

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Idaho Falls District
Upper Snake Field Office**

**Patelzick Creek Aspen Health Project
Categorical Exclusion
DOI-BLM-ID-I010-2013-0006-CX**



**Prepared by
Bureau of Land Management
Upper Snake Field Office
1405 Hollipark Dr.
Idaho Falls, ID 83401**



Patelzick Creek Aspen Health Project
NEPA#: DOI-BLM-ID-I010-2013-0006-CX

Purpose and Need for the Action

The Patalzick Creek Aspen Health Project is located approximately 5 miles west of Spencer, Idaho within the southern foothills of the Beaverhead Range. The area is a popular recreation destination in the summer months with its dispersed camping sites and in the fall is used by sportsman for its hunting opportunities. Additionally, the area is characterized as important big game transition range where mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and elk (*Cervus canadensis*) move through to get to their winter and summer ranges.

Currently, aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) stands within much of eastern Idaho are categorized as even-aged and decadent, being encroached upon by adjacent conifer tree species, and lack the level of reproduction necessary to maintain a healthy clone. Aspens are considered a keystone species and are critical for maintaining biodiversity in western landscapes, where clones regenerate primarily through vegetative reproduction triggered by hormonal stimulation of underground root buds initiated by disturbance (Jones et al. 2005). Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) within the Patalzick Creek drainage has been expanding due to the modification of the natural fire regime which had historically kept the species out of the aspen stands and provided the disturbance necessary to maintain the clone. It has been estimated that fire return intervals in areas where aspen were historically found typically occurred every 20 to 60 years (Campbell and Bartos, 2000). Aspen stands within the area currently show a moderate density of small diameter, even aged, homogeneous conifers, with an average tree DBH of 10 inches. The estimated age of the conifers within the stand ranges between 20 and 60 years. Without a constant disturbance regime, Douglas-fir has encroached into the adjacent aspen stands and to a lesser degree the mountain shrublands within the south facing slopes.

Monitoring conducted during the summer of 2012 within the two treatment areas revealed an abundance of young Douglas-fir encroaching into the aspen stands and mountain shrublands. Within treatment area one (Aspen Unit), Douglas-fir accounted for 36% of the mature live tree density with an average of 130 trees per acre, while aspens accounted for 64% with an average of 230 trees per acre. Understory aspen regeneration (aspen 1-5' tall of <1" diameter at breast height (dbh)) was also limited with clones producing an average of only 1,100 stems per acre (range between 286-1,914 stems per acre). An Aspen Stand Risk Assessment (ASRA) was also conducted at each of the two monitoring locations within the stand. The ASRA is a qualitative assessment of an aspen stand and the associated biotic and abiotic community (EIAWG, 2011). Data from this assessment suggests that the potential for stand loss within the project area would be classified as "High" due to the clone being lost from above and not being replaced from below. Within treatment area two (Mountain Shrub Unit), approximately 60 trees per acre were identified within the predominantly mountain sagebrush stand. Most of the trees within this treatment area were Douglas-fir and ranged in height between 3-6 feet. Conifer encroachment has led to a sharp decline in the once dominant aspen woodlands and shrublands within the area. Furthermore, in some locations Douglas-fir has become the dominant overstory species and has inhibited the natural regeneration of the remaining aspen clones.

As a result of these findings the BLM has proposed to remove approximately 70 acres of encroaching Douglas-fir to stimulate aspen growth, reduce competition in the mountain shrub community, and improve wildlife habitat. If no action is taken and the stands are left untreated, Douglas-fir will continue to encroach and outcompete the aspen clones and mountain shrub communities leading to a site dominated by conifers. This proposal consists of the removal of standing live conifers to improve wildlife habitat, stimulate aspen growth, increase soil moisture and spring output, and ensure that aspens within the Patetzick Creek drainage remain healthy, productive and resilient.

Management action(s) are needed to improve forest/woodland health and reduce the loss of the aspen and mountain shrub communities within the BLM lands of the Patetzick Creek drainage. The purpose of these actions would be to:

- Ensure a healthy stand of aspen by removing encroaching conifers within and adjacent to existing clones.
- Increase the availability of water, nutrients, and light in those areas where conifers have encroached and removed the historic vegetation.
- Reduce hazardous fuel loading to prevent uncharacteristic wildfires and resultant resource damage, while providing conditions so wildfire can safely take its role again in the ecosystem.
- Improve the health, vigor, and acreage of aspen stands and promote natural regeneration of aspens.

