

USDI, Bureau of Land Management
Burns District
Three Rivers Field Office
Hines, Oregon 97738

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

for

Camp Harney/Cow Creek Ecological
Restoration Project
Environmental Assessment
OR-06-025-054

INTRODUCTION:

The Camp Harney/Cow Creek Ecological Restoration Project (ERP) is located in Harney County approximately ten miles north-east of Burns, Oregon. The area proposed for treatment is located in Harney County on the east and west sides of Rattlesnake Creek, north to the Burns District boundary and south to Cow Creek Road (T. 21 S., R. 32 E., Sections 25, 26, 34, 35, and T. 21 S., R. 32.5 E., Sections 27-34; and T. 22 S., R. 32 E., Sections 1-3, 10-12, and 14, 15, and T. 22 S., R. 32.5 E., Sections 3-11, 13-17, 21-23, and 26-29; elevation range is 4,100 to 5,400 feet; Maps 1 and 2, Statewide and Project Vicinity Maps, Appendix A). The project would be implemented over a 5 to 7-year period.

The project has been proposed because western juniper encroachment has caused a reduction in the density, patch size, and health and vigor of sagebrush-bunchgrass communities, aspen stands, and riparian communities. The objective of the Camp Harney-Cow Creek ERP is to remove western juniper and other conifers from vegetative communities where conifers are encroaching or have taken over desirable plant communities across the 16,201-acre Project Area. Conifer encroachment has led to losses of historical vegetative communities and wildlife habitat, degraded stream conditions, reduced rangeland productivity, and conditions that threaten the existence and perpetuation of bald eagle winter roost sites. Management action is needed to halt and reverse the impacts of juniper and to a lesser degree other conifer species encroachment. The Project Area is also important for recreational activities such as birding, photography, wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping.

The attached Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed to analyze effects of prescribed fire and mechanical treatments in the Camp Harney/Cow Creek (Project Area) to restore, maintain, or enhance the diversity of plant communities and wildlife habitat. The project would also maximize protection of life, property, and high value sensitive resources (i.e., bald eagle roost sites) from the detrimental effects of wildfire. The project has been designed to meet the direction of the Winter Bald Eagle Habitat Management Plan (HMP) (1986) for Burns District including: identify replacement roost trees within the roost areas and thin around these trees to allow them to attain desirable size for roosting; use all practical means available to protect these roost trees from wildfire; develop a silvicultural plan to perpetuate the characteristics of forest

stands and roost trees. The project is also in compliance with the Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon.

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action was developed by an Interdisciplinary Team (IDT), with specialists from all affected resources. The proposal is to utilize a combination of prescribed fire and juniper cutting, as well as some ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir thinning to achieve desirable vegetative composition in the Camp Harney-Cow Creek Ecological Restoration Project Area (Appendix A, Map 2, Project Vicinity Map) to achieve objectives identified above.

For project purposes, treatment areas have been divided into four vegetative communities: sagebrush-bunchgrass communities (mountain big sagebrush, Wyoming big sagebrush, low sagebrush), ponderosa pine stands, aspen stands, and riparian vegetation. Because of their close association, treatments for mountain mahogany and bitterbrush communities are not broken out separately from sagebrush and forested plant communities. Juniper with old growth characteristics or obvious signs of use by wildlife would not be treated.

Hazardous Fuels

Hazardous fuels levels would be reduced through a combination of cutting and prescribed fire. Jackpot and/or pile burning would be used in sagebrush communities and broadcast burning would be implemented in ponderosa pine stands. The project burn boss and resource advisors would determine the types of prescribed fire to be utilized on a unit by unit basis.

To reduce impacts to the soil, burn jackpot and pile burning would take place when the soils are saturated, frozen, or covered with snow. Areas where jackpot and pile burning takes place will be seeded with a mixture of native and desirable nonnative plant species.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The proposed action satisfies resource management goals and objectives outlined in the Three Rivers Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/FEIS) of 1992. In addition it conforms to the management objectives outlined in the Winter Bald Eagle Habitat Management Plan (HMP) (1986).

