



# United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Upper Snake Field Office  
1405 Hollipark Ave  
Idaho Falls, ID 83401

In reply refer to:  
9210 (IDI01000)

February 5, 2013

Dear Interested Party:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Upper Snake Field Office (USFO) is in the initial stages of developing a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) that would analyze the impacts of implementing a program to improve habitat conditions by reestablishing and/or enhancing native tree and shrub cover in areas impacted by natural disturbances or other past and present actions. These areas may include, but are not limited to, riparian habitat, priority Greater sage-grouse habitat, and key big game habitat.

This analysis is intended to consider the environmental impacts of reestablishing and enhancing native tree and shrub cover through the use of either hand or mechanical planters. This document would be tiered through various Management Framework Plans (MFPs) and Resource Management Plan (RMP) including: *Big Desert MFP* (1980), *Little Lost Birch Creek MFP* (1978), *Big Lost MFP* (1982), *Medicine Lodge RMP* (1985), *Proposed Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FMDA; BLM 2008) and would incorporate by reference the *Final Vegetation Treatments on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Report* (PER; BLM 2007b).

You are receiving this notice because you have expressed interest in BLM's proposals in the past and the Bureau would again like to solicit comments, suggestions and preliminary issues related to the proposal the BLM will soon be considering. Please find the enclosed materials that provide additional details regarding the proposal now under consideration.

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 March 12, 2013 and directly relevant to the proposal and project area. Comments sent by mail may be addressed to the Bureau of Land Management, 1405 Hollipark Drive, Idaho Falls, ID 83402. Attention: Upper Snake Habitat Restoration Planting Project. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside of the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this preliminary planning level.

The primary contact for questions and comments related to this project is Harley Bateman, Fuels Technician at 524-7500.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Casterson  
Upper Snake Field Office Manager

Enclosures:  
Scoping Information  
Map of Proposed Treatments

## Scoping/Information Package

### Upper Snake Habitat Restoration Planting Project Programmatic Environmental Assessment Upper Snake Field Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to reestablish and enhance native tree and shrub cover in accordance with the *Big Desert Management Framework Plan* (BLM1985), *Little Lost Birch Creek Management Framework Plan* (BLM 1978), *Big Lost Management Framework Plan* (1982), and *Medicine Lodge Resource Management Plan* (BLM 1985) as amended by the *Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (USDI-BLM 2008). 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.

All of the Management Framework Plans (MFPs) and Resource Management Plan (RMP) were amended by the *Fire, Fuels and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FMDA) (USDI BLM 2008). The purpose of the amendments was to incorporate fire, fuels, and related vegetation management direction that is consistent with the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy including the decision to "...maintain, or restore vegetation that would support special status species (SSS) habitat and healthy, diverse, and sustainable vegetative communities" (USDI BLM 2008).

The FMDA set objectives and management actions which state:

*Objective 1* - Make progress towards Desired Future Conditions (DFC) in the Low-elevation Shrub, Perennial Grass, Invasive Annual Grass, Mid-elevation shrub, Mountain Shrub and Juniper Vegetation types.

#### *Management Actions:*

- Use chemical, mechanical, seeding, and prescribed fire treatments as appropriate to achieve DFC.
- In Perennial Grass, Invasive Annual Grass, and Juniper-invaded cover types, restore sagebrush steppe with an aggressive sagebrush seeding effort, using the appropriate sagebrush subspecies for the treatment area.

*Objective 2* - Maintain, protect, and expand sage-grouse source habitats.

#### *Management Actions:*

- Treat areas within source habitats that have low resiliency (i.e., areas characterized by low species diversity, undesirable composition, and dead or decadent sagebrush).

*Objective 3* – Treat sage-grouse key and restoration habitats to expand source habitats. Improve and maintain sage-grouse restoration (R1-3) and key habitats.

*Management Actions:*

- Conduct vegetation treatments in restoration and key habitat to reduce risk of wildland fire and reconnect restoration and key habitats.
- Treat areas of restoration and key habitats that have low resiliency characterized by low species diversity.

This proposal has incorporated the interim conservation policies and procedures found within the *Greater Sage-grouse Interim Management Policies and Procedures* (USDI-BLM IM-2012-043) instruction memorandum which are to be applied to proposed activities that affect Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) and its habitat. This guidance recommends to:

- Coordinate, plan, design, and implement vegetation treatments and associated effectiveness monitoring between Resources, Fuels Management, Emergency Stabilization, and Burned Area Rehabilitation programs to:
  - Promote the maintenance of large intact sagebrush communities.
- Implement management actions where appropriate, to improve Greater sage-grouse habitats that have become encroached upon by shrubland or woodland species.

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 a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of May 6, 2013. 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 action is to improve habitat conditions for threatened, endangered, or sensitive wildlife species, migratory bird species, and big game, as well as restore/improve native shrub vegetation to areas where it is degraded plant communities. This action is needed due to the results of impacts from natural disturbances and other past and present actions which have led to declines or losses of native tree and shrub species within the Upper Snake Field Office (USFO).