Description of the Proposed Action

The BLM is proposing to thin approximately 70 acres of encroaching Douglas-fir out of the existing and historic aspen stands and mountain sagebrush steppe within the Patalzick Creek drainage. The targeted conifer stands are located in Clark County, Idaho, Boise Meridian, T12N R35E Sec 24 and T12N R36E Sec 19. Within both treatment units thinning would be implemented by hand crews, with the biomass remaining on site in the form of hand piles or scattered throughout the unit. Within treatment area one (Aspen Unit), if biomass is hand piled, crews would return the following season and burn the piles, however if conditions permit and the biomass is scattered a broadcast burn would be conducted, which would further help to improve aspen regeneration in the long-term. Determining which secondary treatment, i.e., pile burning or broadcast burning, within the Aspen Unit would be dependent upon weather, fuel loads, and budget at the time of the treatment. Biomass within treatment area two (Mountain Shrub Unit) would be scattered throughout the unit following treatment. Due to the stature of the conifers within this unit and the existing vegetation it was determined that a lop and scatter approach would be the most effective and provide the least amount of vegetation and soil disturbance.

Treatment Prescriptions

- Existing standing dead trees would be retained in the project area for wildlife purposes.
- All conifers less than 26" DBH and located within the identified aspen stands that are likely to compete with existing aspen stems for sunlight, water and nutrients would be removed.
- Trees would be hand felled and either hand piled within the aspen stands or lopped and scattered throughout the project area. Once properly cured, slash would be pile burned during the winter and/or broadcast burned during the fall.
- Piled slash would not exceed 6'x6' in size for the purpose of reducing prolonged heating and potential sterilization of the soil during burning.
- Treatment areas would be accessed by existing roads only. No new temporary or permanent roads would be constructed.
- Treatment area 1 (Aspen Unit) would be temporarily fenced to prevent herbivory by livestock for five years or until aspen suckers have reached a DBH of 2".
- No treatments would occur within a 100 foot buffer on either side of Patalzick Creek and its associated unnamed spring and tributary to mitigate impacts to riparian-wetland vegetation and water resources.
- An ID team would make recommendations on whether a prescribed broadcast burn is necessary following the completion of the thinning operation. The broadcast burn would be done in a mosaic pattern focusing on areas of heavy fuel accumulation to reduce activity fuels on the ground.
- Under the Healthy Forest Initiative Categorical Exclusion Authority, herbicides and pesticides would not be used for treatment. If noxious weed treatments are needed before

or after implementation of the proposed action, this work would follow all standard operation procedures outlined in the *Upper Snake-Pocatello Integrated Weeds Control Programmatic Environmental Assessment* (USDI-BLM 2009).

Plan Conformance

Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) 1985 (ID BLM IFD 1985)

Management Area 1 – Medicine Lodge:

“Manage 1,347 acres of woodland with consideration for wildlife needs.”

-and-

“Provide forage and cover for existing and projected wildlife numbers. Maintain or improve at least 75% of all terrestrial in satisfactory condition.”

General Forestry:

“Public lands within intensive Forest management Area will be available for a full range of forest management activities. Areas classified as woodland will also be available for limited forest management activities.”

Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement (USDI-BLM 2008a:18)

Objective 4:

“Make Progress toward Desired Future Condition (DFC) in historically frequent fire regimes (Aspen/Conifer, Dry Conifer, Mid-elevation Shrub encroached by juniper, Mountain Scrub) by increasing Wildland Fire Use (WFU) and prescribed fire to create a fire regime within the historical range of variability.”

Management Actions:

“Use mechanical and chemical treatments to prepare areas in FRCC 2 and FRCC 3 for prescribed fire and WFU.”

Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act

The proposed action is designated as a Categorical Exclusion (CX) under US Department of Interior manual part 516 DM 11.9, Subject C: *Forestry - Action 7: Harvesting live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than 0.5mile of temporary road construction. Such activities:*

- a) Shall not include even-aged regeneration harvests or vegetation type conversions.*
- b) May include incidental removal of trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing.*
- c) May include temporary roads which are defined as roads authorized by contract, permit, lease, other written authorization, or emergency operation not intended to be part of the BLM transportation system and not necessary for long-term resource management. Temporary roads shall be designed to standards appropriate for the intended uses, considering safety, cost of transportation, and impacts on land and resources; and*
- d) Shall require the treatment of temporary roads constructed or used so as to permit the reestablishment by artificial or natural means, or vegetative cover on the roadway and areas where the vegetative cover was disturbed by the construction or use of the road, as*

necessary to minimize erosion from the disturbed area. Such treatment shall be designed to reestablish vegetative cover as soon as practicable, but at least within 10 years after the termination of the contract.

