

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

Finding of No Significant Impact

June 25, 2013

PREPARING OFFICE

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Finding of No Significant Impact

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**NE WARNER FUELS REDUCTION AND HABITAT RESTORATION
PROJECT**

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Chapter 1. Finding of No Significant Impact

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1.1. BACKGROUND

The BLM Surprise Field Office (SFO) is proposing hazardous fuels reduction and habitat restoration treatments on BLM-managed lands in the Vya Sage-Grouse Population Management Unit (PMU) that lies in the vicinity of northern Surprise Valley, Barrel Springs and Long Valley. The Proposed Action would utilize a mix of hand clearing, mechanical thinning, broadcast burning, and pile burning to remove invasive juniper trees on up to 100,000 acres of sage-steppe ecosystems. These projects are proposed to enhance and restore sage-grouse habitat by treating juniper in sage-steppe plant communities which are declining in vigor as a result of juniper encroachment. Project objectives include improving sage-grouse and sage-steppe obligate species habitats, improving hydrologic conditions, enhancing the forage base for wildlife and domestic animals, and reducing hazardous fuels.

Historically, vegetation community composition, structures and dispersion within the northern Surprise Valley and Barrel Springs areas were heavily influenced by wildfire. Historical fire patterns characterized by more frequent low to moderate intensity fires maintained juniper at low densities in most of the area, with scattered areas of dense juniper woodlands. However, fire regimes within sage-steppe ecosystems have been modified as a result of domestic livestock grazing and wildfire suppression.

As the density of juniper has increased, large portions of the sage-steppe ecosystem have been converted to predominantly juniper woodlands. This shift in vegetative communities has resulted in a loss of biodiversity on the landscape, diminished habitat values, particularly for sage steppe obligate species; and has contributed to degraded surface hydrologic conditions. Increased juniper density in sage-steppe habitats also results in a decline in ground cover and exposure of bare soils, as well as increased erosion potential and a loss of soil productivity.

Juniper is widely scattered throughout the Surprise Field Office area and the intermountain west and management issues surrounding this vegetation community usually focus on stand density and/or encroachment into adjacent habitats. Management of juniper is a complex issue for BLM. Historically, juniper existed in a continuum of seral stages throughout the landscape, dominated by two stand types. Old-growth stands typically inhabit areas of rocky, shallow soils surrounded by limited fine fuels. In these areas, fire intervals are infrequent. The second dominant stand type is the juniper savanna, which is characterized by young trees across the landscape at low densities within areas of deep soils, experiencing more frequent, mixed-severity fires. However, juniper has expanded to greater than 30 percent crown closure within many areas that would have typically supported low-density juniper woodland. In these areas, understory vegetation declines resulting in expanses of bare ground and a loss of key ecosystem components.

This is a Programmatic Environmental Assessment document for juniper reduction treatments within the Vya PMU using an Integrated Vegetation Management Approach (IVM) that is tiered to and consistent with the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Final Environmental Impact Statement (SSER FEIS). Projects consistent with activity descriptions and project design features as described in this EA will be available for implementation across the Project Area. Decisions for treatments will be limited to a maximum of 10,000 acres per year for a total of 100,000 acres over a 10-year period. It is expected that treatments would be dispersed across the Vya PMU, and no more than 2% of lands within the PMU would be treated under this EA in any one year. Actual acres treated in a given year will depend upon funding availability and other field office workloads and priorities. Projects proposed under this Programmatic EA may either be part of a larger landscape planning effort or be implemented as stand-alone projects. It is expected that

streamlining the planning process through a programmatic project development and analysis will greatly improve management efficiencies. The BLM will decide on a variety of vegetation management treatments, implemented individually or in combination, which are designed to attain multiple management objectives using an IVM approach. Treatments will be designed based on the site-level phase of juniper encroachment.

After the public review period for this EA and FONSI and signing of a Decision Record, it will become available for the Surprise Field Office (SFO) to use for specific projects. The SFO resource specialists will propose and develop individual projects consistent with descriptions and stipulations specified in this EA. Individual projects would require preparation of a Documentation of Land Use Plan Conformance and Documentation of National Environmental Policy Act Adequacy (DNA), tiered to this programmatic document, to identify specific project areas and select appropriate treatments based on management direction in this programmatic document. Additional on-the ground surveys and clearances for special status wildlife, plants, and cultural resources would be required for each project plan area prior to implementing treatments. All projects will meet current direction for land management and appropriate consultation under the Endangered Species Act and National Historic Protection Action (NHPA) and will be completed as necessary for each project. If, during the DNA process, it is determined that effects will exceed the effects disclosed in this EA, separate NEPA analysis would be required or the project will not be implemented. Project proposals/draft Decision Records would be written and posted on the SFO BLM website and available for at least 30 days for public review. Following public review, Decision Records would be subject to Administrative Remedies in accordance with 43 CFR Chapter 4 regulations. See Appendix G in the EA for pre-project clearances and a template for Decision Records that will be used for project-specific decisions.

