

SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE  
Big Willow Management Plan  
Four Rivers Field Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to address management concerns related to Packard's milkvetch (*Astragalus cusickii* var. *packardiae*). Management changes to OHV area and route designations, grazing management, and vegetation treatments would be in accordance with the Cascade Resource Management Plan. Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of June 15, 2012. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the purpose of and need for the project.

**Purpose and Need for Action**

The purpose of this proposal is to: 1) change the off-highway vehicle (OHV) designation on approximately 7,400 acres of BLM administered lands in the Big Willow Creek area, 2) designate routes open for OHV use, 3) maintain and enhance Packard's milkvetch habitat, 4) and manage livestock grazing to protect vegetation treatments.

These actions are needed for several reasons. In 1988, the Cascade RMP designated the Big Willow area as limiting OHV activity to existing or designated roads and trails. Following this decision, no inventory was made to identify the existing roads and trails and no routes were designated. During the ensuing years, cross-country OHV use increased 360 percent. Additionally, there are now 300 acres of steep slopes with moderate to high densities of OHV "hill climb" trails. These hill climb areas were not evident in 1988 aerial photography. This uncontrolled expansion of routes has resulted in impacts to Packard's milkvetch (an Endangered Species Act [ESA] candidate species), increased soil erosion, spread noxious weeds, degraded plant and animal habitat, and destroyed private property.

**Existing Condition**

Packard's milkvetch was listed as a Candidate species under the ESA in November 2010 by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The reasons for listing include:

- The species' entire known range is only 10 square miles.
- The primary threats include wildfire, nonnative invasive plant species, and more recently, OHV use.
- Off-highway vehicle use, which is currently considered the most immediate threat to the species and its habitat, was not identified as a threat during the original 1999 surveys for this species, but monitoring conducted in 2008 and 2009 indicate it has since become a widespread activity, occurring throughout the limited range of the milkvetch. OHVs are traveling directly through areas occupied by Packard's milkvetch, as well as along the rims,

spur ridges, and slope bases that form the margins of milkvetch habitat, with tracks ranging from single passage treads to major hill climbing runways. Based on monitoring data, this use appears to be increasing in scope and has resulted in the crushing of milkvetch plants, as well as accelerated erosion of the fine, loose substrate occupied by this species.

- The magnitude of the primary threats to the species and its habitat is high because OHV use, wildfires, and nonnative invasive species which affect the species throughout its range, appear to be increasing in extent, and result in severe and direct impacts to individuals and population levels.
- The plant was given a listing priority number (LPN) of 3 due to the imminent threat to the plant and its habitat, and the magnitude of the threats. A change in the LPN to 2 or 1 (potentially based on 2010 monitoring) would result in a recommendation for immediate listing. Because of the limited distribution, actions to reduce or eliminate threats would help preclude the need for listing.

### **Preliminary Issues**

*Endangered Species Act* - Packard's milkvetch was listed as a candidate species under the ESA in November 2010. This plant is a narrow endemic located in northeastern Payette County, Idaho. Of the 26 known sites, 17 occur on public lands. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) identified OHV use as one of the primary threats, and the most imminent threat, to the species. Because of its limited distribution, the Service has placed a high priority on implementing actions that would preclude the need for listing the species as Threatened or Endangered. The area also provides habitat for southern Idaho ground squirrel which is also a candidate species.

*Off-highway Vehicle Use* - In 1988, approximately 44 miles of roads and trails occurred on public lands in the area. Between 1988 and 2009, there was more than a 360 percent increase (to 160 miles) in the number of miles of roads and trails. Additionally, there are now 300 acres of steep slopes with moderate to high densities of OHV "hill climb" trails which were not evident in 1988. Much of this increase occurred between 2005 and 2010 when the Clay Peak Motorcycle Park, leased by Payette County under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act, was managed by a contractor that charged admission. A lawsuit temporarily closed the motorcycle park in 2009. Management of the park changed in 2010 and admission is no longer charged and is open for free public use. The motorcycle park is located 9 miles west of the subject area and was established to provide an open area for OHV use. The Big Willow area is temporarily closed to OHV use.