**Proposed Action**

The USFO is proposing to hand and machine plant (tree planter) sagebrush seedlings and other tree and shrub species important for a variety of wildlife species and essential to maintaining overall ecological health. Trees and shrubs would be planted in areas within the USFO where those species once naturally occurred, but are currently lacking in cover due to past impacts. Treatment areas would be prioritized based on current habitat conditions, management goals and objectives, the sites proximity to important wildlife habitat, as well as the sites potential for

natural reestablishment. High priority areas would include, but are not limited to, big game winter range, riparian areas, and habitats known to be occupied by threatened, endangered or sensitive species, e.g., Greater sage-grouse and pygmy rabbits (*Brachylagus idahoensis*). Occasionally, trees and shrubs would be planted in habitats already containing tree and shrub species, with the intent of increasing diversity or increasing the densities of existing species. Only those species native to eastern Idaho and known to have existed previously on the site would be considered for planting. Existing conditions and ecological site information would be used to determine suitable vegetation species.

It is expected that approximately 150,000 upland shrubs and 10,000 willows (or other riparian shrub/tree) would be planted annually either early in the spring or late in the fall. Individual plantings would vary from approximately two acres for sites that are hand planted up to approximately 50 acres for machine planted sites. Riparian herbaceous vegetation would be planted in the spring or early summer to allow for the establishment of roots before freezing takes place.

### **Hand Planting**

A small disturbance would be required in placing the trees and shrubs within the soil. This disturbance would vary depending on the species and type of seedling being planted, e.g., cuttings, bare root or containerized, but on average holes would not result in a disturbance area of greater than two feet in diameter. Generally, three inch diameter earth augers would be used to establish holes for plug plantings. If enough soil cannot be obtained to properly plant the seedling an auxiliary hole would be drilled within the vicinity. Hoedads or planting bars may also be used in place of earth augers if site conditions are not favorable, e.g., rocky sites. Occasionally, all-terrain vehicles and 4-wheel drive vehicles would be used to transport materials and equipment to the planting sites.

Riparian shrubs, such as willows, would be planted using cuttings from existing plants. An 18 to 24 inch long stem would be pushed into the stream bank deep enough to reach the water table. This would enable the stems to sprout and establish new plants.

Shovel-sized (about 8 inches by 8 inches by 6 inches deep) riparian vegetation plugs (i.e., sedges and rushes) would be collected from a properly functioning riparian area, with sufficient vegetation cover, and transplanted to areas identified as nonfunctional. Plugs would be planted near the top of drainages. When a plug is planted, a hole the size of the plug would be excavated. The plugs would be planted to ensure they had access to the water table. In some instances a straw mat would be used to hold the plug in place, reduce evaporation and decrease erosion until the vegetation is established.

### **Machine Planting**

Various mechanical planters would be available for implementation including a tractor drawn chisel plow or water wheel transplanter. A tractor drawn chisel plow creates a furrow in the ground that is closed by two packing wheels, which compact the soil. Tree or Shrub seedlings would be placed in the furrow by hand prior to compaction by the wheels. A water wheel

transplanter is also tractor drawn and, through the use of spikes, drives holes into the ground in which seedlings are planted and compacted by hand.

These applications are best suited for areas containing lightly packed soils with few large rocks and gentle slopes. The disturbance created from the plow is 12 to 14 inches wide and 8 to 12 inches deep. Plow rows would be planted approximately 10 feet apart with the seedlings spaced approximately 8 feet apart. The water wheel transplanter has alternating holes approximately six inches deep and between two to four feet apart.

### **Standard Operating Procedures**

To avoid the spread of noxious weeds, no cross country vehicular travel would occur in areas with known noxious weed infestations. Furthermore, any noxious weeds discovered during treatment or during post-treatment monitoring would be treated consistent with the Upper Snake-Pocatello Integrated Weed Control Program Programmatic Environmental Assessment (ID-310-2008-EA-43).

To avoid affecting cultural resources and sensitive plants, site specific inventories would be conducted. Areas where cultural resources or sensitive plants occur and could be affected would not be treated.

Although this project appears large in scope, implementation of the proposed action is limited by funding and the availability of volunteers and shrubs on an annual basis. The actions considered in this programmatic EA would be considered ongoing until a major change in resource conditions, policy, or priorities indicate that the Proposed Action is no longer necessary. Individual proposals would be analyzed by an Interdisciplinary (ID) team for detailed site-specific effects and this document would be reviewed to determine if the project adequately fits within the scope of this analysis.