This project is in conformance with State, Tribal, and local laws, regulations, and land use plans and is compliant with the Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon.

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the EA, I have determined that the proposed action does not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly

impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an EIS is not necessary and will not be prepared.

Rationale:

This determination is based on the following:

1. Similar landscape treatments using prescribed fire and mechanical juniper cutting treatments have been conducted within similar habitat types and vegetative conditions across Burns District for several years. These treatments have been successful at meeting project objectives similar to those described in the Camp Harney/Cow Creek Ecological Restoration EA. These past projects have demonstrated the Bureau of Land Management's ability to successfully treat juniper using prescribed burns and mechanical treatments to restore riparian, sagebrush, and aspen plant communities.
2. The following critical elements are present and were analyzed in the Camp Harney/Cow Creek Ecological Restoration EA: air quality, water quality, wetlands and riparian, migratory birds, Special Status Species (flora and fauna), noxious weeds, cultural heritage, and American Indian Traditional Practices.

Noncritical elements which are present and are analyzed in this document are: soils, vegetation, wildlife, fisheries, livestock grazing management, recreation, visual resource management (VRM), social and economic values, fire management, transportation/roads and biological soil crusts. (The following critical and noncritical elements of the human environment have been analyzed in the Three Rivers RMP/FEIS and are not known to be present in the Project Area or would not be affected in any way by implementation of the proposed action: Wilderness, WSAs, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Flood Plains, Paleontology, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Hazardous Materials, Forestry, Minerals, Reclamation. Environmental Justice is a critical element that is not discussed in the Three Rivers RMP/FEIS, but will not be affected by enacting the proposed action or no action alternative.)

Impacts to affected resources are considered nonsignificant (based on the definition of significance in 40 CFR 1508.27) for the following reasons:

Air Quality

The air quality currently meets or exceeds air quality standards outlined by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. The proposed action would have only minor impacts on air quality focused during the time of implementation to a few days post treatment. The prescribed burn plan would minimize the effects of smoke on the communities of Burns, Hines, and Crane. Reductions in juniper would increase shrub and herbaceous vegetation. Smoke produced by fires in those post treatment stands would be less than in fully-developed woodlands.

Water Quality, Riparian, and Wetlands

The proposed action should facilitate the recovery of deciduous woody and herbaceous riparian communities where juniper is currently outcompeting riparian vegetation. This would improve watershed stability and function by reducing bare soil and sediment inputs, stabilizing banks, increasing infiltration, and maintaining or restoring proper storage and release of groundwater important for late season flows and temperatures. Water quality would improve with enhanced watershed function where erosion is minimized, sediment inputs are minimized, channel bank stability is reinforced, infiltration rates increase, and potential for groundwater recharge is restored.

Prescribed fire treatments would result in mosaic burn patterns that include patches of unburned living vegetation following treatment. These unburned areas would reduce immediate risks of increased water turbidity and stream sedimentation by providing cover and roots that stabilize sediments and serve as sediment traps. In the burned areas, most of the herbaceous and root sprouting shrubs would retain their live rooting systems intact and hold the soil in place.

Migratory Birds

The overall net effect of the proposed action would likely be an increase in habitat and avian species diversity as grasses, forbs, sagebrush, and other shrubs are regenerated by the reintroduction of fire in rangeland ecosystems and a mosaic of habitat types is created. Enhancing stands of aspen and riparian communities would also benefit migratory birds.

Impacts to migratory birds nesting and brood rearing would be minimized by broadcast burning in the fall, and cutting and piling where determined necessary.

Threatened, Endangered, and Special Status Species – Flora

There would be no detrimental effect on Special Status flora provided that the established project design elements are observed. By reducing the influence of encroached juniper, the proposed action would have positive effects on Special Status plant populations.