*Adjacent Private Landowners* – Almost all access to the public lands in the area is through surrounding private property. Each of the four adjacent landowners has seen increased unauthorized OHV activity on their property. Increases on one parcel have been substantially greater than those observed on public lands.

*Livestock Grazing* – Three livestock grazing allotments, including a 680-acre parcel of State lands, would be affected by the proposed actions. Increased OHV activity has resulted in reduced forage availability (through direct habitat loss) and disturbance to grazing animals. Livestock grazing management may need to be modified to allow implementation and maintenance of vegetation treatments.

*Upland Vegetation* – Four fires in the past 40 years (1958, 1975, 1976, and 1992) have altered vegetation conditions. Approximately 40 percent of the area is currently occupied by scattered pockets of basin big sagebrush, with small inclusions of bitterbrush, and a cheatgrass dominated understory. The remaining 60 percent is dominated by cheatgrass with no shrub overstory. Widely scattered pockets of native grasses and forbs remain; however, they are limited in size and distribution.

*Noxious Weeds* – Noxious weeds are a significant concern in this area. Payette County Noxious Weed Control has invested a significant amount of time and resources (BLM Assistance Agreements and ARRA funds) in this area for treatment of rush skeletonweed, scotch thistle and yellow starthistle. There is concern that continued disturbance by OHVs will adversely affect noxious weed management.

### **Preliminary Alternative Development**

Alternatives have been developed based on input from the USFWS, BLM staff, local landowners, and user groups. The different alternatives have been crafted to address the identified preliminary issues in many ways.

Road and trail designation was developed using the following criteria:

- Provide for a motorized transportation system that meets the recreation demands of local users.
- Implement a travel management program that protects natural resource values, discourages the creation of new routes, discourages use of private land, and reduces the number of duplicate and redundant routes by:
  - Designating routes to minimize impacts to or avoid environmentally sensitive locations,
  - Designating routes to avoid or minimize OHV use in special status plant habitat,
  - Designating routes to reduce and limit OHV use within areas with highly erosive soils, and
  - Do not designate routes that cross or lead into private land.

### **Actions Common to Alternatives B-D**

Adaptive Management – Off-highway vehicle use would be monitored to ensure the selected actions are having the desired result. Additional actions would be taken to mitigate OHV impacts if the desired results are not being met. This may include actions such as reducing the number of routes open for use or physically blocking OHV access. Success of vegetation treatments would be monitored. Livestock and/or OHV management would be modified if they are found to be adversely affecting vegetation treatments.

User Education – A public outreach/communication plan would be developed to educate the general public and specific users groups of the designations and rules of the area. The plan would outline both on-site and off-site methods to be used. The existing kiosks would be updated to show current designation and regulations and clearly show users where riders can and cannot ride. Open trails would be clearly posted.

Route Marking – Open routes would be signed and posted using a variety of means. Routes not posted as “open” would be closed to motorized uses. Select closed routes would be treated using various means including physically blocking trails, ripping, rocks, short fence, and reseeding to discourage use.

### **Alternative A – Current Management**

Off-highway Vehicle Area and Route Designations – The entire project area (approximately 7,400 acres) would continue to be designated as limited to existing roads and trails. Forty-four (44) miles of trails present on BLM land when the 1988 Cascade Resource Management Plan was signed would be available for motorized use (Map 1). Trails created since 1988 would not be available for use.

Vegetation Treatments – Noxious weed control would be carried out by BLM and Payette County Noxious Weed Control personnel as needed.

Fencing – No new fencing would be constructed. Existing fencing would be maintained as needed.

Livestock Grazing Management – A total of 2,683 AUMs would be permitted in three allotments (Table 1, Map 1). Cattle and sheep use would occur during the spring.

Table 1. Permitted livestock grazing use for three allotments in the Big Willow area, Payette County, Idaho.