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- a) Removing individual trees for sawlogs, specialty products, or fuelwood.*
- b) Commercial thinning of overstocked stands to achieve the desired stocking level to increase health and vigor.*

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. The proposed action has been reviewed, and, as documented below, none of the extraordinary circumstances described in 516 DM 2 apply.

Extraordinary Circumstances Requiring Preparation of an EA or EIS (516 DM 2, Appendix 2)

The action(s) described in this categorical exclusion have been reviewed to determine that none of the extraordinary circumstances listed below pertain to the proposed action.

- | <u>DM#</u> | <u>Extraordinary Circumstance</u> |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2.1 | Have significant impacts on public health or safety. |
| 2.2 | Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990); floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas. |
| 2.3 | Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA section 102(2)(E)]. |
| 2.4 | Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks. |
| 2.5 | Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects. |
| 2.6 | Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects. |
| 2.7 | Have significant impacts on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or office. |
| 2.8 | Have significant impacts on species listed or proposed to be listed on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated critical habitat for these species. |
| 2.9 | Violate a Federal law, or a State, local, or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. |
| 2.10 | Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (Executive Order 12898). |
| 2.11 | Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites (Executive Order 13007). |
| 2.12 | Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and Executive Order 13112). |

Persons and Agencies Consulted

Idaho Department of Fish and Game
Upper Snake Regional Office, Idaho Falls, ID

Bureau of Land Management
Glen Guenther – Botany
Juley Smith – Rangeland Management Specialist
Marissa Guenther – Archaeologist
Channing Swan – Zone Forester
Dan Kotansky – Hydrologist
Devin Englestead – Wildlife Biologist
Ben Dyer – Fire Ecologist

Recommendation and Rationale

I have decided to implement the Patetzick Creek Aspen Health Project. Manual hand thinning would be used to achieve project goals. Prescribed fire may be used, if necessary, following the completion of the thinning operation to reduce further fuel loading. These actions meet the needs for the project. In addition, I have reviewed the plan conformance statement and have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the approved land use plan and that no further environmental analysis is required.

Implementation of the proposed action would help increase the health of the aspen woodlands in question, reduce the probability of uncharacteristic wildfire, and stimulate the growth of aspen.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented on or after October 1, 2014.

Jeremy Casterson, Field Manager,
Upper Snake Field Office, Idaho Falls District.

Date

Marissa Guenther, NEPA Reviewer,
Upper Snake Field Office, Idaho Falls District.

Date

Ben Dyer, Fire Ecologist, CX Preparer,
Upper Snake Field Office, Idaho Falls District.

Date

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to appeal consistent with 43 CFR Part 4. Refer to attached form 1842-1 for further information regarding the appeal process.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or project, contact Ben Dyer, Fire Ecologist, Upper Snake Field Office, 1405 Hollipark Dr. Idaho Falls, Idaho 83401. (208) 524-7534. You may also contact Channing Swan, Forester, Pocatello Field Office 4350 Cliffs Dr. Pocatello, Idaho 83204. (208) 478-6389.

Referances

Campbell, R.B., and Bartos, D.L. 2000. Aspen Ecosystems: Objectives for Sustaining Biodiversity. USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-0.

DOI-BLM. 2009. Upper Snake-Pocatello Integrated Weeds Control Programmatic Environmental Assessment. EA#ID-310-2008-EA-43.

Eastern Idaho Aspen Working Group. 2011. Aspen Stand Risk Assessment Protocol. Idaho Falls, ID: 14p.

Jones, B.E., Rickman, T.E., Vazquez, A., Sado, Y., and Tate, K.W. 2005. Removal of Encroaching Conifers to Regenerate Degraded Aspen Stands in the Sierra Nevada. Restoration Ecology 13(2): 377-379.

