A review of the Proposed Action and alternatives against the above-stated decisions has determined that the Proposed Action and alternatives would be in conformance with the VFO Approved RMP. Consideration of an amendment to Uintah County's existing Seep Ridge Road ROW would be in conformance with the overall management goals and objectives stated above. The proposed amendment would also be in conformance with specific lands and realty management decisions because the need for fencing of the paved Seep Ridge Road was considered (refer to Section 2.3.3); segments of the proposed road would involve truck climbing lanes, the entire roadway would not consist of more than two lanes; and, the proposed ROW amendment would be within or involve the existing Seep Ridge Road ROW and would be consistent with the existing ROW conditions of approval.

## **1.5 RELATIONSHIP TO STATUTES, REGULATIONS, OR OTHER PLANS**

The proposed activity is in conformance with FLPMA, as amended. This EA was prepared by the BLM in accordance with NEPA and in compliance with all applicable regulations and laws passed subsequently, including the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, U.S. Department of Interior requirements and guidelines listed in the BLM *Manual Handbook H-1790-1* (BLM 2008b), and Utah BLM NEPA Guidebook (BLM 2006). This EA assesses the environmental effects of the Proposed Action (Alternative A) and alternatives, and also serves to document public participation and consultation conducted with other agencies.

The alternatives considered in this EA are also consistent with the Uintah County General Plan (Uintah County 2007, as amended). The Uintah County Plan generally indicates support for development proposals in its emphasis of multiple-use public land management practices and its emphasis of responsible use and optimum utilization of public land resources. Within the Uintah County General Plan, multiple-use is defined as including, but not being limited to, the following historically and traditionally-practiced resource uses: grazing, recreation, timber, mining, oil and gas development, agriculture, wildlife habitat, and water resources as they become available or as new technology allows.

The State of Utah is obligated by both the Utah Enabling Act and the Utah Constitution to act as a trustee in managing school trust lands. The State Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) is the independent state agency responsible by law for the management of these lands. The BLM understands

that their management decisions affect the ability of the Utah public schools to receive the revenue from the in-held school lands, as intended by Congress when they were granted.

## **1.6 IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES**

Issues were identified both internally and externally relative to this proposal. Internally the BLM and Uintah County met on May 19, 2008, to review the elements of the Proposed Action. An Interdisciplinary Team analysis was completed and documented in the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) Analysis Record Checklist (refer to Appendix A). Those resources identified as not present (NP) in the Project Area or not impacted (NI) were not carried forward into the EA. Resources identified as potentially impacted (PI) are identified below and were carried forward in Chapters 3 and 4 of this EA.

Externally, the Proposed Action was posted to the BLM Environmental Notification Bulletin Board (ENBB) on December 01, 2008. The Uintah County conducted a public meeting on September 16, 2008 in Vernal, Utah. Attending this meeting were 12 citizens of which 5 provided comments. In addition, private landowners owning lands over which the Seep Ridge Road crosses were contacted on April 1, 2009, for their issues and concerns on the proposed project. The BLM has coordinated with the affected grazing permittees as to their concerns relative to this project.

Issues identified from both the internal and external scoping exercises are identified below. (Note: The issues listed below follow the presentation in the IDT Checklist. The presentation of environmental elements in Chapters 2 through 5 of this document are re-ordered to provide a grouping of like resources or elements.

### **1.6.1 AIR QUALITY**

- Impacts to air quality from fugitive dust created during construction activities.

### **1.6.2 CULTURAL RESOURCES**

- Impacts to historic and prehistoric sites from construction activities within the Project Area.

### **1.6.3 FLOODPLAINS**

- Impacts to Cottonwood Wash and its associated floodplain from proposed construction activities.

### **1.6.4 INVASIVE PLANTS, NOXIOUS WEEDS**

- Impacts to native vegetation communities from introduction and/or expansion of invasive weeds from construction-related vehicles and equipment and the anticipated increase in recreational vehicle traffic on the upgraded roadway.

### **1.6.5 LANDS/ACCESS**

- Impacts to existing authorized easements (e.g., pipelines) that parallel and/or cross the Seep Ridge Road ROW from proposed expansion of and improvements to the existing ROW.

### **1.6.6 LIVESTOCK GRAZING**

- Impacts to grazing operations in the Project Area, including existing range improvements (water facilities, corrals, fences, etc.) from proposed expansion of and improvements to the ROW.
- Impacts to current, predominately open grazing practices from proposed expansion of and improvements to the ROW.
- Impacts to livestock from animal:vehicle collisions resulting from expected increased vehicle traffic and speed on the improved roadway.

### **1.6.7 PALEONTOLOGY**

- Impacts to paleontological resources from proposed construction activities.

### **1.6.8 RECREATION (INCLUDING TRAVEL MANAGEMENT)**

- Impacts to dispersed as well as planned/designated recreation facilities from improvements to be made to the Seep Ridge Road, especially paving the road and proximity to these facilities.
- Impacts to OHV users from improvements to be made to the Seep Ridge Road.

### **1.6.9 SOILS**

- Impacts to soil resources from increased sedimentation from construction activities.

### **1.6.10 SPECIAL STATUS ANIMAL SPECIES OTHER THAN USFWS CANDIDATE OR LISTED SPECIES, E.G., MIGRATORY BIRDS**

- Impacts to sage grouse, white-tailed prairie dog, burrowing owl, raptors and migratory birds from proposed expansion of and improvements to the ROW.
- Impacts to big game species' habitats and traditional free-ranging movements from proposed improvements made to the ROW.
- Impacts to big game individuals from animal:vehicle collisions resulting from expected increased vehicle traffic on the improved roadway.

### **1.6.11 SPECIAL STATUS PLANT SPECIES OTHER THAN USFWS CANDIDATE OR LISTED SPECIES**

- Impacts to Graham beardtongue (*Penstemon grahamii*) from proposed construction activities along the Seep Ridge Road.

### **1.6.12 THREATENED, ENDANGERED AND CANDIDATE ANIMAL SPECIES**

- Impacts to Colorado River system endangered fish and their critical habitat from possible water depletions from the White and Green Rivers.

### **1.6.13 THREATENED, ENDANGERED AND CANDIDATE PLANT SPECIES**

- Potential impacts to clay reed mustard (*Schoenocrambe argillacea*) in areas adjacent to the current Seep Ridge Road from construction activities.

### **1.6.14 VEGETATION**

- Impacts to native vegetation communities from construction activities.

### **1.6.15 WATER QUALITY (SURFACE/GROUND)**

- Impacts to water quality from increased surface runoff coming off the improved road.
- Potential impacts due to increased amounts of water coming off the paved road.

### **1.6.16 WATERS OF THE U.S.**

- Impacts to the drainages involving waters of the United States from flash runoff events.

### **1.6.17 WOODLAND/FORESTRY**

- Impacts to pinyon-juniper woodlands within the ROW from construction activities.