Allotment	Permittee	Class	Number	On Date	Off Date	% Public Land	AUMs
Bannister Basin (00312)	J.G. and Kristin Schwartz	Cattle	340	April 1	June 1	58	367
Little Willow (00295)	H. Hook Ranch	Cattle	178	April 15	June 1	32	98
			141	October 15	November 14		50
Paddock Valley (00370)*	Soulen Livestock	Sheep	2,000	March 28	April 15	30	75
			3,000	March 28	June 5		414
			2,000	May 2	June 20		197
		Cattle	230	April 1	April 30		68
			900	April 1	June 20		719
			365	April 1	October 10		695

\*Only Pasture #1 of the Paddock Valley Allotment contains Packard’s milkvetch. This pasture is grazed by sheep only and accounts for 9% of the allotment.

### **Alternative B**

Off-highway Vehicle Area and Route Designations – An area matching the proposed Banister Basin Area of Critical Environmental Concern (5,841 acres) would be designated as “closed” to motorized use (Map 2). Motorized access would be allowed within this area only for emergency vehicle use, BLM administrative uses, and other BLM authorized uses. The remaining area, 1,525 acres, would be limited to designated routes. Routes designated for motorized use (11 miles) would provide ridgeline and drainage riding loop opportunities on BLM-administered lands that would not direct riders onto or across private lands (Map 2). Designated routes would

consist primarily of existing 1988 and other user identified routes that facilitate loop opportunities and do not cross or lead to private lands.

Vegetation Treatments – Vegetation restoration efforts would be focused within 400 yards of known element occurrences (EOs) of Packard’s milkvetch. Invasive species (e.g. cheatgrass, medusahead, annual mustards) adjacent to EOs would be treated with ground applications of Imazapic in the late fall. Additional treatments with Glyphosate and 2-4-D could also be used to control invasive forb species. Where necessary, native grass, forb, and shrub species would be seeded or planted to enhance vegetation recovery. Treated areas would be monitored and noxious weeds would be treated as necessary.

Fencing – Three permanent exclosures (3.2 miles of fence) would be constructed to wildlife specifications to minimize disturbance of Packard’s milkvetch EOs. Approximately 0.7 miles of temporary fencing would be placed in the Little Willow Allotment until vegetation treatments are successfully established. Drift fences could be placed adjacent to three EOs in the Paddock Valley Allotment during the grazing use period if monitoring determines that livestock herding is not helping maintain vegetation treatments.

Livestock Grazing Management – Livestock grazing would not be allowed in the exclosures. There would be a 28 AUM reduction in the Bannister Basin Allotment, a 15 AUM temporary reduction in the Little Willow Allotment, and no AUM reduction in the Paddock Valley Allotment (Table 2). Yearling sheep would be grazed in Pasture #1 of the Paddock Valley Allotment; BLM would flag treatment areas and provide maps to aid sheep herders in avoiding the treatment areas.

Table 2. Proposed modifications to permitted livestock grazing use for three allotments in the Big Willow area, Payette County, Idaho.

Allotment	Permittee	Class	Number	On Date	Off Date	% Public Land	AUMs
Bannister Basin (00312)	J.G. and Kristin Schwartz	Cattle	340	April 1	June 1	53	339
Little Willow (00295)	H-Hook Ranch	Cattle	178	April 15	June 1	32	98 <sup>1</sup>
			141	October 15	November 14		50
Paddock Valley (00370) <sup>2</sup>	Soulen Livestock	Sheep	2,000	March 28	April 15	30	75
			3,000	March 28	June 5		414
			2,000	May 2	June 20		197
		Cattle	230	April 1	April 30		68
			900	April 1	June 20		719
			365	April 1	October 10		695

<sup>1</sup>A temporary reduction of 15 AUMs would occur until vegetation treatment objectives are met.

<sup>2</sup>Only Pasture #1 of the Paddock Valley Allotment contains Packard’s milkvetch. This pasture is grazed by sheep only and accounts for 9% of the allotment.