Maps

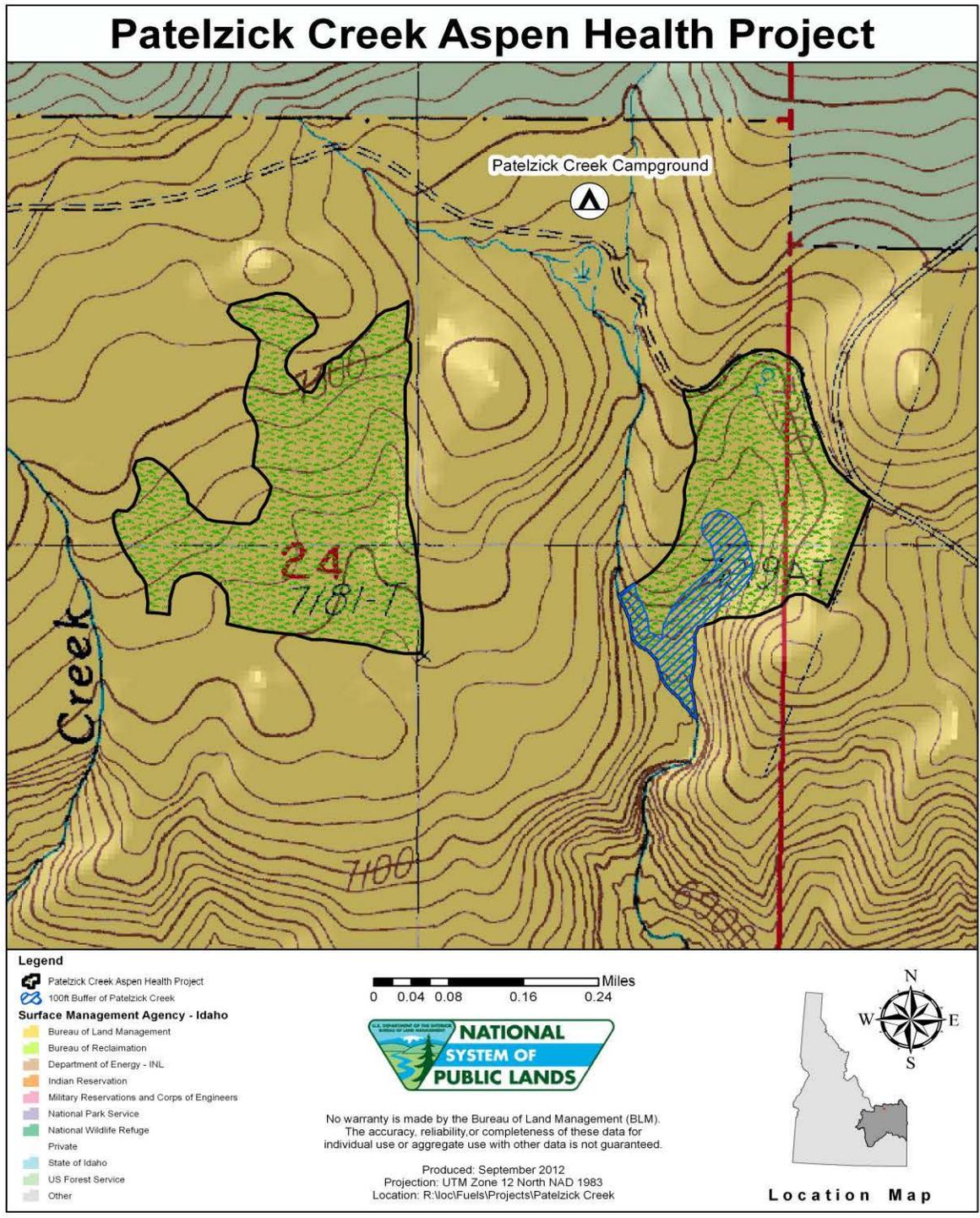


Figure 1. Patelzick Creek Aspen Health Project Boundary and Corresponding Treatment Units.

