

Categorical Exclusion Review
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Twin Falls District
Jarbidge Field Office
2536 Kimberly Road
Twin Falls, Idaho 83301

Jarbidge Field Office Sage-grouse Habitat Juniper Skeleton Removal

NEPA No. DOI-BLM-ID-T010-2015-0002-CX

A. Background

BLM Office: Jarbidge Field Office. **Lease/Serial/Case File No.:** N/A

Proposed Action Title/Type: Jarbidge Field Office Sage-grouse Habitat Juniper Skeleton Removal

Location of Proposed Action: Burned juniper stands are scattered in Blue Gulch, Buck Flat Draw, Cedar Draw, and Devil Creek in the central Jarbidge Field Office, southwest of Castleford, Idaho. The stands are located in portions of the following: T. 11S, R. 09E, Sections 23-25; T. 12S, R. 10E, Section 5; T. 11S, R. 12E, Sections 13, 24; T. 11S, R. 13E, Sections 18-19; T. 12S, R. 12E, Sections 28, 33-35; T. 12S, R. 13E, Sections 18-19; T. 13S, R. 12E, Sections 2, 5, 6, 8, 11.

Description of Proposed Action: The purpose of the proposed action is to remove about 60 acres of burned juniper skeletons resulting from past wildfires from areas that are in close proximity to sage-grouse leks and breeding habitat. Removal of the dead juniper would reduce vertical structures used by avian predators for predation of sage-grouse eggs and chicks.

The proposed action would remove juniper skeletons in areas of Blue Gulch, Buck Flat Draw, Cedar Draw, and Devil Creek. All drainages are ephemeral in nature and dominated by upland vegetation. Individual dead juniper stands range in size from less than 0.1 acre to about 13 acres. Nest trees used by ferruginous and Swainson's hawks, or trees with cultural significance, would be marked prior to treatment and would not be cut. Juniper skeletons would be limbed and cut to knee height or less, and the woody debris would be scattered within the drainages so as not to create obstacles to wildlife movement. This project would not remove live junipers or disturb the soil surface.

Work would begin in fall 2015 by fuels and fire staff using chain saws. Work could continue during the fall of subsequent years, if necessary to complete removal of identified skeletons. No work would occur between February 1 and July 30. Full-size vehicles would be restricted to existing roads. Off-highway vehicles would be used to shuttle equipment to treatment locations not accessible by road. Vehicles would avoid known cultural sites.

B. Land Use Plan Conformance

Land Use Plan Name: Jarbidge Resource Management Plan

Date Approved/Amended: September 2, 2015

The proposed action is in conformance with the LUP, even though it is not specifically provided for, because it is clearly consistent with the following LUP decision(s) (management actions [MA], goals [G], objectives [O]):

- **UV-MA-33 (p. RMP-21).** Except in the wilderness, WSA, and within 300 feet of fish-bearing streams, commercial and non-commercial harvest of dead juniper trees may be allowed by permit subject to seasonal restrictions for wildlife.
- **SS-G-1 (p. RMP-26).** Manage public lands to contribute to the conservation and recovery of sage-grouse and other special status species.
- **SS-O-1 (p. RMP-26).** Maintain or improve the quality and quantity of habitat for sage-grouse and other special status species by managing public land activities to sustain or benefit those species.
- **SS-MA-25 (p. RMP-28).** BLM management activities and authorized uses within one mile of known ferruginous hawk and peregrine falcon nests and 0.5 mile from northern goshawk nests will be designed to minimize impacts to their prey base and availability of nesting material from February through July.

The proposed action would remove dead trees that facilitate predation of sage-grouse eggs and chicks by avian predators, thus taking action to maintain or enhance sage-grouse populations. Temporal and spatial design features include doing work during fall so that breeding migratory birds are not disturbed, and leaving juniper skeletons that are used by ferruginous or Swainson's hawks for nesting. These features would eliminate impacts to breeding migratory birds, wildlife, and special status species.

The proposed project occurs within the Idaho Southern Conservation Area – Important for sage-grouse.

C. Compliance with NEPA:

The proposed action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with 516 DM 11.9 A(6).