Special Status Species – Fauna: Wildlife

Wintering bald eagles are known to use specific roost sites within the Project Area. Bald eagles were recently de-listed as Threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on June 28, 2007. The proposed action is in compliance with the Winter Bald Eagle Habitat Management Plan (HMP) (1986) for the Burns District.

The proposed action is in compliance with the Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon. Overall, the mountain big sagebrush and low sagebrush sites that are currently considered unsuitable for sage-grouse due to juniper encroachment would likely again become functional habitat as a result of the proposed action.

Currently, there are no known goshawk nest sites within the Project Area. Should a nest site be discovered, mitigating measures would be taken to protect both birds and nesting habitat. The

proposed action would protect and enhance current aspen stands within the Project Area. This should improve and expand potential nesting habitat within the Project Area.

Currently, there are no known Swainson's hawk nest sites within the Project Area. Should a nest site be discovered, mitigating measures would be taken to protect both the birds and the nesting habitat. The proposed action generally would not target the areas within the Project Area that would be considered preferred habitat for Swainson's hawk. If any treatments occur in these areas they would likely improve Swainson's hawk habitat by making it more open. In addition, the proposed action would create more habitat in areas that are in a latter transitional stage toward juniper woodlands. These areas would likely become suitable and maybe even preferred habitat for Swainson's hawks after the treatments.

Overall, the removal of juniper from riparian areas and the restoration of riparian habitat would benefit Preble's shrew habitat. Initially, Preble's shrew habitat may be negatively affected in some areas through the loss of sagebrush cover. This habitat will return with the reestablishment of sagebrush.

Roosting habitat for bats in cliffs, rock crevices, and abandoned mines would not be affected by this alternative. The cutting and burning of young juniper would increase foraging habitat for some species of bats that use more open areas for foraging.

Columbia spotted frogs (Federal Candidate for listing as Threatened or Endangered) may inhabit stream systems within the Project Area but have not been documented. There would likely be habitat improvements as riparian habitat and stream conditions would be maintained or improved.

Special Status Species – Fauna: Fish

The proposed action would reduce sediment delivery to streams from juniper-dominated uplands thus improving fish habitat. Treatment of juniper in riparian areas would lead to greater bank stability, sediment capture, stream shading, nutrient input, and water storage and release. Prescribed burning would stimulate regeneration of some riparian species (e.g., aspen willow, alder, dogwood, and other root sprouting shrubs) that have become decadent due to fire exclusion, further contributing to stream shading and thermal buffering. Maintaining or improving riparian function and restoring or rejuvenating riparian vegetation would maintain or improve aquatic habitat and conditions for fish.

Prescribed burns would be initiated when conditions are conducive to lower intensity burns. A low intensity burn into the riparian zone would most likely result in a patchy burn pattern and leave shade-providing riparian vegetation. A patchy burn would also minimize the chance of excessive sediment delivery to the streams because sediment trapping vegetation would still remain. In the event of a higher intensity burn, sediment input, lack of shade providing vegetation, and bank instability would likely be short term.

Noxious Weeds

The proposed action, including mitigations for preventing noxious weed spread, should enhance the overall health of the plant communities in the Project Area. Healthy plant communities would help minimize the potential for noxious weed introduction and spread. Follow-up treatments on noxious weeds identified during project monitoring would be performed as described in the Burns District Noxious Weed Program Management EA OR-020-98-05.

Cultural Heritage

There would be no detrimental effect on cultural resources provided that the established project design elements are observed. Prescribed fire treatments that could diminish the data potential of archaeological sites would not be utilized within site boundaries. Cultural resources in the Project Area would benefit from the proposed action as archaeological and built resources would become less likely to sustain damage from a severe wildfire event and fire suppression activities.