Appeal Form 1842-1

Form 1842-1
(September 2006)

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

INFORMATION ON TAKING APPEALS TO THE INTERIOR BOARD OF LAND APPEALS

DO NOT APPEAL UNLESS

1. This decision is adverse to you,
AND
2. You believe it is incorrect

IF YOU APPEAL, THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURES MUST BE FOLLOWED

1. NOTICE OF APPEAL	A person who wishes to appeal to the Interior Board of Land Appeals must file in the office of the officer who made the decision (not the Interior Board of Land Appeals) a notice that he wishes to appeal. A person served with the decision being appealed must transmit the <i>Notice of Appeal</i> in time for it to be filed in the office where it is required to be filed within 30 days after the date of service. If a decision is published in the FEDERAL REGISTER, a person not served with the decision must transmit a <i>Notice of Appeal</i> in time for it to be filed within 30 days after the date of publication (43 CFR 4.411 and 4.413).
2. WHERE TO FILE	U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management
NOTICE OF APPEAL.....	Upper Snake Field Office 1405 Hollipark Dr. Idaho Falls, Idaho 83401
WITH COPY TO SOLICITOR...	U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor University Plaza 960 Broadway Ave., Suite 400 Boise, Idaho 83706
3. STATEMENT OF REASONS	Within 30 days after filing the <i>Notice of Appeal</i> , file a complete statement of the reasons why you are appealing. This must be filed with the United States Department of the Interior, Office of Hearings and Appeals, Interior Board of Land Appeals, 801 N. Quincy Street, MS 300-QC, Arlington, Virginia 22203. If you fully stated your reasons for appealing when filing the <i>Notice of Appeal</i> , no additional statement is necessary (43 CFR 4.412 and 4.413).
WITH COPY TO SOLICITOR.....	U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor University Plaza 960 Broadway Ave., Suite 400 Boise, Idaho 83706
4. ADVERSE PARTIES	Within 15 days after each document is filed, each adverse party named in the decision and the Regional Solicitor or Field Solicitor having jurisdiction over the State in which the appeal arose must be served with a copy of: (a) the <i>Notice of Appeal</i> , (b) the Statement of Reasons, and (c) any other documents filed (43 CFR 4.413).
5. PROOF OF SERVICE	Within 15 days after any document is served on an adverse party, file proof of that service with the United States Department of the Interior, Office of Hearings and Appeals, Interior Board of Land Appeals, 801 N. Quincy Street, MS 300-QC, Arlington, Virginia 22203. This may consist of a certified or registered mail "Return Receipt Card" signed by the adverse party (43 CFR 4.401(c)).
6. REQUEST FOR STAY	Except where program-specific regulations place this decision in full force and effect or provide for an automatic stay, the decision becomes effective upon the expiration of the time allowed for filing an appeal unless a petition for a stay is timely filed together with a <i>Notice of Appeal</i> (43 CFR 4.21). If you wish to file a petition for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Interior Board of Land Appeals, the petition for a stay must accompany your <i>Notice of Appeal</i> (43 CFR 4.21 or 43 CFR 2801.10 or 43 CFR 2881.10). A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the <i>Notice of Appeal</i> and Petition for a Stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate Office of the Solicitor (43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted. Standards for Obtaining a Stay. Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulations, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards: (1) the relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied, (2) the likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits, (3) the likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and (4) whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

Unless these procedures are followed, your appeal will be subject to dismissal (43 CFR 4.402). Be certain that **all** communications are identified by serial number of the case being appealed.

NOTE: A document is not filed until it is actually received in the proper office (43 CFR 4.401(a)). See 43 CFR Part 4, Subpart B for general rules relating to procedures and practice involving appeals.

(Continued on page 2)

43 CFR SUBPART 1821--GENERAL INFORMATION

Sec. 1821.10 Where are BLM offices located? (a) In addition to the Headquarters Office in Washington, D.C. and seven national level support and service centers, BLM operates 12 State Offices each having several subsidiary offices called Field Offices. The addresses of the State Offices can be found in the most recent edition of 43 CFR 1821.10. The State Office geographical areas of jurisdiction are as follows:

STATE OFFICES AND AREAS OF JURISDICTION:

Alaska State Office ----- Alaska
Arizona State Office ----- Arizona
California State Office ----- California
Colorado State Office ----- Colorado
Eastern States Office ----- Arkansas, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri
and, all States east of the Mississippi River
Idaho State Office ----- Idaho
Montana State Office ----- Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota
Nevada State Office ----- Nevada
New Mexico State Office ----- New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas
Oregon State Office ----- Oregon and Washington
Utah State Office ----- Utah
Wyoming State Office ----- Wyoming and Nebraska

(b) A list of the names, addresses, and geographical areas of jurisdiction of all Field Offices of the Bureau of Land Management can be obtained at the above addresses or any office of the Bureau of Land Management, including the Washington Office, Bureau of Land Management, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240.

(Form 1842-1, September 2006)

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