Due to the large size of the restoration area, treatments will occur across the Project Area over several years. Implementation of juniper reduction treatments within the Project Area on any given year will occur in smaller treatment areas within the Project Area (typically from 20 to 1000+ acres) based on prioritization of habitat (see Figure 2.1.1 in EA) and ability to secure funding for a certain project area. Crews completing juniper reduction projects will follow the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's), Standard Resource Protection Measures (SRPM's) and mitigation measures outlined in this document. Additionally, more intensive cultural and wildlife surveys will be completed in a treatment unit before implementation of the project occurs. Cultural and wildlife staff will outline additional mitigation measures, as needed, to ensure resources within a specific treatment area are not negatively and/or adversely affected. The SFO Field Manager will review and approve all additional mitigation measures. See Appendices D, E, and F in the EA for SOP's, SRMP's, and Mitigation Measures.

1.2. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the actions will not have a significant effect on the human environment other than those already analyzed in the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy FEIS. All environmental effects for this decision (listed below) have been discussed and disclosed in the Environmental Assessment (EA); therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. Project specific proposals will require all necessary surveys, clearances,

and consultation prior to signing of a Decision Record implementing specific treatments within the project area.

1.3. CONTEXT

The Vya PMU Habitat Restoration and Fuels Reduction Project Area is located within the Vya PMU, excluding areas without juniper encroachment, private lands, and WSAs. The need for the action is to address juniper encroachment within Preliminary Priority sage-grouse habitat at a landscape scale to ensure large blocks of habitat remain intact and connected. The Vya PMU Habitat Restoration and Fuels Reduction Project Area (Project Area; see Figure 1.2.1 in EA) comprises 195,578 acres within the Vya PMU. The Project Area represents portions of the Vya PMU that have varying phases of juniper encroachment ranging from very low densities of juniper to high densities of juniper. Of the 195,578 acre Project Area that has varying degrees of juniper invasion, no more than 100,000 acres would be treated under the Proposed Action over a 10-year period, and a maximum of 10,000 acres could be treated each year. See Table 2.1.1 in the EA for a breakdown of treatment types and associated acres for the Project Area.

1.4. INTENSITY

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The EA has considered both beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed habitat restoration and hazardous fuels reduction project. Considering all impacts, the project will result in improved habitat conditions, reduced fuel loads, improved vegetative condition and fire resiliency within the proposed Action Area. The Proposed Action would decrease fuel loads and could potentially reduce fire line intensities within the Action Area, potentially resulting in an increased ability for fire suppression resources to suppress wildfire in and around private property surrounding the Action Area. In addition, proposed treatment would facilitate Resource Management Plan objectives for using wildland fires to restore, maintain, and improve ecosystems. The Proposed Action would facilitate the restoration of fire as a natural ecological process, potentially resulting in the restoration of more diverse vegetative communities within the area and complementing prescribed fire and fuel reduction actions implemented within adjoining forests, refuges, and BLM field offices encompassing a vast area in northeast California and northwest Nevada. Potential adverse effects to Visual and Biological resources resulting from implementation of the Proposed Action would be minimized through implementation of proposed SOP's and mitigation measures.

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

The Proposed Action would benefit public health and safety by decreasing fuel loads and reducing fire line intensities within the Action Area, potentially resulting in an increased ability for fire suppression resources to suppress wildfire in and around private property surrounding the project area.

Per BLM Standards for Fire and Aviation and any applicable State and or County regulations, a Prescribed Burn Plan would need to be developed, reviewed and approved by SFO Fire Management Officer, SFO Manager, NOR CAL Fire Management Officer and the BLM State Fire Management Officer before any prescribed burns occur.

The Proposed Action would open new areas to firewood gathering. It is most likely that people who already gather firewood would divert their activities to these areas from other areas, so the number of people and amount of firewood gathered per year will remain relatively constant. In this circumstance the selected alternative would have no effect on public health and safety. Cutting firewood, even with already downed trees, has an inherent level of risk. If more people gathered their own firewood due to the Proposed Action there would be some incremental increase in risk to public health and safety.

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.

Major habitat types within the Action Area include big sagebrush, low sagebrush, timber, and antelope bitterbrush, with important inclusions such as curleaf mountain mahogany, western juniper woodland, intermittent and ephemeral drainages, riverine seasonal wetlands, riparian areas and wet meadows. The project area does not contain any park lands, prime or unique farmlands, or wild and scenic rivers. No Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are included within the Action Area.

