

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT**

Twin Falls District
Burley Field Office
15 East 200 South
Burley, ID 83318

**Scoping Information Package
Burley Integrated Hazardous Fuels Management Project
DOI-BLM-ID-T020-2013-0033-EA**

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to create fuel breaks in accordance with the Cassia Resource Management Plan, the Craters of the Moon Monument Resource Management Plan and the Twin Falls Management Framework 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 December 1, 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

Concerns over hazardous fuel loads occurring on land managed by the BLM Burley Field Office (BFO) and public land throughout the country are increasing as a result of increasing populations, increasing fire frequency due to cheatgrass invasion and increasing fire severity. As a result, there is a greater risk of either wildfire moving off public land onto the property of adjacent landowners or fires moving from private land onto public land. Once a fire crosses the boundary from public to private, the cost of the fire increases both from the BLM perspective of an increased need for increased firefighting effort, but also through the loss of cropland, hayfields, livestock, farm structures, homes and potentially human lives.

This project has multiple objectives. The most critical objective of this action is to protect lives and private property by reducing hazardous fuel loads along the public-private land boundary of the Burley Field office to reduce or slow the spread of fire. This action is also expected to protect important habitat in the Burley Field Office for sage-grouse populations and sagebrush-obligate species, reduce the probability of wildfires consuming large acreages across the BFO, enhance firefighter options to safely engage wildfires in remote locations, minimize acreage where sagebrush cover is lost and at risk of conversion to annual grassland from repeated wildfire and reduce the cost of wildfire rehabilitation by reducing fire size.

The proposed action to create fuel breaks (strips or blocks of land on which the vegetation, debris and detritus have been reduced or modified) are expected to meet the objectives because the methods proposed are expected to reduce flame length and thus reduce or slow the fire spread.

Proposed Action

Introduction

The proposed action is to create fuel breaks within ½ mile of the BLM – private land boundaries and along roads located on public land within the BFO (see Maps 1-4). The BLM proposes to use a variety of methods to create the fuel breaks depending on the conditions of the vegetation. Potential methods may include mowing, disking, bulldozing, chaining, harrowing, chemical, mastication or hand-cutting trees, road maintenance or improvement, biological methods and seeding.

The forthcoming EA will analyze the effects of the proposed action programmatically. The reason why the BLM is using this approach is to provide a framework to adapt the management of hazardous fuels to changing environmental conditions (fuel type, fuel load, fuel moisture, sensitive resources) as well as changing human environmental conditions (new constructions, private land practice changes). With the exception of the individual site specific actions identified for implementation in the EA, project implementation would require additional public involvement, environmental review and documentation including but not limited to a Documentation of NEPA Adequacy (DNA) and Decision Record.

Prioritization of treatment areas would be determined by the degree to which private and public property is threatened. Highest priority would be for the protection of home, business and vulnerable infrastructure. The BLM would also consider treatments which could potentially protect cropland and private rangelands. Some treatment areas have been included for the protection of important sage-grouse habitat.

The determination of method would depend on the condition of the vegetation, individual project goals, limitations for the protection of sensitive resources and potential logistical limitations such as terrain, proximity and size of the individual project. While the overall project area includes treatment analysis widths of ½ mile, individual treatments would most likely be implemented with a narrower footprint area. Having a ½ mile analysis area would allow flexibility in the actual treatment area to avoid affecting sensitive resources, allow flexibility in treatment placement to negotiate difficult terrain and to allow rest to treated vegetation by shifting fuel break placement.

Treatment Methods

Mowing

A deck mower may be used to reduce vegetation height on sites having vegetation dominated by either grasses or shrubs. Treatment width and residual height of mowed vegetation would be determined on a case by case basis.

Disking

Disk plowing may be implemented to create a bare soil fuel break. Mechanical disk plowing may be implemented in the spring or summer primarily in grassland vegetation types. Application of herbicides such as *Glyphosate* following disk plowing may occur to eliminate any later germination of invasive plants. The width of plowed fuel breaks may vary depending on terrain and fuel type. Areas receiving a plow treatment must be rehabilitated with perennial vegetation following cessation of use.

Bulldozing

Bulldozing may also be implemented to create a bare soil fuel break. Bulldozing may be implemented in the spring or summer in any vegetation type (grass, shrub, woodland). Application of herbicides such as *Glyphosate* following dozing may occur to eliminate any later germination of invasive plants. The width of bulldozed fuel breaks may vary depending on terrain and fuel type. Bulldozed areas must be rehabilitated with perennial vegetation following cessation of use.