Category description: Relocation of nuisance or depredate wildlife, providing the relocation does not introduce new species into the ecosystem.

The proposed action would reduce the number of burned juniper skeletons near sage-grouse leks and breeding habitat which are used by avian predators. The reduction in vertical structures should decrease the potential for predation on sage-grouse eggs and chicks. In this case, relocation is accomplished by reduction in perch availability.

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. The proposed action has been reviewed, and none of the extraordinary circumstances described in 43 CFR 46.215 apply.

The following list of Extraordinary Circumstances (43 CFR 46.215) have been considered:

1. Have significant impacts on public health or safety.

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed project would not include any actions that impact air or water quality or generate hazardous or solid waste. Fuel used to power chain saws and vehicles would be handled according to standard operating procedures to prevent spills. The proposed project areas are outside of and distant from developed recreational facilities; recreation in the vicinity of the proposed project areas is highly dispersed. The likelihood of public presence during project implementation is very low.

2. Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990); floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; or ecologically significant or critical areas.

No

Comments/Explanation: Evaluation of the proposed action and proposed project areas by the interdisciplinary team determined that the proposed action, including design features, would not result in any significant impacts on natural resources and unique geographic characteristics. Lack of soil surface disturbance and restricting travel of full size vehicles to existing roads would avoid impacts to historic properties.

The proposed action would not adversely impact migratory birds. The proposed action would reduce perching and nesting opportunities for some songbirds, raptors, and ravens, but would not disturb birds during the nesting season. Dead junipers used by ferruginous and Swainson's hawks for nesting would be marked and not cut. Loggerhead shrikes perch in dead juniper for hunting and display purposes. However, the remaining dead nest trees and live junipers within or adjacent to the treatment areas would continue to provide this type of habitat. The burned junipers that would be removed provide little nesting habitat for most songbirds. Live junipers would remain in all draws to provide perching and nesting habitat. Work would be scheduled in fall to avoid the nesting and breeding periods for migratory birds, other wildlife, and BLM sensitive animals.

There are no park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wilderness study areas; lands with wilderness characteristics; wild and scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands; or national monuments within the proposed project areas. The proposed action would not modify any floodplains within the

proposed project areas. The proposed project areas are outside of and distant from developed recreational facilities; recreation in the vicinity of the proposed project areas is highly dispersed. There are no expected impacts to recreational use.

3. Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA Section 102(2)(E)].

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action would not have any highly controversial environmental effects for several reasons. Proposed treatment areas are very small, ranging in size from less than 0.1 acre to about 13 acres and are scattered on the landscape. Treatments would utilize hand-cutting methods and would occur outside of wildlife breeding seasons. All woody material resulting from treatment would be left on site. Design features of the proposed action would avoid impacts to sensitive resources, including breeding migratory birds and wildlife and cultural resources. The proposed treatment areas have been inventoried for special status plants and animals and cultural resources and no conflicts were identified. The proposed action was also reviewed by Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Comments received documented that there are no conflicts relative to wildlife resources. All documents are available in the project file.

Juniper skeleton removal via chaining, mastication, and hand cutting has been implemented in areas of the Burley Field Office to the east of the proposed project area. Observed impacts of hand-cutting junipers are substantially less than for chaining and do not result in soil surface disturbance. The hand-cutting methods proposed here also do not require cross-country travel by heavy equipment used for chaining or mastication, thus further reducing potential for soil and vegetation disturbance.

There are no unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources. The subject burned juniper trees are not appropriate for commercial harvest. Since woody materials would not be removed from the treatment areas, firewood collection by members of the public with appropriate permits could occur.

4. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action would not have highly uncertain or potentially significant environmental effects. Lop-and-scatter treatments of dead junipers using chainsaws are a common activity in the Twin Falls District, the continuation of which poses no unique or unknown environmental risks. The proposed locations are small and scattered, and design features have been included in the proposed action to avoid impacts to sensitive resources.

5. Establish a precedent for future actions or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action applies only to the identified burned juniper stands. This is a discrete action that would not establish a precedent for future actions or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects. Future actions would be subject to environmental analysis and separate decision.

6. Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant environmental effects.

