U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Finding of No Significant Impact
DOI-BLM-NV-L020-2011-0013-EA
October 20, 2011

South Steptoe Watershed Restoration Plan

Location: South Steptoe Watershed, Eastern Nevada

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOI-BLM-NV-L020-2011-0013-EA) that analyzed the effects of a watershed restoration plan to be conducted within the South Steptoe Valley Watershed. The EA considered a range of development alternatives, including the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative. The EA is tiered to, and incorporates by reference, the *Ely Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* (RMP/FEIS), released in November 2007.

I have reviewed the EA for the South Steptoe Valley Watershed Restoration Plan (DOI-BLM-NV-L020-2011-0013-EA), dated September 2011. After consideration of the environmental effects as described in the EA, I have determined that the Proposed Action (Selected Alternative), with the project design features, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

I have also considered the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts described in the EA:

Context:

The proposed watershed restoration plan is located within the South Steptoe Valley Watershed south of Ely, Nevada. The primary vegetation within the project area consists of sagebrush communities and established stands of singleleaf pinyon pine and Utah juniper. A lack of natural disturbance in the project area, among other factors, has resulted in a Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) 2 with an overall departure of 58% from the reference condition. Treatment is needed in order to move the project area toward a FRCC 1. The total project area includes approximately 97,901 acres of treatment units, although only an average of 50 percent of the total acreage within the treatment units is targeted for treatment. This equates to an estimated 20-30 percent of the total 201,522-acre watershed being targeted for treatment over the life of the plan.

Intensity:

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse:*
   The project will be beneficial to the environment overall by improving the health of the South Steptoe Valley Watershed through restoration of natural vegetative conditions and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the area. Vegetation and wildlife will be the primary beneficiaries of the action. Adverse impacts may include short term soil compaction from heavy equipment, hydrophobicity following severe prescribed fire, establishment of non-native or invasive vegetation following treatment, and short term impacts on visual resources. Design features of the proposed action ensure that no threshold of significance is approached. Beneficial impacts greatly outweigh the potential short term negative impacts.

2) *The degree to which the Proposed Action affects public health or safety:*
There are no concerns for human life and safety or public health as a result of this action. No hazardous materials will be introduced into the project area as a result of treatment. Dust is expected to occur under chaining activities and heavy equipment use and smoke will be emitted as a result of prescribed fire treatments, but neither is expected to exceed Nevada and National Ambient Air Quality Standards. Emissions from equipment will also occur, but air quality will not be affected beyond the current emission levels. Treatments resulting in healthier ecosystems will be at less risk to uncontrollable wildfire resulting in increased public health and safety.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historical or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas:*
The project area encompasses the Ward Charcoal Ovens, a historically significant site managed by the State of Nevada. Design features included in the proposed action ensure that none of the treatments would pose a threat of harm to any of the structures on this site. No other unique areas will be affected by the action.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial:*
The treatment methods analyzed in the EA are well known and documented as successful tools for reducing fuel continuity and improving habitat conditions. The treatments in the proposed action will allow for attainment of resource objectives. Chaining has been somewhat controversial due to the visual imprint it creates on the land. However, the proposed treatment design to leave islands and to create a mosaic pattern will mitigate this concern. Herbicide treatments have also been somewhat controversial in other states, but treatments will be designed using criteria that will minimize any potential impacts. In the long term, benefits will be realized to the quality of the human environment as vegetative species diversity and distribution increase and wildfire risk decreases. The effects resulting from the proposed treatments are not likely to be highly controversial.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks:*
The treatment methods to be used are accepted standard practices and the effects of the treatments do not involve unique or unknown risks. Design features of the proposed action have been developed to address known risks and uncertainties. Monitoring is also incorporated in the project design to address any uncertainty. Through the adaptive management approach, any unexpected results or risks can be remedied and treatment methods changed to best fit the situation.

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 actions associated with this project, and as identified in the EA, do not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and do not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. While post treatment monitoring data from this

project might be used to determine appropriate actions in future similar projects, those projects will be subject to compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and an independent decision-making process.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant impacts:*
All resources have been considered for cumulative effects and any potential impacts have been documented in the EA. No significant impacts were identified. Other fuels reduction and habitat improvement projects may be proposed in the future in the South Steptoe Valley Watershed based upon monitoring and future assessments. As standard procedure, future projects will be subject to their own cumulative impact analysis and reviewed on a site-specific case-by-case basis.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources:*
The proposed action will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures or objects listed on or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historical Places, nor will it cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical places. Design features of the proposed action address protection of eligible historic and cultural properties that occur in the project area. Identified cultural and historic properties will be avoided or mitigation actions completed prior to treatment to prevent adverse impacts.

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 Endangered Species Act of 1973:*
No federally listed threatened or endangered species are known to occur within the project area.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, local or tribal law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment:*
The proposed action will not violate or threaten to violate any Federal, State or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed action is consistent to the maximum extent possible with Federal, State and local policies and plans.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined that the proposed action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment and that preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Mary D'Aversa 10/20/11

Mary D'Aversa
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Date