

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

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Crested Wheatgrass Seed Collection

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Background information: Crested wheatgrass has been used extensively in the Intermountain West on public and private rangelands to reclaim disturbed rangelands, stabilize soils, suppress noxious and invasive weeds, and for livestock forage. In addition to use in rangelands, it is also used in urban areas with limited irrigation water for ground cover, weed control, and to stabilize ditch banks, dikes, pipelines, power lines, and roadsides. Although there is a shift towards planting native species on public lands, the commercial demand for crested wheatgrass seed is still viable.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has received requests from the private sector to harvest crested wheatgrass seed on public land. The BLM can authorize seed collection for commercial purposes (43 CFR Subpart 5400).

Type of project: A commercial use permit to collect crested wheatgrass seed on 650 acres of public land administered by the Burley Field Office.

Location of proposal: The proposed seed collection area is 10 miles southeast of Murtaugh, Idaho in Cassia County and east of the Buckhorn Ranch (Figure 1). The project area is in the Buckhorn-Churchill and Simon Baker Grazing Allotments.

Name and location of preparing office: The BLM office responsible for authorizing the commercial use permit is the Burley Field Office (BFO) in Burley, Idaho.

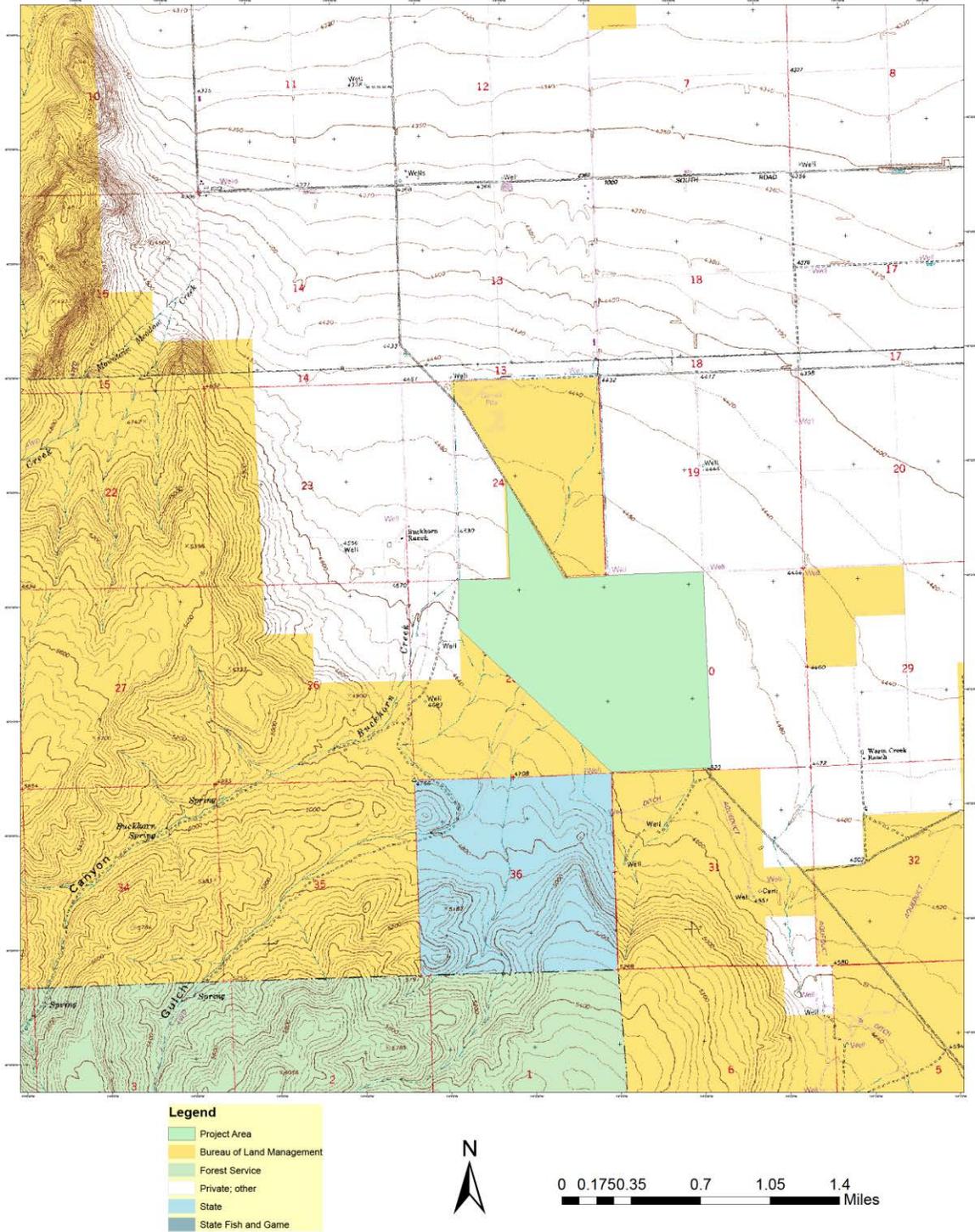
Applicant name: Ray Anderson

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The BFO received a request from Ray Anderson to harvest crested wheatgrass seed. The Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) 43, Subpart 5400.0-3(b) authorizes the disposal of vegetative resources on public lands. BLM policy objectives for seed collection include: 1) meet public needs for commodity and non-commodity benefits and uses to the extent possible; 2) receive fair market value for the products sold; 3) manage resources to maintain desired ecosystems and to improve the health of the land. The BFO is considering permitting Ray Anderson's request to harvest crested wheatgrass seed.

Figure 1: Burley Seed Collection Location Map

Burley Seed Collection Project Area



Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plan(s)

The Proposed Action conforms to the Cassia Resource Management Plan (RMP). The following citation is from the Cassia RMP (BLM, 1985).

“Resource Management Guidelines – Allowable Uses: The public lands will be managed under the principles of multiple use and sustained yield as required by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. Any valid use, occupancy and development of public lands, including but not limited to those requiring rights-of-ways, leases and licenses will be considered, subject to applicable environmental review procedures, unless specifically excluded in the plan. BLM will include stipulations and special conditions as necessary in leases, licenses and permits to ensure the protection and preservation of resources. ”

RELATIONSHIP TO STATUTES, REGULATIONS OR OTHER PLANS

The following statutes and regulations are applicable to the authorization of commercial collection of vegetative materials.