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action does not have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant environmental effects. The small, scattered dead juniper stands are located in areas where on-going activities such as livestock grazing are already occurring and would continue at the current rate and intensity as existing permitted actions.

7. Have significant impacts on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or office.

No

Comments/Explanation: Field reviews with the Jarbidge Field Office archaeologist occurred on September 26 and October 20, 2014. No impacts to historic properties are anticipated as no surface disturbance would be authorized. Documentation is available in the project file.

8. Have significant impacts on species listed or proposed to be listed on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or on designated Critical Habitat for these species.

No

Plants - *Comments/Explanation:* No known federally listed, candidate, or BLM special status plant species were observed during field examinations on June 24-25, 2013, and March 30, 2015.

Wildlife - *Comments/Explanation:* No known federally listed, candidate, or BLM special status wildlife species would be significantly impacted by the proposed action. Field reviews by the Jarbidge Field Office biologist occurred on September 26 and October 20, 2014. Timing of treatments and design features to protect nest trees would eliminate impacts to breeding ferruginous and Swainson's hawks and other migratory birds. The proposed action could reduce predation of sage-grouse eggs and chicks by avian predators.

Aquatics - *Comments/Explanation:* The proposed treatment areas do not contain habitats for federally listed, candidate, or BLM special status aquatic species.

9. Violate a Federal, State, local, or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action does not violate any Federal, State, local or tribal laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. Since work would be done in fall there would be no impact to breeding migratory birds. In addition, burned junipers used by ferruginous and Swainson's hawks and all live trees would be left in place.

10. Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (Executive Order 12898).

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action would not have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations. There are no known low income or minority populations in the area of the proposed action. Low income or minority visitors to the area would not be affected any differently by the proposed activity than any other visitor.

11. Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites (Executive Order 13007).

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action would not impede access to sacred sites or interfere with religious practices conducted by Native Americans. The project is intended to protect sage-grouse populations – a species of importance to the tribes.

12. Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and Executive Order 13112).

No

Comments/Explanation: The proposed action is not expected to spread invasive, non-native species. Full-size vehicles would be restricted to existing roads and only limited off-highway vehicle use would occur. No soil surface disturbance would occur. Removal of juniper skeletons would reduce the potential for accumulation of tumbleweeds resulting from non-native invasive species like tumbled mustard (*Sisymbrium altissimum*) and Russian thistle (*Salsola kali*).

BLM Interdisciplinary Team Authors and Reviewers are as follows:

Name	Title	Area(s) of Participation	Initials
Julie Hilty	Fire Ecologist	Project Lead, Fuels	JH
Jeff Ross	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources	JWR
Michael Haney	Botanist	Vegetation, Soils, Invasive Species	MH
Jim Klott	Wildlife Biologist	Wildlife	JHK
Scott Maclean	Fisheries Biologist	Aquatics, Wetlands, Riparian	SHM
Shane Wilson	Park Ranger	Recreation, Wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers, VRM	SW
Dan Strickler	Rangeland Management Specialist	Livestock Grazing	DS
Lisa Claxton	Realty Specialist	Lands, Minerals, Water Rights	LC
Brian Thrift	Planning & Environmental Coordinator	NEPA	BDT

D. Signature

I certify that none of the Departmental exceptions (Extraordinary Circumstances) listed in the above Part C apply to this action; therefore, this categorical exclusion is appropriate for this situation.