### **Preliminary Alternative Development**

#### **Alternative 1: The Proposed Action**

Under the Proposed Action, Shrubs would be planted in degraded areas, allowing for the potential increase of cover for Greater sage-grouse, migratory birds, and big game. Plantings in riparian areas would also have the potential to enhance water quality and riparian habitat through the reduction of erodible soils and the increase of vegetative shrub cover.

#### **Alternative 2: No Action Alternative**

Under the No Action Alternative, no plantings of shrubs would take place on any degraded BLM managed lands. These lands would continue to lack adequate shrub cover for Greater sage-grouse, big game, and migratory birds. Additionally, lower condition and nonfunctional riparian areas would not be rehabilitated, leading to continued increases in sediment loads from erosion, which would hamper aquatic species and reduce overall aquatic habitat.

### **Decision to be Made**

The Field Office Manager has the option to choose any of the alternatives presented here and future alternatives analyzed within the scope of the Upper Snake Habitat Restoration Planting Project Programmatic Environmental Assessment.

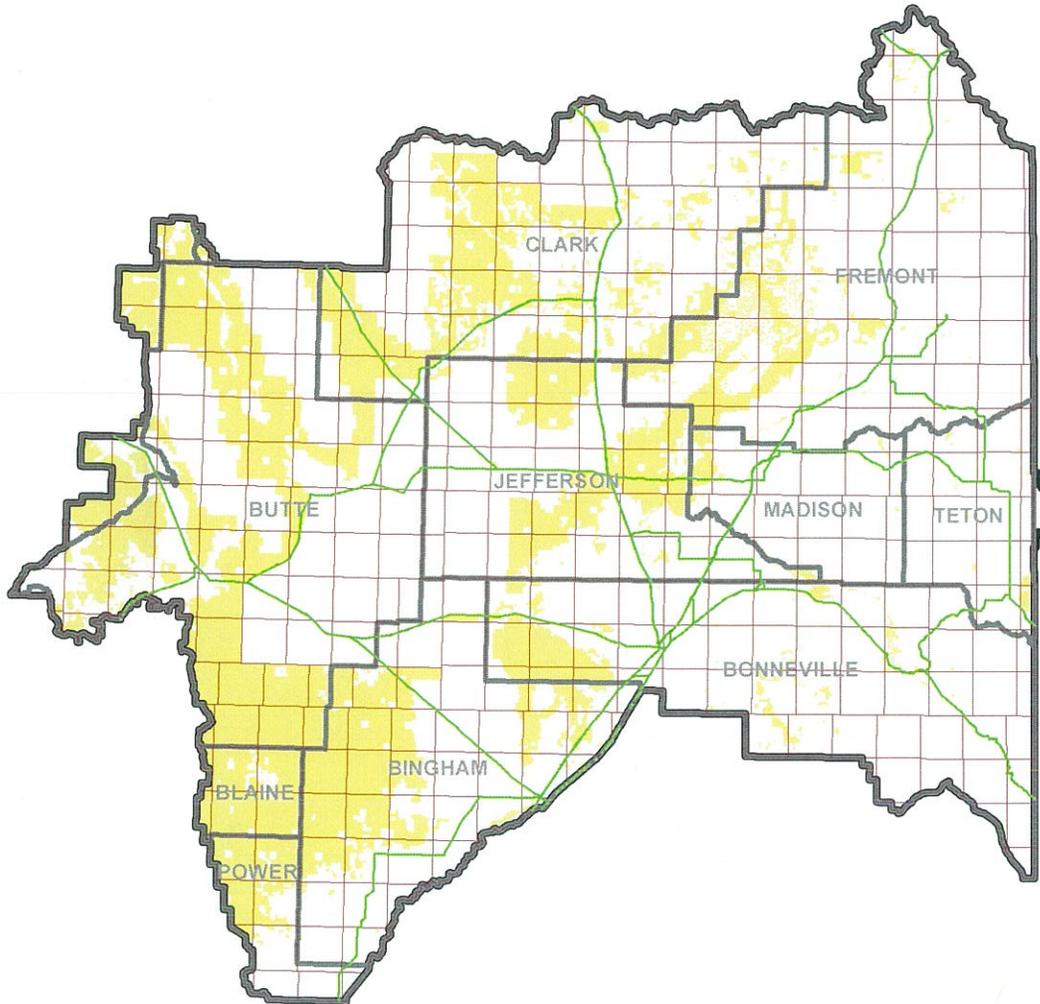
**Public Input Needed**

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action and alternative(s). Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by March 12, 2013, 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. 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.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is:

Harley Bateman  
Fuels Technician  
1405 Hollipark Ave,  
Idaho Falls ID 83401  
(208)524-7500

# Upper Snake Habitat Restoration Planting Project



No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management for use of the data for purposes not intended by BLM.

**DRAFT**



**Legend**

- Major Highways
- Townships
- Counties
- Upper Snake Field Office

**Surface Management Agency**

- Bureau of Land Management

**Surface Management Agency - USFO**