CFR 43, Part 5400, Subpart 5400 – Sales of Forest Products; authorizes the disposal of timber and other vegetative resource on public lands.

Section 302 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976; provides the general authority for BLM to manage the use, occupancy, and development of the public lands under the principles of multiple use and sustained yield in accordance with applicable land use plans.

Section 304 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 and the Independent Offices Appropriation Act of 1952; authorize the Federal government to collect fees and to require reimbursement of its costs.

SCOPING, PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AND ISSUES

As of January 26, 2015 the proposal is on the Idaho BLM, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Database. The project summary posted on the public database contained a brief description of the project, the project location, and contact information for the project lead. No questions or comments arose from the public as a result of the project summary posting. In addition, BLM internal scoping did not find any substantial resource or social issues; therefore, a formal scoping package was not prepared. The only alternative identified during internal scoping is to not issue a commercial permit for harvesting crested wheatgrass seed.

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE(S)

PROPOSED ACTION ALTERNATIVE

The proposed action is to issue a commercial seed collection permit to Ray Anderson for crested wheatgrass seed from 650 acres of public land (Figure 1). The project proponent would harvest

the seed using a road sweeper brush attached to a swather. The sweeper will sweep the seed from the plant while leaving the remaining plant intact. The sweeper uses a rolling drum to remove the seed from the seed head. Harvest would occur when the seed has matured. This stage of seed development typically occurs in late summer. Collection would not occur on wet soils. Seed collection would occur in the summer/fall of 2015 or summer/fall of 2016.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

A permit would not be issued to Ray Anderson for the commercial harvest of crested wheatgrass seed.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The no-action alternative reflects the current situation within the project area and will serve as the baseline for comparing the environmental effects of the proposed action alternative.

During the analysis process, the interdisciplinary team considered both critical and important resources that could be affected by the proposed action. The interdisciplinary team determined the resources listed below would be affected. The project file displays the complete list of resources considered and the reasons why they were or were not analyzed further.

Resources potentially affected by the proposed action are:

- Air Quality
- Vegetation and Soils
- Invasive, Non-native Species
- Wildlife
- Migratory Birds

AIR QUALITY

The Clean Air Act requires the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) to protect human health and safeguard public welfare. The EPA has set standards for six criteria pollutants: ozone, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, lead, and nitrogen dioxide. An air shed must satisfy standards for these six pollutants to ensure compliance with the NAAQS.