Harrowing

A harrow implement, such as a Dixie harrow, would be utilized to reduce hazardous fuels in grass or shrub vegetation types or to prepare a seedbed or cover seed broadcast over an area. A Dixie harrow is typically used in situations requiring thinning or removal of a live or dead overstory of shrubs in combination with seeding. The Dixie harrow consists of metal tubes attached to a 1,500 lb. drawbar. Each tube has four sets of steel fins which protrude 12 inches from either side of the tube. When the Dixie harrow is dragged along the ground the design of these fins allow for the tubes to twist and turn which reduces woody cover and covers seed broadcast on to the soil surface. A rubber-tired tractor of 150 horsepower or greater is required to pull the Dixie harrow effectively. A tined harrow could be used to cover broadcast seed where no live or dead woody cover is present.

Chemical Treatment

Chemical treatment would involve the application of herbicides at certain plant growth stages to suppress or kill the plant. Herbicides would be used to prepare the seedbed for vegetative fuel breaks, for maintenance by reducing the amount of fuel available for wildfire and for reducing the prevalence of annual grasses in stands of perennial grass. Chemical application as the

exclusive method of establishing or maintaining fuels breaks may also occur primarily in areas dominated by noxious and invasive weeds. If chemical application is used as the exclusive method, the fuel break will eventually require re-vegetation to prevent the loss of soil.

Only those herbicides approved for use on public lands would be employed in chemical treatments subject to the standard operating procedures presented in the Record of Decision for the *Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement* (DOI-BLM 2007b). Only ground-based application methods would be employed.

Hand cutting

Hand cutting individual or small groups of trees may be utilized in concert with other methods where a few trees may limit the use of the other methods or where terrain impairs the use of other methods. Trees would be cut with chainsaws or loppers and branches would be scattered on the ground.

Chaining

Chaining would be utilized to create fuel breaks where brittle brush, live trees or tree skeletons preclude the use of a deck mower or harrow. Prior to chaining, treatment areas would be broadcast seeded with a perennial seed mix. Chaining can be done on irregular, moderately rocky terrain, with slopes of up to 20%. Chaining may cause soil disturbance, but the plant debris can be left in place to minimize runoff and erosion, shade the soil surface, and maintain soil moisture and nutrient recycling. Alternatively, the debris may be burned to facilitate seeding, improve scenic values, and eliminate potential rodent habitat. For the purposes of fuel type conversion, chaining is a cost-effective means of incorporating seed into soil, especially in burned areas. Chaining provides a variety of seeding depths and microsites, as well as improves ground cover and forage production. Recent studies have shown improved seedling establishment on chained sites and less downy brome establishment 3 years after fire in chained sagebrush and pinyon-juniper habitats (Ott et al. 2003).

Chaining consists of pulling heavy (40 to 90 pounds per link) chains in a “U” or “J” shaped pattern behind two crawler-type tractors. The chain is usually 250 to 300 feet long and may weigh as much as 32,000 pounds. The width of each swath varies from 75 feet to 120 feet. Chain link size, modifications to links and operation of the crawler tractors determine the number and size of trees and shrubs that are removed and the effects on understory species. Chaining can be conducted during the appropriate season to benefit soil stability and plant seeding, and reduce the invasion of weeds (Monsen et al. 2004).

Mastication

Mastication would be utilized to remove live or dead shrubs or trees (e.g. juniper skeletons remaining following prescribed fire) with less soil surface disturbance compared to chaining. Mastication treatment may be followed by spot herbicide application for species that re-sprout. Mastication is achieved utilizing an implement such as a Fecon® head attached to a crawler-

tractor. The head grinds the woody plant from the top down, creating debris that acts as mulch on the soil surface. Mastication can be used in combination with broadcast seeding; the woody debris resulting from mastication provides cover for seed.

Road Maintenance or Improvement

Proposed road maintenance and improvement actions would include using heavy equipment to blade or grade existing roadways to remove vegetation and improve access. Grading of road surfaces would allow for maintenance, improvement and creation of ditches and shoulders (maximum width for any type of improvements would be 22 feet wide). Maintenance of roads may also include installation of culverts, construction of rolling dip gravel stream crossings, excavating the road base and replacing with gravel and boulder fill (in meadow areas), installing cattleguards, sediment barriers and surfacing areas with gravel. Application of pre-emergent herbicides after grading is also proposed to reduce the spread and establishment of noxious weeds. Road shoulders may be seeded with fire resistant/resilient grass and forb species in where seeding is deemed appropriate and additional shoulder and bar ditch maintenance is complete. Once maintained, roads would serve as fuel breaks and allow for better access for fire suppression equipment. All existing and proposed road improvements would be subject to periodic maintenance.