The foundations of much of western Great Basin/Northeast California prehistory and ethnology were developed in this region. As a result of Cultural Resource investigations for the Action Area, a total of 47 sites, five rock stack feature locations, and 75 isolated finds were documented. Cultural resource survey will be completed prior to any restoration activities. Any recommendations therein will be followed. Any resource of concern identified to be at risk from the project activities will be protected from damage or disturbance. There are no effects on park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

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

The Proposed Action would decrease fuel loads and could reduce fire line intensities within the Action Area, potentially resulting in an increased ability for fire suppression resources to suppress wildfire in and around private property surrounding the project area. In addition, proposed treatment would facilitate Resource Management Plan objectives for using wildland fires to restore, maintain, and improve ecosystems. Implementation of the Proposed Action project would result in short term effects, ultimately leading to long-term benefits to the quality of the human environment. Potential adverse effects would be avoided or minimized through implementation of proposed SOP's and mitigation measures relevant to biological and visual resources. Potential 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.

There is inherent risk involved with vegetation manipulation in the Great Basin. Annual weather is very variable and unpredictable. The weather from the time of treatment and for two to several years post treatment is critical to the short and long term results of the project. Weather is an uncontrollable variable.

The Proposed Action implements scientific information and experiential knowledge gained over the past several decades of managing western juniper expansion in sagebrush plant communities and the short and long term impacts to greater sage-grouse habitat values. The Surprise Field Office has numerous examples of similar projects successfully implemented. The EA did not find unique or unknown risks to the human environment that were not identified in the 2008 Surprise field Office RMP and FEIS and the Sage-Steppe Ecosystem Restoration FEIS.

Proposed vegetative treatments represent accepted standard management practices. Mitigation measures, SOP's and SRPM's have been identified to address the potential for resource specific adverse effects as identified by the EA. Potential uncertainties (i.e. changes in weather during prescribed burning) would be eliminated or reduced to very low levels through development of a prescribed burn plan that will establish acceptable conditions for prescribed burning and will prescribe relevant monitoring requirements.

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.

Similar restoration projects have occurred numerous times for many years throughout BLM. There is no evidence that this action has potentially significant environmental effects. 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 this Programmatic EA might be used to determine appropriate actions in future similar type projects, those projects would be subject to environmental assessment standards and as independent decision-making processes.

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

The environmental analysis did not reveal any cumulative effects beyond those already analyzed in the Surprise Field Office RMP and FEIS and the Sage-Steppe Ecosystem Restoration FEIS which encompasses the project area.

All resources have been evaluated for cumulative impacts in the EA and no significant impacts were identified. Other fuels reduction and vegetation treatment projects may be proposed in the region. These projects seen together with anticipated future proposed land disturbing activities in the area would not result in cumulatively significant impacts within the identified cumulative assessment area. Overall, future similar projects would improve vegetation and habitat diversity and protect watersheds from erosion and hazards from large wildfires. As standard procedure, future projects would be subject to cumulative impact analysis and review on an area-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 in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Hand thinning within sites and implementation of other recommended avoidance measures outlined in the Standard Resource Protection Measures in Appendix D would reduce or mitigate potential adverse effects to historic properties found within the Action Area.

As part of the Pre-project clearances identified in the attached EA, prior to treatment implementation, a cultural resource specialist would complete the appropriate surveys.

Heavy equipment would not be utilized within identified site boundaries if it is deemed to likely result in damages to the site. Sites containing artifacts or features susceptible to fire damage or destruction would be protected from burning. Cultural resource properties would be protected throughout the life of the project. For all of the ineligible cultural properties, including the isolated finds, no further archaeological work is recommended. In regards to the proposed project-related treatment activities for ineligible sites, the targeted trees and vegetation can be removed mechanically. For those cultural properties recommended eligible or are unevaluated to the National Register, treatments will comply with the BLM protocol with the SHPO. Eligible and unevaluated sites should be flagged for mechanical avoidance as deemed necessary prior to project implementation activities. Hand thinning should be utilized within cultural sites when deemed necessary. If temporary roads are required to access portions of the project area, a cultural survey should be conducted prior to any ground disturbing activities.

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 ESA of 1973.

There are no known federally-listed species present in the treatment areas. Implementation of the Proposed Action would result in short-term effects to habitat for some sage steppe obligate species. However, long-term habitat productivity for sage steppe obligate species would improve following restoration. Juniper-dependent species would experience short-term and long-term effects resulting from proposed treatments and resultant restoration activities. It is anticipated that implementation of the Standard Operating Procedures identified in Appendix F, in combination with proposed mitigation measures relevant to wildlife would minimize potential adverse effects.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local 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 and alternative actions are proposed in conformance with the *Surprise Resource Management Plan* (2008), and the *Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy Final Environmental Impact Statement* (2008). The proposed and alternative actions are also consistent with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003) and the *Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* (2001), and other Federal, state, and local policies and plans to the maximum extent possible.

1.5. Signatures:

Approved by:

Tim Burke [Date]
Acting Field Manager, Surprise
Field Office