The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) is responsible for monitoring air quality in Idaho. The two most common criteria pollutants of concern in Idaho are particulate matter and carbon monoxide. IDEQ only monitors carbon monoxide levels in the Boise area as a condition of EPA's Northern Ada County (Boise), Idaho CO Maintenance Plan.

Particulate matter is widespread throughout Idaho and sources include windblown dust, re-entrained road dust, smoke, industrial emissions, and motor vehicle emissions. Nonattainment areas or areas of concern have not been identified in the Twin Falls Region; which includes

Cassia County. Particulate matter is the only pollutant measured in the region. The project area is in the vicinity of extensive agricultural lands where activities like this project are common.

IDEQ monitoring data for the Twin Falls Region shows the average daily concentrations of particulate matter during 2001-2013 has been met (IDEQ, 2013). (An annual monitoring summary for 2014 has not yet been released.) In 2013, IDEQ monitored particulate matter for 305 days. Using an air quality index, air quality rated good (air quality index) on 292 days and moderate on 13 days. A moderate rating meets the EPA standard of 35 mg/m³ during a 24 hour period; however, for people who are very sensitive to air pollution a moderate health concern may exist.

No Action

There would be no additional impacts to air quality from this alternative since no seed collection would occur.

Proposed Action

Air quality impacts would be confined to the immediate area. There is opportunity for dust, but the amount of dust generated is not expected to result in a measurable change in air quality. Increased emissions of carbon monoxide would occur during operation of equipment. The project is not expected to exceed NAAQS standards due to the low amount of pollutants emitted as well as the limited amount of time emissions would occur in the area.

Cumulative Impacts

Current activities contributing to air quality include activity at a nearby gravel pit, surrounding farming practices, traffic along a county road, off-road vehicle use, and livestock grazing. Dust created from harvesting crested wheatgrass seed is minimal and will only occur when operating equipment. Livestock grazing will not occur when the seed is harvested. The other ongoing activities have met the NAAQS standard from 2001 to 2013. Although some dust from harvesting seed would be emitted, emissions should stay similar or slightly increased from those that have occurred for the last several years.

Vegetation and Soils

The project area was plowed and drill seeded to crested wheatgrass in 1955. Crested wheatgrass is the dominant plant in the proposed project area. Sandberg's bluegrass is the next most common plant. Other herbaceous vegetation scattered throughout the seeding include prickly pear, goatsbeard, and milkvetch. The project area contains healthy perennial vegetation with no observable effects of soil compaction. The entire project area burned in the 2012 Cave Canyon Wildfire, effectively removing any shrubs in the area. The area recovered naturally after the fire. Soil deposits consist of tertiary alluvial material composed of clasts of rhyolitic volcanic. The topsoil is about 1 foot thick (BLM, 1980). The project area occurs on a Loamy 8-12" Wyoming big sagebrush/bluebunch wheatgrass ecological site.

No Action

There would be no disturbance to resources (i.e. vegetation, wildlife, soils, etc.) from equipment operating in the proposed project area since seed collection would not be authorized.

Proposed Action

Some vegetation would be crushed when harvesting seed, but would be confined to equipment tire tracks. Crushed vegetation should recover during the next rainfall and/or growing season. Reduced amount of livestock forage is not anticipated since the crushing impact is temporary, limited to tire tracks, and most of the vegetation will remain after seed collection.

Seed dispersal would be reduced for one season, but this effect is not expected to change the healthy condition of the seeding since crested wheatgrass seed will still be available in the soil profile from last season and not all seed would be collected as some would likely fall to the ground when harvested. In addition, the project area is well vegetated and the need for recruitment is minimal on any given year.

Some minor temporary soil disturbance may occur on the soil surface. Surface compaction is not anticipated, but if it occurs, the effects would also be temporary due to freezing and thawing of soils on a yearly basis. Dry soil can sustain higher axle loads and high contact pressures without adverse effects (Duiker, 2004). Subsurface compaction should not occur since the project will happen when the soil is dry and the swather has an axle load of less than 10 tons (Duiker, 2004).

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts to vegetation are minimal as the only measurable impact (crushing) to vegetation is within the equipment tire tracks. Livestock may add to soil compaction if grazing occurs when soils are wet. However, grazing on the project area occurs only in the fall (October 17 to November 30) when soils are typically dry, lessening this effect. There is also a band of 1005 sheep that trail through the project area during the spring once every year. Although this action occurs when soils have more potential to be wet, the sheep do not stop and are through the area within 1-2 hours. The plow and drill treatment done in 1955 likely resulted in some temporary soil compaction; however, any impacts to soil and vegetative are no longer apparent.