Targeted Grazing

Targeted Grazing would require the use of livestock at a high intensity to remove hazardous fuels to create fire breaks. Targeted grazing may be employed as a stand-alone treatment or in concert with other treatments such as green strips. Since the BLM does not own livestock, this treatment method would require a contract with a qualified livestock operator. No preference would be given to existing permit holders. Targeted Grazing may require additional temporary facilities for implementation such as water haul sites, temporary fencing, salt or mineral supplementation. No additional feeding would be allowed. An individual implementation and monitoring plan would be developed for treatments employing this method. The implementation and monitoring plan would specify the targeted area, the timing of the treatment and the desired effect. Due to the general lack of uniformity of vegetation removal offered by grazing, targeted grazing fuel breaks may need to be wider than other fuel breaks to ensure fuel loads are reduced over enough area to retard fire progress.

Re-vegetation

A vegetated fuel break would be created after a seedbed preparation has occurred (through a plow or similar treatment). Drill or broadcast seeding during the fall season would be utilized to establish or re-establish desirable perennial vegetation for the purposes of creating vegetation fuel breaks or rehabilitation of past fuel breaks after they are no longer necessary. Rangeland drills or no-till drills would be utilized to seed proposed grass, forb, and shrub mixtures after seedbed treatments (herbicide, disk plowing, etc.). The rangeland drill was developed to seed rough rangeland sites. The rangeland drill is typically used in open, relatively flat topography, which is fairly absent of larger rocks (8-10" in diameter). This method works well in most soil types and is the primary seeding method that would be used. A no-till drill may be utilized where less rocky conditions allow its use. The advantage to using the no-till drill is less soil

disturbance; however, no-till drills are not readily available and can only be used in non-rocky soils. The drill seed method has the greatest probability of seeding success among various seeding tools and methods. Broadcast seeding would be utilized on small tracts or when the terrain is not conducive to drill seeding. The broadcast seeding is normally followed with a cover treatment with a harrow implement.

Treatment Restrictions

Cultural Resources (from FMDA pages 30-31)

Ensure that existing cultural and paleontological data and information is reviewed and that required and appropriate cultural resource inventories/surveys are completed prior to implementing site-specific fuels projects to meet BLM policy.

A Class II or Class III inventory will be conducted for all proposed projects unless previous inventory has been deemed adequate in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office and Native American Tribes.

All projects will be subject to further site-specific analyses and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act compliance and consultation.

Bulldozer blading or disking would not occur within 300 feet of known historic trails, historic properties, Districts, Landmarks and ACECs designated for cultural resources.

Riparian Resources

No treatment of any type in riparian areas.

Botanical Resources

No herbicide use or plowing would be allowed in areas identified as *Erigeron latus* (fleabane) habitat.

Wildlife Resources

The use of forage kochia would be restricted to ¼ mile from major roadways such as interstates and highways to reduce big game-vehicle collision.

All treatments would be restricted during the Migratory Bird nesting season (May 1 – July 15) unless a wildlife survey is completed and nests are avoided.

Livestock class would be restricted to cattle only where treatment areas overlap bighorn sheep use areas.

Active long-billed curlew (*Numenius americanus*) and burrowing owl nests would be avoided from treatment from April 1 and June 30 (Cassia Resource Management Plan, 1985, Appendix B, p. 67).

On-the-ground vegetation treatments would be avoided within 0.5 miles of direct line of sight or within 0.25 miles of bald eagle winter concentration sites during the winter roosting season (November 1 through March 1).

Aerial treatment applications will be avoided within 0.5 mile of bald eagle winter concentration sites during November 1 through March 1.

If treatments are necessary to meet vegetation treatment objectives outside of the temporal and spatial restrictions for bald or golden eagles, the BLM may apply for a Non-Purposeful Take Permit from the FWS. The BLM would not conduct such treatments until a permit is acquired (USFWS 2009).

Trees with raptor nests would be protected. Activities within 2,000 to 3,000 feet of known ferruginous hawk nest sites would be avoided from March 1st to July 15th.