American Indian Traditional Practices

Implementation of the proposed action may increase the distribution and density of riparian vegetation stands important for the practice of Burns Paiute Tribal traditions. The proposed action would have no effect on culturally important root crops in the Project Area. The Burns Paiute Tribe was consulted regarding the proposed action and no concerns were identified.

Soils

Any increases in surface erosion from prescribed fire and mechanical treatments would be short lived and would decrease within the first growing season after ignition of the prescribed burn. The risk of surface erosion associated with a bare ground understory in juniper woodlands would be reduced as the density and diversity of understory shrubs and grasses increases.

Vegetation

Application of prescribed fire to juniper woodlands developed on historic sagebrush/bunchgrass communities would make more resources available to understory shrubs, grasses, and forbs. The proposed action would create a mosaic of multiple successional stages. The mosaic would increase diversity and plant community structure across all scales and increase the resilience of the plant communities to disturbance.

Wildlife

Overall, there is likely to be an increase in wildlife species diversity as a result of implementing the proposed action. The mosaic of vegetative communities resulting from the prescribed fires and mechanical treatments would increase habitat diversity. Species utilizing more open habitats would be favored as a result of the proposed action. Foraging opportunities for big game and other herbivores would increase as understory grasses, forbs, and shrubs reestablish. The proposed action would increase the health, vigor, and palatability of winter forage for both deer and elk. Sufficient thermal and hiding cover would be retained in the Project Area through project design elements.

Livestock Grazing Management

Livestock and feed production industries are major contributors to the economy of Harney County. The highest individual agricultural sales revenue in Harney County is derived from cattle production, which is inextricably linked to the commodity value of public rangelands. The proposed action is designed to improve forage conditions found with the allotments being treated. The proposed action may alter grazing rotations, require rest of certain pastures, and could require the permittees to use offsite forage for three or more growing seasons (dependent upon plant community recovery).

Recreation

There may be impacts to recreational activities in the vicinity of the Project Area. Smoke and noise generated during project implementation would disrupt recreational activities in the spring or fall seasons.

Overall, recreational activities related to big game hunting and wildlife viewing would be enhanced as habitat function improves over time.

Visual Resource Management

The Project Area falls within the VRM Class III and Class IV. The proposed action meets management direction outlined in the Three Rivers RMP and the Steens Mountain CMPA/RMP for VRM Classes III and IV. The aesthetic character of the Project Area would improve as views and scenic diversity increase.

Social and Economic Values

Juniper treatment and increased rangeland health would increase forage production for wildlife, and livestock. This may increase economic opportunities and foster more desirable recreation opportunities. The purchase of supplies and equipment necessary for implementation of the proposed action from community merchants would constitute an additional economic effect. Service contracts to treat juniper woodlands would be utilized and may also contribute to the local economy.

Fire Management

Treatments would reduce the intensity and severity of wildfires and the risk to firefighters by altering the continuity of fuels. Suppression actions would be able to employ more direct attack strategies minimizing acres burned in wildfires. Firefighters may rely more on natural fuel breaks and changes in fuels. Less fireline may need to be constructed to suppress wildfires. Treatment of previously cut areas would help to increase firefighter and public safety. Mop-up following wildfire would also be decreased by reduction of cut juniper.

Transportation/Roads

After completion of all project activities within a specific area, roads damaged by project vehicles would be maintained and brought back to their previous conditions.

Realty

The land surrounding the Project Area is a mix of private and public lands. The proposed action would reduce the risk of intense wildfires occurring with extreme rates of spread, minimizing the risk of fire entering private, or National Forest lands by way of land administered by the BLM.

Biological Soil Crusts

Biological soil crusts in the Project Area may benefit from increased light and moisture as a result of decreased interception from juniper. Eventually, the total biological soil crust cover may increase in the Project Area as treated areas with proper site-specific soil chemistry are restored to pre-juniper expansion conditions.

/signature on file/
Joan M. Suther
Three Rivers Resource Area Field Manager

July 17, 2007
Date