INVASIVE, NON-NATIVE SPECIES

Noxious weeds have not been identified in the proposed project area. However, halogeton (*Halogeton glomeratus*) has occupied disturbed areas in the adjacent gravel pits (2008 BLM Murtaugh Hwy District Permit Renewal EA). Halogeton is an invasive annual plant that if eaten in large quantities is poisonous to both sheep and cattle. It is found in highly disturbed areas with sparse vegetation. Some cheatgrass is also present in the area.

NO ACTION

Currently, the project area does not contain any noxious weeds and only minor amounts of invasive weeds (cheatgrass and halogeton). Mechanical disturbance would not occur under this alternative, therefore; there is no potential for noxious and/or invasive weeds to establish or expand in the project area under this alternative.

PROPOSED ACTION

Although no noxious weeds and minor amounts of invasive weeds are known to occur in the project area, the potential of them establishing on the site exists. The project proponent will be responsible to ensure equipment and vehicles brought into the project area are free of noxious weeds. Neither halogeton nor cheatgrass are expected to increase as a result of the the project as very little disturbance to the soil and vegetation would occur and the vegetation is healthy, providing adequate competition from invasive and noxious weeds.

CUMULATIVE

Noxious weeds and invasive plants can easily be transported into the area via vehicles, equipment, livestock, wildlife (i.e. birds, fur-bearing animals) and wind. Cumulative impacts would not be notably different from the existing condition since the direct and indirect effects are not expected to lead to increases of noxious weeds or invasive species.

WILDLIFE

The proposed project area is home to songbirds, rodents and other small mammals. Coyotes likely use the area. Pheasants are known to occupy adjacent farmlands and probably occasionally move through the area. Although the west half of the project area is currently mapped as Preliminary Priority Habitat (PPH) and a small area east of the foothills road is mapped as Preliminary General Habitat (PGH), sage-grouse have not been documented in the proposed project area. Despite portions of the area being mapped as sage-grouse habitat, it has been a crested wheatgrass seeding since the 1950's and has little to know sage cover for an extended period of time. Additionally, the site recently burned so there are currently no habitat values for sage-grouse.

No Action

Wildlife occupying the proposed project area would continue to inhabit the area, unless a substantial change in vegetation occurs in the future. For example, sagebrush may re-establish in the area over the next 20 to 50 years. As sagebrush re-establishes, wildlife that depend on it would become more common.

Proposed Action

Minimal effects to wildlife would occur as a result of harvesting crested wheatgrass seed. Wildlife present during the operation could be temporarily displaced, but would likely return

once the machinery passes through the area. Small mammal burrows in the tire tracks may collapse under the weight of the equipment. However, depending on the animal, the burrows would likely be repaired or rebuilt as needed by the species affected (i.e. voles, mice, etc.). There are no effects to sage-grouse from the proposed action since there is no suitable habitat within the project area. Additionally, the project would occur outside of lekking, nesting and brood rearing periods for sage grouse. Therefore, no design features are necessary to protect sage-grouse.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts to wildlife are negligible, since most effects from the proposal are temporary and do not result in any long-term impacts to wildlife habitat or populations.

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Farmland is next to the project area on its north and west boundaries with rangelands surrounding it to the east and south. Crested wheatgrass dominates the vegetation throughout the project area. Prior to disturbance and the subsequent crested wheatgrass seeding, the area was sagebrush steppe. Due to the sparse shrub cover, habitat is marginal for most sagebrush obligates. However, a variety of other migratory birds may occupy the project area

No Action

Migratory birds would continue to use the area. Harvesting equipment would not be authorized for use in the project area so no effects to migratory birds would occur.

Proposed Action

Direct impacts to migratory bird nesting are not expected because seed harvesting would occur outside of their nesting season. The primary impact would be disturbance to migratory birds that may still be present in the project area in the fall. This effect would be temporary.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts to migratory birds are expected to be negligible since the direct and indirect effects are limited to disturbance. Other activities in the project area that could disturb birds include ongoing activity at a gravel pit to the north of the project area and ongoing vehicle travel on the county road that intersects the project area.

TRIBES, INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, OR AGENCIES CONSULTED

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