Treatments within 0.6 miles of occupied Columbian sharp-tail grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus*) leks that results in or could likely result in disturbance to displaying birds would be avoided from approximately 6:00 pm to 9:00 am. This guideline would be applied from March 15 through May 1.

Sage-grouse would be used as an umbrella species when planning vegetation treatments in sagebrush steppe (Noss, 1990; Rich & Altman, 2001; Rowland, Wisdom, Suring, & Meinke, 2005). The assumption is habitat needs for other sagebrush-obligate sensitive species would benefit from protection, improvement, and restoration of sage-grouse habitat. Other sagebrush obligates include pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*), sage thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*), sage sparrow (*Amphispiza belli*), and Brewer's sparrow (*Spizella breweri*). In some cases, some species may have habitat needs in addition to what is outlined for sage-grouse. Where identified, the interdisciplinary team would address unique habitat needs of other sagebrush obligates. The following design features would apply to sagebrush steppe habitats.

- The Idaho Sage-grouse Preliminary Priority Habitat map (BLM, April 2012) or subsequently approved BLM planning map would be used when developing site-specific vegetation treatment plans that benefit sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate species.
- The Idaho Sage-grouse Habitat Planning map (BLM, updated 2011) and Greater Sage-Grouse Preliminary Priority and General Habitat map (Version 2, April 2012) would be used when developing vegetation treatment activities that benefit sage-grouse and other sagebrush-obligate species.
- Temporary protection fences would generally not be constructed within 400 yards of an active sage-grouse lek. If sage-grouse collisions are possible due to fence placement, marking or flagging would be done.
- Vegetation treatments within 0.6 miles of occupied sage-grouse leks that results in or could likely result in disturbance to lekking birds would be avoided from approximately 6:00 pm to 9:00 am. This guideline would apply from March 15 through May 1.

- Treatments in areas supporting sage-grouse nesting habitat would be limited from April 30 through June 15
- Treatments in close proximity to sage-grouse wintering habitats would be limited from December 1 through March 1
- Standing dead juniper trees that are potential raptor perches may be felled as needed to protect pygmy rabbits and sage-grouse from excessive predation. (Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-Grouse in Idaho, 2006, p. 4-97.)

Botanical Resources

Noxious weed inventories would be implemented prior to treatment. Areas having known infestations of root spreading noxious weeds such as rush skeletonweed would not be plowed.

The following design features would apply to areas containing plants designated as BLM sensitive species and their habitats.

- Requirements of individual BLM sensitive plants would be considered when designing ground-disturbing activities in their habitats.
- Seeding within occupied habitat would not be done, unless it is clearly beneficial for the BLM sensitive plants occupying the site.
- Highly competitive non-native plant materials would not be used in BLM sensitive plant habitats unless native plant materials are unavailable or they are needed to stabilize a site.
- The biology and ecology of BLM sensitive plants would be considered when selecting herbicides and application methods. Treatments would be designed to minimize or mitigate adverse impacts to the plants and their habitat.

Recreation Resources

Areas having class 1 or 2 visual resource limitations may not be treated.

Preliminary Issues

Issues identified through internal scoping include the potential for the spread of noxious and invasive weeds and the protection of priority sage-grouse habitat.

Preliminary Alternative Development

There are no preliminary alternatives developed at this time due to the fact that the proposed action has not been defined.

Decision to be Made

The Burley Field Manager will decide whether to implement the project and when and where the project would occur. If the Field Manager decides to apply the treatment, he will also determine

which design feature mitigation measure or restrictions are needed to reduce impacts to the natural resources in the project area.

Public Input Needed

Recognizing that all public land boundaries are not all equal in regards to wildfire risk and fuel type, the BLM needs more information from adjacent land owners regarding their individual needs for fuels management and interest in partnering with the BLM to maintain fuel breaks.

