



United States Department of the Interior  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Four Rivers Field Office  
3948 Development Avenue  
Boise, Idaho 83705-5339



In Reply Refer To:  
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August 17, 2015

Dear Interested Public:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is proposing three geographically separate range improvement projects intended to help better manage livestock grazing within the Weiser River Basin of the Four Rivers Field Office in accordance with the Cascade Resource Management Plan (RMP) of 1988. Relevant resource objectives in the Cascade RMP include managing rangeland to provide forage for livestock and wild horses as well as improving the condition of rangelands and riparian areas over time. 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 letter 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 October 30, 2015. 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**

#### ***Riparian Fence***

In the northeast corner of Washington County Idaho is a BLM managed reach of Crane Creek located directly above the deep and rugged canyon where Crane Creek flows before entering the Weiser River. This half mile reach of Crane Creek is a flow-regulated water body located downstream of Crane Creek Reservoir and was assessed in September 2006 using protocols and guidance described in *A User Guide for Assessing Proper Functioning Condition and the Supporting Science for Lotic Areas* (BLM-TR-1736-1997). This reach was rated in non-functioning condition (NF) for both Standard 2 (Riparian Vegetation) and Standard 3 (Stream Channels and Floodplains). Improved management of permitted livestock use within the Paddock Valley Allotment and along this reach of Crane Creek is needed to improve riparian vegetation and stream channel conditions.

#### ***Drift Fence***

Located in the south-central portion of Washington County Idaho is the 4,200 acre Hixon Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Preserve and Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). BLM manages this ACEC for the conservation of the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (CTSG); the ACEC provides suitable habitat for the last remaining populations of CTSG in southwestern Idaho. Livestock grazing is currently prohibited on a large portion of this ACEC (the Hixon Field), however cattle

from adjacent BLM and Forest Service grazing allotments have access to this area due to lack of sufficient barriers (both topographical and man-made). Improved livestock control in the area is needed to effectively manage the Hixon Field for CTSG habitat.

### ***Pond Cleaning***

Sandy Spring and an adjacent stock watering pond are located in the Weiser River Canyon in south-central Washington County, Idaho. Over the years this stock pond has filled with sediment and is no longer a reliable watering source for livestock and wildlife. Cleaning of this stock pond would increase water availability over a longer period of time in the spring/early summer months. This action would improve grazing distribution across the Ridge grazing allotment alleviating grazing use along the banks of the Weiser River and afford additional wildlife water opportunities.

### **Existing Condition**

#### ***Riparian Fence***

Dominant vegetation on the greenline and floodplain of the half mile reach of Crane Creek consists of exotic Kentucky bluegrass, annual forbs and grasses, with a few small patches of native Nebraska sedge. The infrequent woody vegetation consists of heavily hedged black hawthorn. No willows are present in or near the stream in this reach. Sinuosity and width/depth ratios have been significantly altered along this reach of the creek. This alteration in stream channel morphology is the combined negative outcome of complex post-dam effects on the hydrology of Crane Creek, combined with historic and current grazing use. These activities have reduced the frequency of deep-rooted riparian vegetation necessary for bank stability in the very fine colloidal clay substrates present in the area. Eroding streambanks in this reach contributes to the elevated sediment levels in Crane Creek each year. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) has determined that Crane Creek is not supporting designated beneficial uses, and does not meet several water quality standards. Total Maximum Daily Load or TMDLs were developed by IDEQ for Crane Creek for sediment, bacteria, and water temperature in 2007.

#### ***Drift Fence***

The Fairchild Grade Road is approximately 2 miles long and intersects the Mann Creek County Road in a canyon on the south side of the Hitt Mountains. It slowly climbs up Mann Creek Canyon off the county road following the contour until it reaches the top of the canyon where it follows the southeast side of Fairchild Reservoir. This road grade is very rocky and includes steep drop-offs on the downhill side. Fairchild Reservoir and the creek below the dam are located within the Hixon Field of the Hixon Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse ACEC. Riparian vegetation along the creek includes sedges, rushes, and willow species. Other man-made ponds in the ACEC support riparian and aquatic vegetation. Upland vegetation in the ACEC and in Mann Creek Canyon consists of mountain big sagebrush, native grasses and forbs, and mountain shrub patches (primarily black hawthorne, bittercherry, serviceberry, and bitterbrush). Invasive annual grasses (cheatgrass and medusahead rye) exist in patches throughout the area. Bulbous bluegrass, a non-native perennial grass species, also occurs throughout the area. Cattle grazing occurs on private, BLM, and Forest Service lands surrounding the ACEC in the summer and fall months of the year. Topographical barriers between Mann Creek Canyon, the Forest Service allotments, and the Hixon Field of the ACEC are not sufficient to keep livestock in surrounding allotments where they belong.