### Alternative C

Off-highway Vehicle Area and Route Designations – A 127-acre area adjacent to Big Willow Creek Road would be designated as “open” for cross-country travel (Map 3). This area would provide a staging/riding area with hill climbing opportunities. About 1,475 acres around

Bannister Basin would be designated as “closed” to motorized use. Public motorized use would not be allowed. Motorized access would be allowed within this area only for emergency vehicle use, BLM administrative uses, and other BLM authorized uses. The remaining area, 5,764 acres, would be limited to designated routes. Fifty-nine (59) miles of routes designated for motorized use would provide ridgeline and drainage riding loop opportunities on BLM lands that would not direct riders onto or across private lands (Map 3). Designated routes would be those identified by users during public meetings. The combination of an open area and extensive designated routes would provide a broad range of riding opportunities for families and riders of all abilities.

Vegetation Treatments – Same as Alternative B.

Fencing – Approximately 2 miles of fence would be constructed around the “open” area to clearly delineate the boundary. Gates would provide access from the “open” area to designated trails. Fencing associated with Packard’s milkvetch would be the same as Alternative B.

Livestock Grazing Management - Same as Alternative B.

#### **Alternative D**

Off-highway Vehicle Area and Route Designations – A 95-acre “open” area would be designated adjacent to Big Willow Creek Road to be used as a staging/riding area with hill climbing opportunities (Map 4). Approximately 4,588 acres would be designated as “closed” to motorized use. Public motorized use would not be allowed. Motorized access would be allowed within this area only for emergency vehicle use, BLM administrative uses, and other BLM authorized uses. The remaining area, 2,683 acres, would be limited to designated routes. Twenty-four (24) miles of designated routes would provide loop opportunities for ridgeline and drainage riding (Map 4).

Vegetation Treatments – Same as Alternative B.

Fencing – Approximately 1.5 miles of fence would be constructed around the “open” area to clearly delineate the boundary. Gates would provide access from the “open” area to designated trails. Fencing associated with Packard’s milkvetch would be the same as Alternative B.

Livestock Grazing Management - Same as Alternative B.

#### **Alternative E**

Off-highway Vehicle Area and Route Designations – The entire project area (7,366 acres) would be designated as “closed” to motorized uses (Map 5). Public motorized use would not be allowed. Motorized access would be allowed within this area only for emergency vehicle use, BLM administrative uses, and other BLM authorized uses. No routes would be designated within the project area as open for motorized uses.

Vegetation Treatments – Same as Alternative B.

Fencing – Same as Alternative B.

Livestock Grazing Management - Same as Alternative B.

### **Decision to be Made**

The Four River Field Office manager will select an alternative to be implemented. The field manager has the discretion to select an alternative as presented or to select portions of different alternatives to craft a different alternative to implement. The BLM previously decided to implement a two-year, temporary motorized vehicle closure in this area to address the threat to Packard's milkvetch and other resource damage caused by OHV use. Changes in OHV area designation would require a land use plan amendment. Following the BLM's decision, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service must make a listing decision for Packard's milkvetch by 2015.

### **Public Input Needed**

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by May 25, 2012 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA.

Comments sent electronically should be sent to [BLM\\_ID\\_FRFO\\_OHV@blm.gov](mailto:BLM_ID_FRFO_OHV@blm.gov) with the title of this project in the subject line. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

Two additional public meetings will be held during the comment period in Emmett and Payette to solicit additional input. You will be notified of the date, time, and location of these meetings. The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Larry Ridenhour, Outdoor Recreation Planner, 3948 Development Avenue, Boise, Idaho 83705, (208) 384-3334.

### **MAPS**

- Map 1. Alternative A, Big Willow Management Plan
- Map 2. Alternative B, Big Willow Management Plan
- Map 3. Alternative C, Big Willow Management Plan
- Map 4. Alternative D, Big Willow Management Plan
- Map 5. Alternative E, Big Willow Management Plan