

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
BRUNEAU FUEL BREAKS
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
BRUNEAU FIELD OFFICE**

DOI-BLM-ID-B020-2009-0005-EA

I have reviewed the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations for significance (40 CFR 1508.27) and have determined the actions analyzed in DOI-BLM-ID-B020-2009-0005-EA (also referred to as ID-B020-2009-0005) would not constitute a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. This finding was made by considering both the context and intensity of the potential effects, as described in the above EA, using the following factors defining significance:

1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The environmental assessment (EA) considered both beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action. Wildfire is the greatest threat to sage-grouse habitat in the Bruneau Field Office (BFO). The proposed action would develop a network of fuel breaks to restore and maintain sage-grouse habitat and enhance firefighting safety and capability. A total of 145 roadside miles were identified for development or maintenance of fuel breaks. Fuel breaks would be created and maintained using a combination of treatments, including mowing roadside shrubs (mow strips), application of BLM-approved herbicides, and rangeland seeding (greenstrips). Proactive wildfire management strategies that reduce large wildfire risk and maximize the potential for safe and effective suppression are necessary to prevent further degradation and habitat loss for sage-grouse and other wildlife species in the BFO. The impacts of the proposed action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment because the proposed action would only treat 3,042 acres within the 420,391 acre project area (PA), and those acres are along existing roads. Only 0.5% of the Key sage-grouse habitat in the PA would be treated. During the 2011 fire season, the Big Hill Fire destroyed over 21,000 acres of Key habitat, and 40 miles of dozer line were installed during suppression efforts.

While there would be an alteration of 1,115 acres from mowing along roadsides, this action is far less detrimental to sage-grouse compared to the long-term habitat loss from fire and impacts from suppression actions (such as cutting miles of fire-line using dozers). Greenstrips would be maintained on 1,527 acres and established on 400 acres along roadsides. These treatments provide firefighters with safe anchor points and a greater number of options to engage wildfires. The benefits of altering 3,042 acres by creating fuel breaks to increase firefighter safety and to protect sage-grouse habitat across several thousands of acres from its greatest threat outweigh the minimal impacts that could occur.

2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health and safety.

The analysis did not find the Proposed Action to have any appreciable negative effects on public health or safety. Mowing and seeding along roadsides do not pose a threat to the public. All chemicals proposed for treatments in the project area are approved for use and have been analyzed for their effects on public health in the 2007 Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on BLM Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, Final Programmatic Environmental Report, and Biological Assessment. The proposed action would reduce the risk of large and hard-to-control wildfire and would, therefore, have beneficial effects to the public and firefighter safety as well as for sage-grouse by reducing the likelihood of large wildfires and the long-term detrimental effects to sage-grouse.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The PA does contain areas of cultural significance: Key and Priority habitat for sage-grouse and nearby wilderness areas. No treatments are proposed within wilderness areas. The area has been surveyed to identify existing cultural sites. These sites would be protected through project design (EA pages 15-17, Alternative B; or 17-19, Alternative C), and no disturbance or negative impacts to significant sites would occur.

Impacts to sage-grouse their habitat from development of fuel breaks would be negligible because of the minimal acres treated and because the treatments would occur along roadsides. Additionally, the proposed treatment would impact far fewer acres and be much less detrimental than the long-term loss of habitat from a large wildfire. The treatments would not only protect Key sage-grouse habitat, it would also benefit several sagebrush-obligate species and other wildlife existing in the area. Breaking the fire cycle in areas that have repeatedly burned by maintaining and developing greenstrips would augment the restoration of healthy sage steppe habitat.

The Standard Operating Procedures/Design Criteria to reduce the likelihood of negative effects to resources are identified on pages 15-17 (Alternative B) or 17-19 (Alternative C) of the EA.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The public scoping process indicated concern regarding impacts to sage-grouse and their habitat, expansion of cheatgrass and noxious weeds, impacts to sagebrush-obligate species from altered habitat, and the potential for creating a traffic hazard by attracting livestock near roads with greenstrips. There was also concern expressed during meeting with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) concerning the broad expanse of the area included in the PA. Based on these concerns, several standard operating features and project design criteria have been identified and included as part of the action alternatives (EA pages 15-17, Alternative B; or 17-19, Alternative C).

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The analysis did not identify any significant effects on the human environment which are highly uncertain or involve unknown risks as a result of this action. Inaction would likely result in

greater risks to firefighters, sage-grouse, other wildlife, and existing habitat from a large wildfire event. A large wildfire would result in a long-term loss (>20 years) of sage-grouse and other wildlife habitat.

The area is a stronghold for sage-grouse in the west. As loss of habitat continues to occur from wildfire, invasion by exotic vegetation and expansion of conifers, energy development, urban development, and other processes, quality habitat as found in the PA becomes even more valuable for the long-term persistence of sage-grouse. Climate experts also predict increased fires and more extreme fire behavior in the future, making projects such as this one timely and extremely important.

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 and practices analyzed in the EA are normal practices that have been successfully implemented elsewhere. This EA does not set a precedent for future actions that have significant effects. Individual site-specific proposals will be analyzed on their own merits. If they are not within the scope of this NEPA analysis, a new NEPA process will be initiated. The project design guidelines and tools identified are in accordance with decisions and direction established in the land use plans, guidelines, and recommendations outlined in section 1.5. (EA, pgs. 6-10)

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

This EA considered potential cumulative impacts of the Proposed Action and alternatives. Such analysis concluded that implementation will not result in significant cumulative effects on biological, cultural, or social resources, even when considered in relation to other actions.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect properties listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Based on the analysis in the EA, the proposed action would not result in loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, Native-American, or historical resources. Known and undiscovered sites would be protected from loss or destruction through site-specific surveys conducted, and adequate mitigation actions identified, approved, and implemented, prior to any ground disturbance. Most often, the mitigation measure prescribed if sites are present is avoidance (EA, pages 15 and 64-67).

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The EA identifies that there are no known threatened or endangered species in the PA. Sage-grouse is identified as a candidate species that warrants listing but has been precluded due to higher listing priorities. Appropriate design features (EA pages 15-17, Alternative B; or 17-19, Alternative C) have been incorporated into the project to protect sage-grouse, and conferencing has occurred with the FWS. There is no “critical habitat” for any species within the PA.

10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, and local laws or requirements imposed for protection of the environment.

The proposed action analyzed in the EA was developed in accordance with all applicable Federal, State, and local laws/regulations for the protection of the environment. The EA discloses the potential effects of the proposed action on all critical and non-critical elements. It was determined that the proposed action would not adversely or significantly affect any of them.

/s/ Arnold L. Pike

June 25, 2012

Arnold L. Pike
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Date