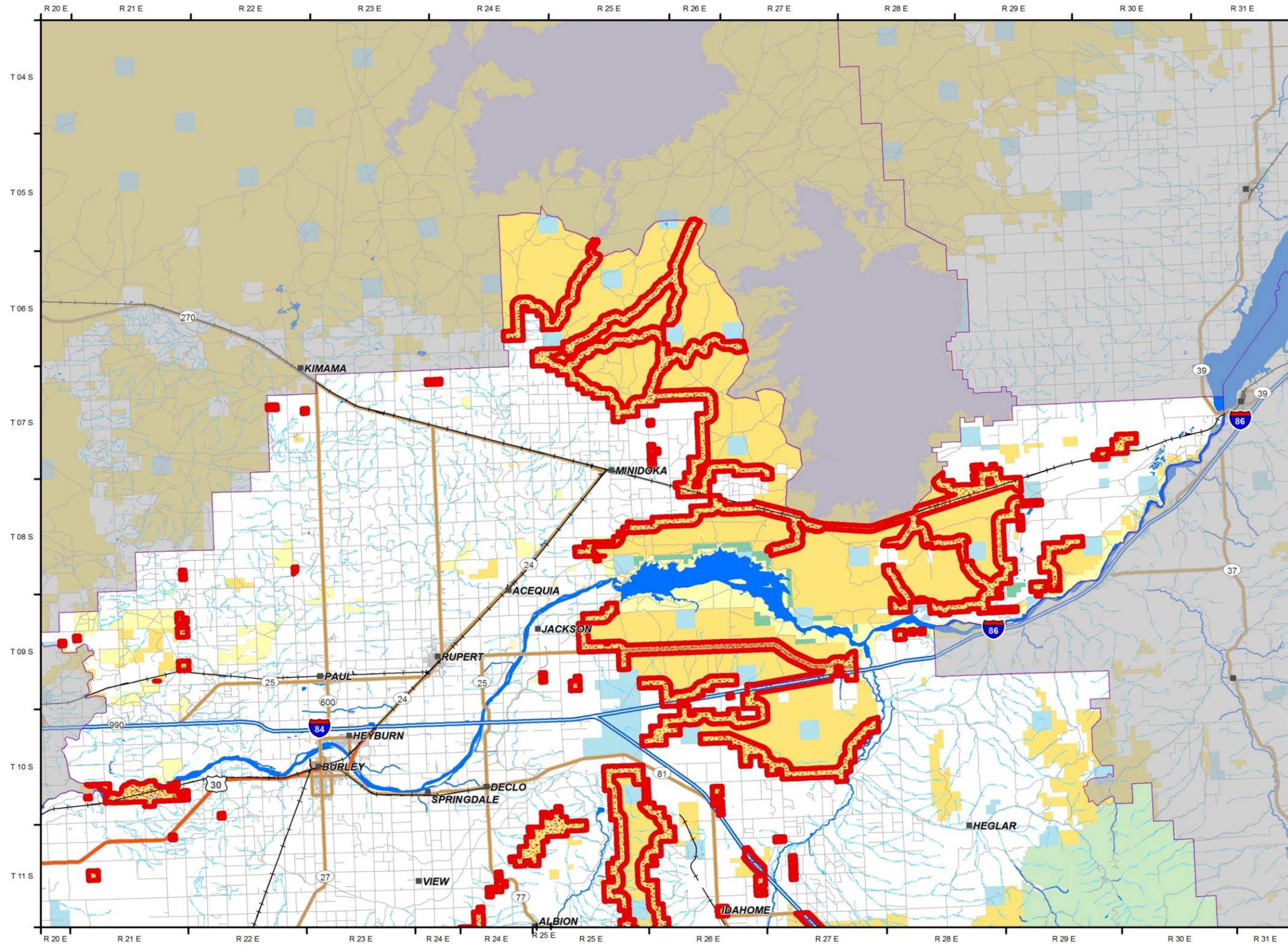
Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by September 30, 2013 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside 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.

Written comments must be submitted to Michael Courtney, Field Manager, 15 East 200 South, Burley, ID 83318. The office business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are 7:45 am - 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or portable document format (.pdf) to blm_id_burleyoffice@blm.gov. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed, in other formats than those listed, or containing viruses will be rejected. To be most helpful, comments sent electronically should include 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.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, be advised that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold from public review your personal identifying information, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

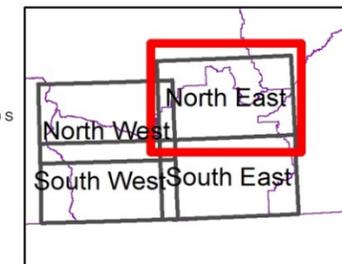
The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Jeremy Bisson, Wildlife Biologist (208) 677-6600.