Authorizing Official: /s/ Elliot Traher Date: 9-10-15

Name: Elliot Traher

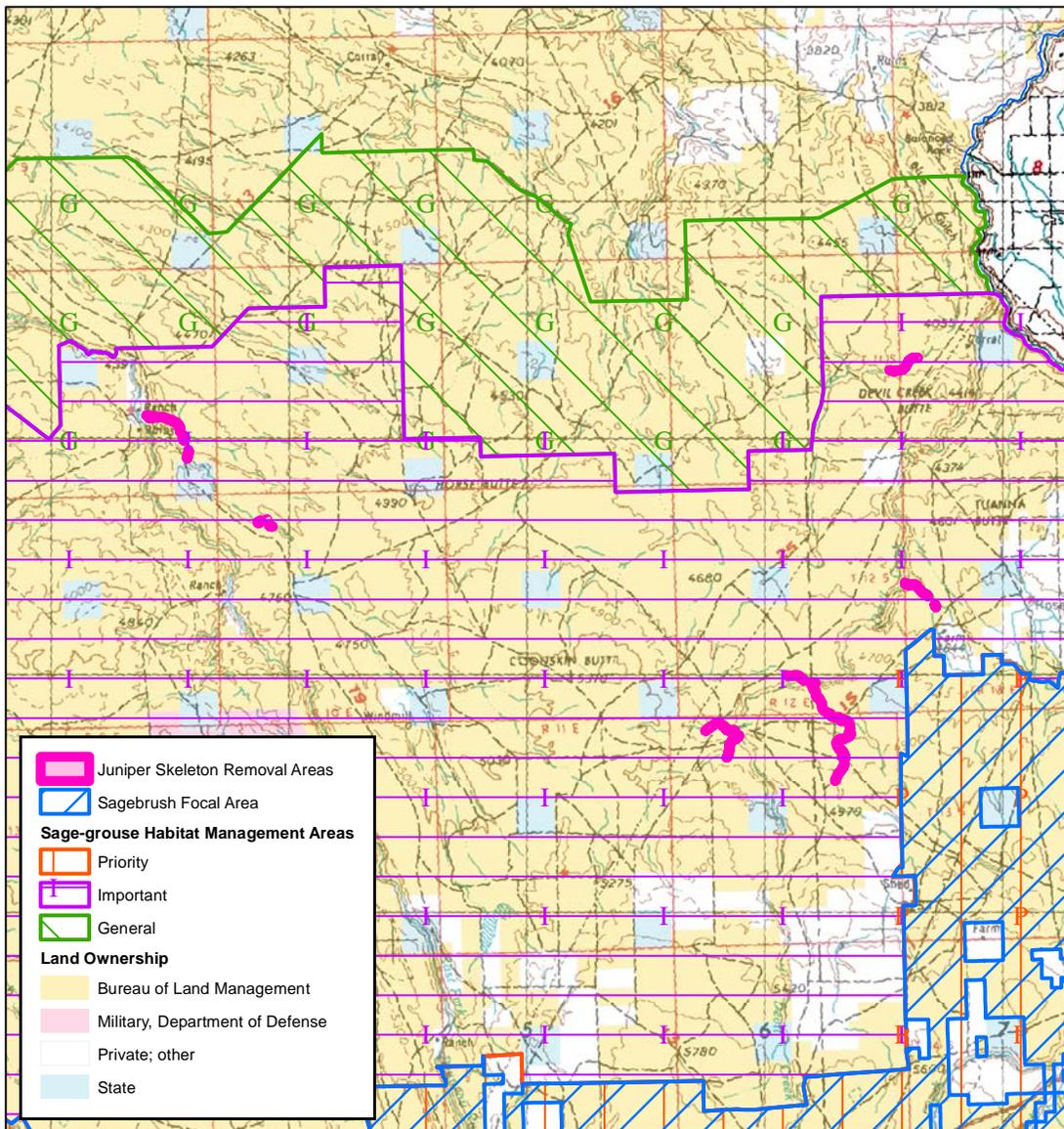
Title: Jarbidge Field Office Manager

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this Categorical Exclusion Review, contact Julie Hilty, Fire Ecologist, Jarbidge Field Office, by phone at (208) 736-2371, email at jhilty@blm.gov, or mail at Bureau of Land Management, 2536 Kimberly Road, Twin Falls, ID 83301.

Note: A separate decision document must be prepared for the action covered by the CX.

Proposed Juniper Skeleton Removal Areas



Map Created: 9/9/2015

The surface management status ("land ownership") should be used as a general guide only. Official land records, located at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and other offices, should be checked for up-to-date information concerning any specific tract of land.

No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management. The accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data is not guaranteed. The following cannot be made Section 508 compliant. For help with its data or information, please contact the BLM Idaho State Office Webmaster at 208-373-4000.

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 Map Projection: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 11N

