

SODA MOUNTAIN FIBER OPTIC PROJECT HUNTER COMMUNICATIONS, INC. RIGHT-OF-WAY GRANT (OR 068168)

BLM
Medford District Office

October 2015



ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DOI-BLM-ORWA-M040-2015-0001-EA



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Medford District Office
3040 Biddle Road
Medford, Oregon 97504
email address: BLM_OR_MD_Mail@blm.gov

IN REPLY REFER TO:
2800, 6240 (ORM040)

OCT 21 2015

Dear Interested Public:

The *Environmental Assessment* (EA) for the Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project Hunter Communications, Inc. Right-of-Way Grant (OR 068168) is now available for a 15-day public review. The EA is also available electronically on the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) planning website at https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/nepa/nepa_register.do.

The BLM is proposing to issue a right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. that would authorize placement of 24-count fiber optic cable both on existing utility poles and underground. The proposed alignment would connect with an existing fiber optic cable that is located on utility poles currently ending at the intersection of BLM Road 39-2E-34 and Buckhorn Springs Road to the US Cellular tower which is located on the top of Soda Mountain. This proposed project would cross several BLM properties both outside and within the CSNM. The term of the requested easement will be for 30 years.

The legal description of the project area is NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 28, W $\frac{1}{2}$ of Section 21, SWSW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 16, E $\frac{1}{2}$ of Section 17, and S $\frac{1}{2}$ of Section 6, T. 40 S., R. 3 E.; and the NESW $\frac{1}{4}$ and SENW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 1, T. 40 S., R. 2 E., W.M., Jackson County, Oregon.

Alternatives analyzed in detail in this EA include: 1) not authorizing the right-of-way grant; 2) authorizing the right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. to install and maintain a fiber optic cable line connecting a communication office located in Ashland, Oregon with the telecommunication towers located at the communications site on the top of Soda Mountain within the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (CSNM).

We welcome your comments on the content of the EA. We are particularly interested in comments that address one or more of the following: 1) new information that would affect the analysis, or 2) information or evidence of flawed or incomplete analysis. Specific comments are the most useful. **Although comments are welcome at any time, comments are most useful if received by 4:30 PM on November 6, 2015.**

All comments should be made in writing and mailed or delivered to Jennifer Sanborn, Acting Field Manager, Ashland Resource Area, 3040 Biddle Road, Medford, OR 97504. Please note that all written submissions from private individuals in response to this notice, including your name, address, telephone number, email address, or other personal identifying information may be made available for public inspection and disclosure, unless you specifically request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your personal identifying information from public review or disclosure, you must state this at the beginning of your written comment and provide justification for doing so. We will honor such requests to the extent allowed by law, but you should be aware that release of that information may be required under certain circumstances. All submissions from organizations or businesses and from individuals identifying

themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses will be made available for public inspection and disclosure in their entirety.

Further information on this proposed project is available at the Medford District Office, 3040 Biddle Road, Medford, Oregon 97504 or by calling Kathy Minor, Assistant Field Manager, at 541.618.2245.

Sincerely,



for Jennifer Sanborn
Acting Field Manager
Ashland Resource Area

Enclosure

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

EA COVER SHEET

RESOURCE AREA: Ashland

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL: Jennifer Sanborn, Acting Field Manager
Medford District Bureau of Land Management
Ashland Resource Area
3040 Biddle Road
Medford, OR 97504

ACTION/TITLE: Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project
Hunter Communications, Inc.
Right-Of-Way Grant (OR 068168)

EA NUMBER: DOI-BLM-ORWA-M040-2016-0001-EA

LOCATION: The project area is located within the Soda Mountain Communications Site and within the BLM Roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road) in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument. The project also is located on BLM properties outside the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument within the Ashland Resource Area. The Public Land Survey System (PLSS) description is the NW¼ of Section 28, W½ of Section 21, SWSW¼ of Section 16, E½ of Section 17, S½ of Section 6, T. 40 S., R. 3 E.; and the NESW¼ and SENW¼ of Section 1, T. 40 S., R. 2 E., Willamette Meridian, Jackson County, Oregon.

List of Preparers	Responsibility
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CHAPTER 1 – PURPOSE AND NEED

INTRODUCTION

The Medford District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is currently evaluating an application from Hunter Communications, Inc. for a new right-of-way grant (OR 068168) to install fiber optic cable that will connect a communication office located in Ashland, Oregon with the telecommunication towers located at the communications site on the top of Soda Mountain within the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (CSNM). The term of the requested easement will be for 30 years.

This Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the environmental analysis conducted to estimate the site-specific effects on the human environment that may result from issuing a right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. on BLM-administered lands. The analysis documented in this EA will provide the BLM's responsible official, the Ashland Resource Area Field Manager, with current information to aid in the decision-making process. This document complies with the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA; 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508) and the Department of the Interior's manual guidance on the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (43 CFR part 46).

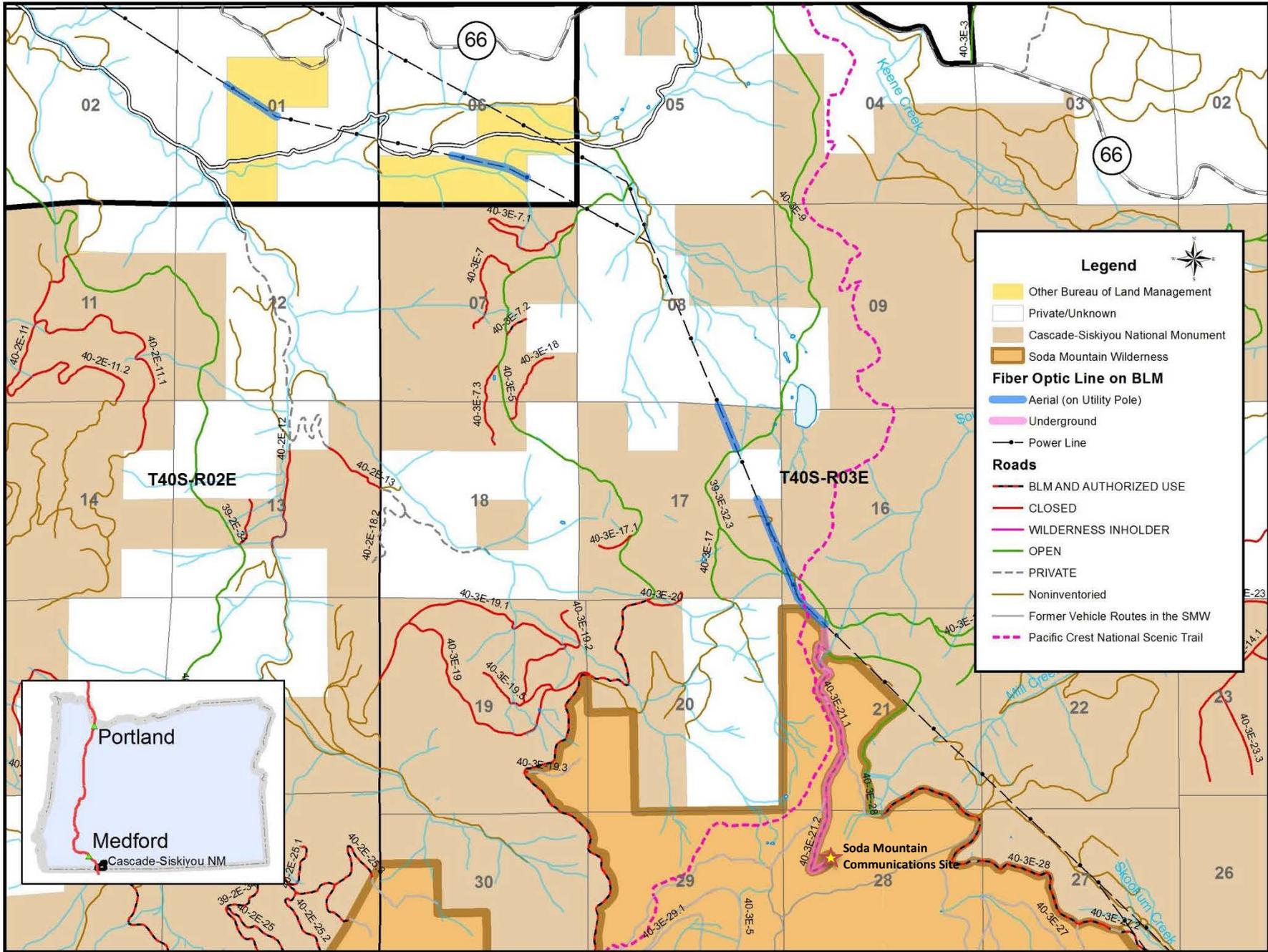
This chapter cites management direction, and displays the decisions to be made in analyzing this proposal. It defines the scope of the analysis, summarizes the scoping process, and describes the issues identified during scoping.