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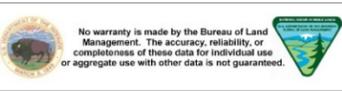


Legend

- Potential Fuel Breaks
- Towns Communities
- BLM Offices
- Outside BFO
- Railroad
- Roadways**
- Interstate
- Highway
- Local Road
- Local Road
- Streams**
- Perennial Stream
- Intermittent Stream
- Lake
- Surface Management Agency**
- Bureau of Land Management
- Bureau of Reclamation
- Military, Department of Defense
- Bankhead-Jones Land Use
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- Forest Service
- Fish and Wildlife Service
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- State
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- Historical Open Water
- Associated Maps



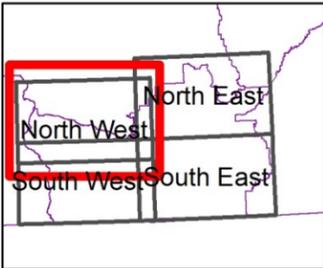
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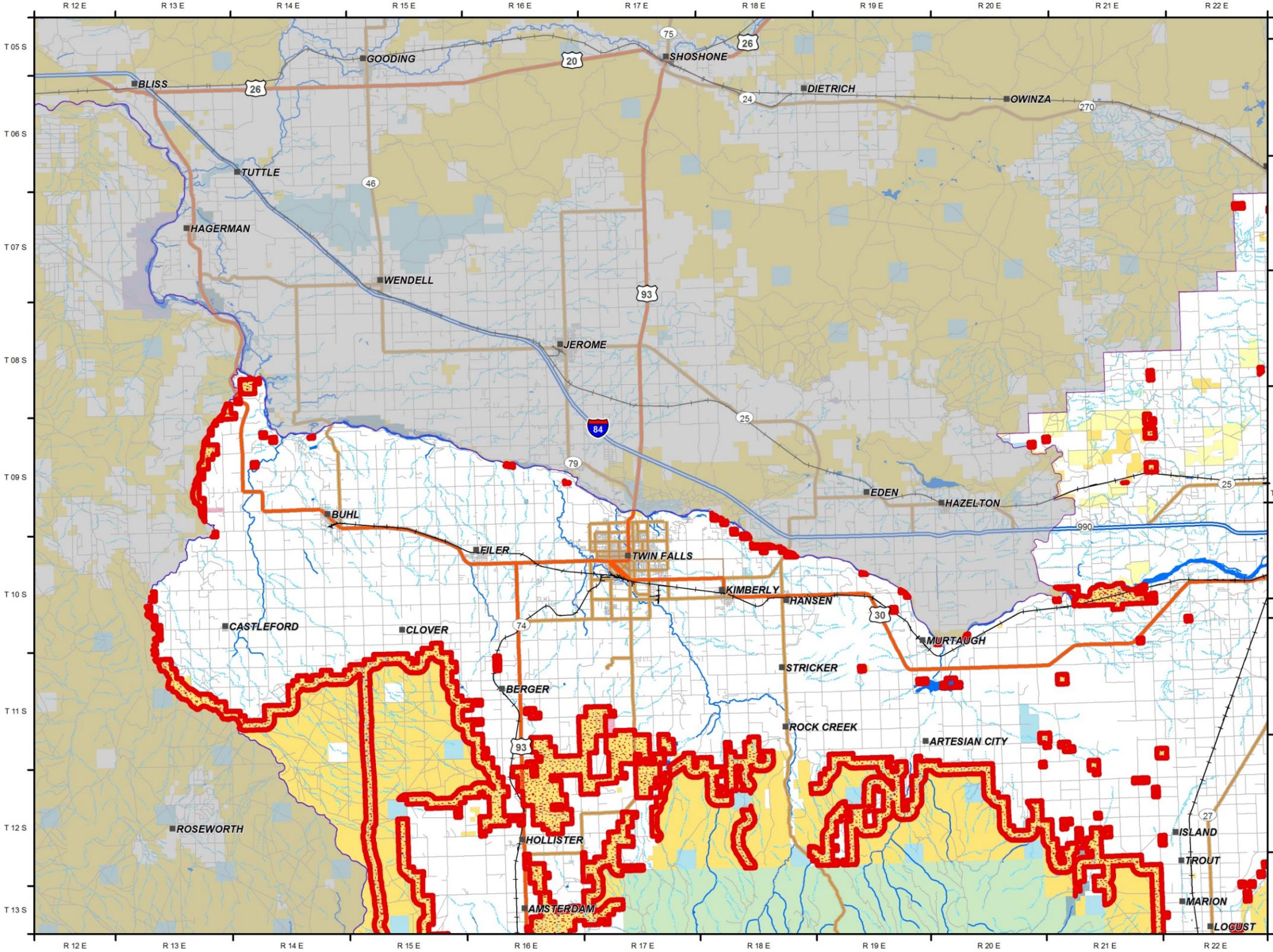
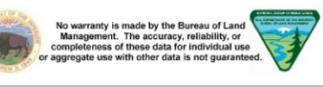
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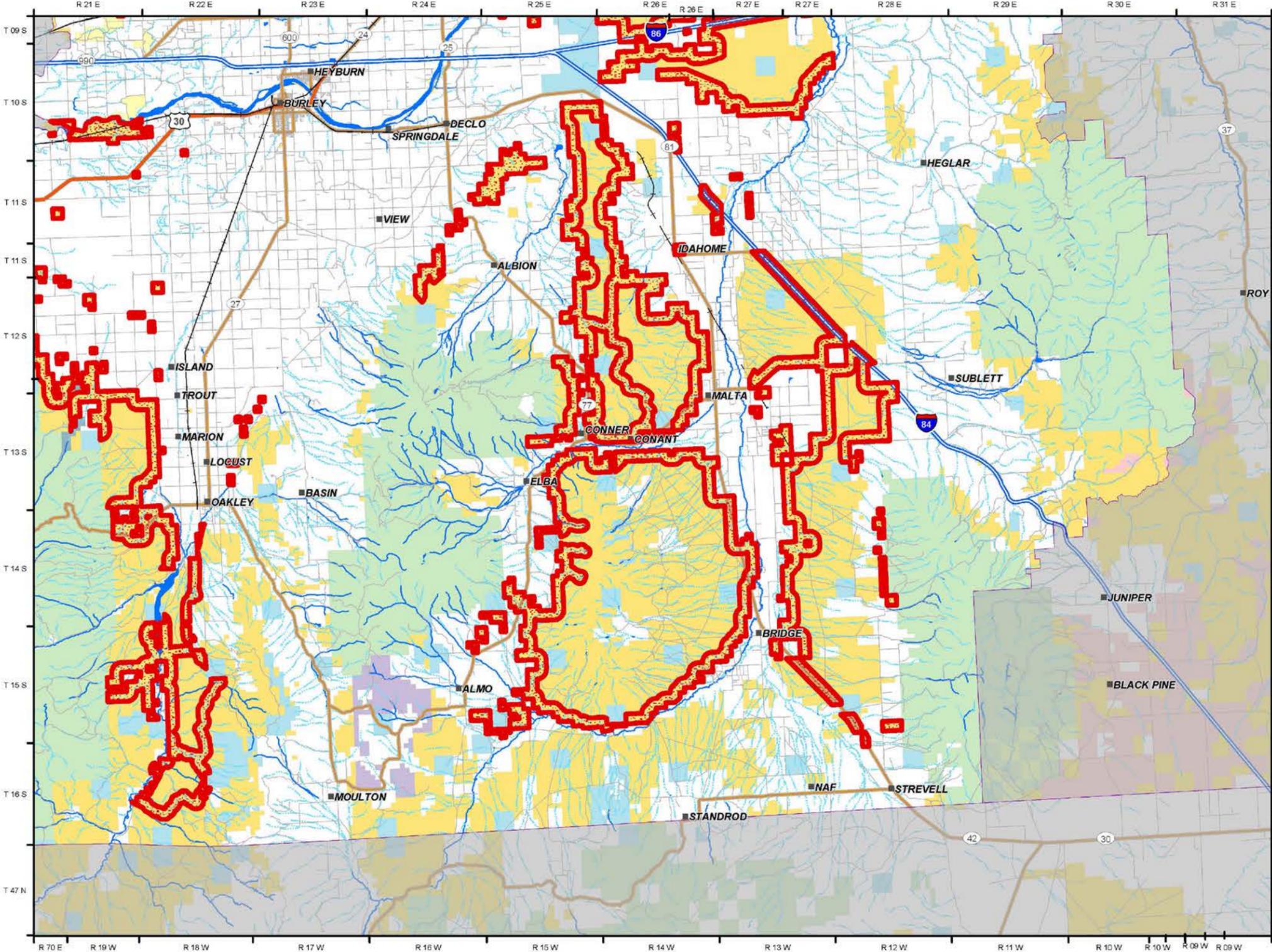