### ***Pond Cleaning***

The existing pond was constructed many years ago (age is unknown since no administrative records exist) and is approximately 40' x 40' in size. It is situated below a low yielding un-named seep which occurs along the northwest edge of the pond. This seep is classified as a discharge slope

wetland and is adjacent to the somewhat larger Sandy Spring (also is classified as a discharge slope wetland). No flowing surface water or water flow paths are present; however, the soil surrounding the seep is saturated and standing water is present. A healthy approximate 10' x 14' patch of obligate wetland vegetation (cattails) occurs below the seep. The remaining vegetation on the sediments within the pond are early seral annual wetland obligate plant species such as monkey flower. Vegetation on the dike and surrounding uplands is mostly exotic annual cheatgrass and medusahead rye. This seep has not been rated for proper functioning condition due to its very small size and modified morphological state created by construction of the small pond.

## **Proposed Action**

### ***Riparian Fence***

The first project includes construction of .8 miles of permanent four-wire fence along the east side of Crane Creek as shown in Map #1. Fencing specifications would be compatible with big game species and the Greater Sage Grouse as specified in BLM Fencing Manual 1-1572 and attachments. This fence would join the existing fence bordering private lands to the north, and into Crane Creek's canyon wall to the south. Installation of this fence would eliminate livestock grazing on a half mile long reach of Crane Creek during the spring/early summer months. The fence would allow for the continuation of livestock grazing in the Spady Pasture of the Paddock Valley Grazing Allotment while improving the structure and function of the riparian vegetation community along this stretch of Crane Creek.

### ***Drift Fence***

The second project includes the reconstruction of a permanent drift fence located at the intersection of Mann Creek and Fairchild Grade Roads (Map #2). The old four-wire drift fence would be removed and the cattleguard currently in place would be cleaned out. The old fence would be replaced with approximately 515 feet of 4-rail, wooden, buck and pole style fence. The new fence would run parallel to the Mann Creek County Road before dead ending into a steep road cut on one side of the cattleguard and up the canyon wall into an unpassable rock pile on the other side of the cattleguard. Installation of a longer and sturdier drift fence and cattleguard would eliminate cattle using the Fairchild Grade Road as an easy route into the Hixon Columbina Sharp-tailed Grouse ACEC from the Mann Creek Road and adjacent Forest Service grazing allotment. The terrain along the northeast side of Mann Creek Road is generally very steep and inhibits cattle movement from the road to upper elevation areas including the ACEC. Elimination of this route (Fairchild Grade Road) for livestock access into the ACEC would help improve the vegetation condition of both the uplands and riparian areas.

### ***Pond Cleaning***

The third project would involve the removal of sediment from an existing stock pond below Sandy Spring which is located in the Weiser River Canyon 10 miles east and 4 miles north of Weiser, Idaho (Map #3). Approximately 30 cubic yards of material would be excavated from the pond using a rubber-tired backhoe and then used to rebuild the pond's small dam, raising its present elevation by three feet. A rock-lined spillway would be constructed in the unnamed intermittent drainage adjacent to the dam. Cleaning of this stock pond would increase water availability for livestock and wildlife over a longer period of time in the spring/early summer months. This action would also disperse grazing distribution across the Ridge Allotment alleviating grazing use along the banks of the Weiser River.

## **Preliminary Issues**

*Vegetation* – Disturbance associated with the construction of the proposed range improvement projects could further the spread of invasive annual grasses and noxious weeds.

*Wildlife* – Additional fencing could affect wildlife use of the project areas.

*Livestock Management* – Proposed range improvement projects would affect water availability for livestock and wildlife.

*Special Status Wildlife Species* – Proposed range improvement projects could affect special status wildlife species and their habitat.

## **Decision to be Made**

The Four Rivers Field Office Manager is the authorized officer responsible for management decisions. Based on the NEPA analysis, the Field Manager will issue a decision document that includes a determination of the environmental effects' significance and whether an environmental impact statement (EIS) would be required. If he determines it is unnecessary to prepare an EIS, the Manager will decide which management actions, mitigation measures, and monitoring requirements will be prescribed for the proposed project areas.

## **Public Input Needed**

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 15, 2015 and are directly relevant to the proposal and project areas. 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.

Comments sent electronically should be sent to [sgcastro@blm.gov](mailto:sgcastro@blm.gov) with the title of this project (Weiser River Management Area Fences and Pond Maintenance) 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.

If you have any questions, please contact either Sarah Garcia, Rangeland Management Specialist at (208) 384-3396, or myself at (208) 384-3430.

Sincerely,

/s/ *Matt McCoy*

(for) Tate Fischer  
Four Rivers Field Office Manager

3 Enclosures: Maps #1, #2, and #3