BACKGROUND

The Soda Mountain Communications Site is located on public land and administered by the Bureau of Land Management, Medford District Office (Map 1). It is a long-standing, established site that serves a large and varied population over a broad geographic region encompassing southwest Oregon and northern California. Soda Mountain functions as a vital link in the communications industry. The various authorized holders who currently operate at the site provide an array of services, including emergency 911 service; fire detection/reporting; commercial and public radio and television broadcasting; microwave and internet data links; telephone transmissions; and other uses.

The site overlooks Ashland, Oregon and several other communities in the region. Interstate 5 runs in a generally north/south direction approximately six miles west of the communications site. State Highway 66 runs in an east/west direction approximately four miles north of Soda

Map 1. Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project Area.



Mountain. Other secondary county and BLM roads also run through the surrounding area. This transportation network, and the many residents who live in and around the area (including those within the boundaries of the CSNM), are served by the authorized users who operate at and provide 24/7 communication services from the top of Soda Mountain.

There are currently eight communications facilities at Soda Mountain. The first authorized use on the mountain was for the fire lookout/repeater site, allowed through a letter of permission dated May 11, 1962. The last communications facility to be authorized on Soda Mountain occurred on September 6, 1993.

In 2000, the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument was reserved in recognition of its remarkable ecology and to protect a diverse range of biological, geological, aquatic, archeological and historic objects (Presidential Proclamation 7318). The Soda Mountain Wilderness (SMW) was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System on March 30, 2009. The Soda Mountain Communications Site is within the CSNM and is surrounded on all sides by the SMW.

The existing communication site authorizations at Soda Mountain were recognized as valid existing rights in the *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan* (CSNM ROD/RMP) (USDI 2008, VER-5, p. 117 and Appendix O, Table O-2, p. O-3). The CSNM ROD/RMP also identified that a comprehensive communications site management plan addressing site efficiency, visual resources, and the impacts of technology would be developed (VER-6, p. 117). The *Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan* was approved on August 27, 2012.

The *Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan* (2012) allows for a new right-of-way grant to be issued “[i]f additional telephone service is ever deemed necessary or expanded at the site (page 19).” Special resource coordination considerations with on-site or adjacent resource values must be consistent with the CSNM ROD/RMP (2008) and the *Soda Mountain Wilderness Final Stewardship Plan* (2012).

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of BLM’s action is to respond to Hunter Communications, Inc.’s application for new right-of-way grant to install fiber optic cable on BLM-administered lands by granting, granting with conditions, or denying the application. Pursuant to 43 CFR § 2805.10, if the BLM issues a grant, the BLM may include terms, conditions, and stipulations that the BLM determines to be in the public interest.

PROPOSED ACTION

This section provides a brief summary of the BLM's proposal for responding to an application from Hunter Communications, Inc. requesting a new right-of-way grant (OR 068168) to install fiber optic cable that will connect a communication office located in Ashland, Oregon with the telecommunication towers located at the communications site on the top of Soda Mountain within the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (CSNM). A more detailed description of the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) and other alternatives considered is included in Chapter 2, Alternatives.

The BLM is proposing to issue a right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. that would authorize placement of 24-count fiber optic cable both on existing utility poles and underground. The proposed alignment would connect with an existing fiber optic cable that is located on utility poles currently ending at the intersection of Road 39-2E-34 and Buckhorn Springs Road to the United States Cellular Corporation (USCC) tower which is located on the top of Soda Mountain. This proposed project would cross several BLM properties both outside and within the CSNM.

The total length of aerial (on utility poles) fiber optic cable placement on BLM property would be approximately 8,243 feet (5,100 feet would be located within the CSNM and 3,143 feet would be outside the CSNM). The total length of underground fiber optic cable (including that within the Soda Mountain Communications Site) would be approximately 7,996 feet and would be placed within the road prism of BLM Roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road) (Map 1).