-  Potential Fuel Breaks
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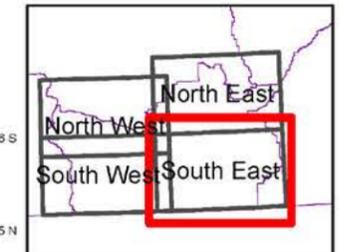
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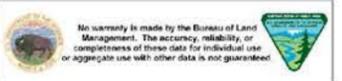
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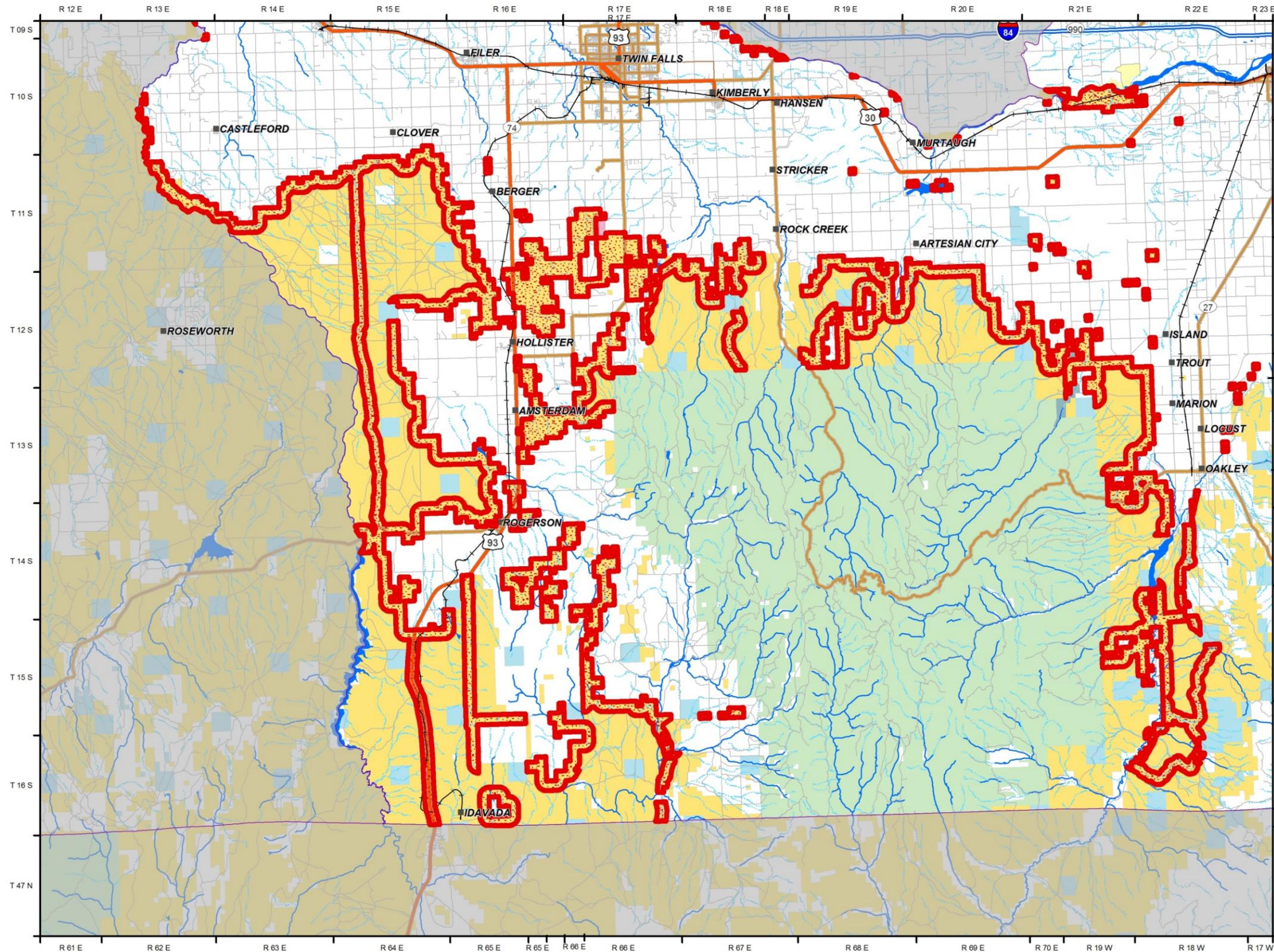
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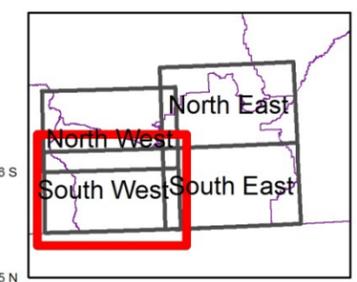
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