DECISION FRAMEWORK

This Environmental Assessment will provide the information needed for the responsible official, the Ashland Resource Area Field Manager, to select a course of action to be implemented in response to the request from Hunter Communications, Inc. for a right-of-way grant for a fiber optic cable line. The Ashland Resource Area Field Manager must decide whether to implement the action alternative or select the No Action Alternative.

The decision will also include a determination of whether or not the impacts of the Proposed Action are significant to the human environment. If the impacts are determined to be insignificant, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) can be issued and a decision implemented. If this EA determines that the significance of impacts are unknown or greater than those previously analyzed and disclosed in the RMPs/Final Environmental Impact Statements (FEISs) then a project specific environmental impact statement (EIS) must be prepared.

In choosing the alternative that best meets the needs/objectives, the Field Manager will consider the extent to which each alternative responds to the decision factors listed below. The

forthcoming Decision Record will document the authorized officer's rationale for selecting a course of action based on the effects documented in the EA, and the extent to which each alternative:

Is consistent with the management direction in the *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan (USDI 2008)* for communication sites.

The 2008 CSNM ROD/RMP contains the following direction for the overall management of the Soda Mountain Communications Site:

The proclamation states, "The establishment of this monument is subject to valid existing rights." Valid existing rights (VERs) may include a variety of BLM authorizations such as rights-of-way grants, leases, reciprocal agreements, and withdrawals. Valid existing rights were expressly recognized and protected in the presidential proclamation (USDI 2008, p. 114).

VER-5: Existing communication site authorizations on Soda Mountain... will continue. No new facilities would be built at the existing communication sites. Modifications to existing individual facilities (i.e., buildings) can be made if the proposed use does not increase the size (footprint) of the current authorized development and there are no interference problems with the other authorized users. For example, the addition or replacement of a new transmitting or receiving device (e.g., antenna) on an existing tower structure would be considered if the proposed device was consistent with the other existing electronic devices in terms of size, visual characteristics, and frequency compatibility.

VER-6: The BLM completed a communication site survey for the Soda Mountain site in 2005. A comprehensive communication site management plan addressing site efficiency, visual resources, and impacts of new technology is planned for 2006 (dependent on funding). The BLM could permit modifications, such as a new device, following the completion of a site-specific management plan.

VER-7: The Soda Mountain communication site access roads (40-3E-21.1, 40-3E-21.2) will be improved (rocked) to reduce erosion, maintained to BLM standards, and gated at the junction of 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2.

VER-8: No new communications sites will be developed in the CSNM.

Follows the guidance in the *Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan* (USDI 2012).

In accordance with the CSNM ROD/RMP (USDI 2008, VER-6, p. 117), the *Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan* was completed in 2012. This site plan was incorporated into all the existing leases or right-of-way grants and is required to be used in conjunction with the granting authorization. Provisions of the site plan are enforced through the granting authorization (USDI 2012a, p. 10).

The *Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan* provides applicable guidance and adds current policy and technical standards for better management of the Soda Mountain Communications Site. The site plan allows for a new right-of-way grant to be issued “[i]f additional telephone service is ever deemed necessary or expanded at the site (USDI 2012a, p. 19).”

Considers the resource values associated with the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument and the adjacent Soda Mountain Wilderness.

In 2000, the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (CSNM) was reserved in recognition of its remarkable ecology and to protect a diverse range of biological, geological, aquatic, archeological and historic objects. The Soda Mountain Wilderness was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System on March 30, 2009. The Soda Mountain Communications Site is within the CSNM and is surrounded on all sides by the SMW. Special resource coordination considerations with on-site or adjacent resource values must be consistent with the CSNM ROD/RMP (USDI 2008) and the *Soda Mountain Wilderness Final Stewardship Plan* (USDI 2012b). Both the CSNM and the SMW are part of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS). As required under the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, the BLM will manage components of the NLCS to “conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes.”

The CSNM ROD/RMP assigns Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class II to the lands of the monument (VIS-2, page 114). The objective of Class II is to retain the existing character of the landscape. Per BLM’s Visual Resource Inventory Handbook, H-8410-1 (V)(B)(2), “management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer.” Any changes made in lands with VRM Class II management objective “must repeat basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.”

Is consistent with the management direction in BLM Manual 6100 – *National Landscape Conservation System Management Manual* (USDI 2012c), BLM Manual 6220 – *National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, and Similar Designations* (USDI 2012d) and BLM Manual 6340 – *Management of BLM Wilderness* (USDI 2012e).

The CSNM and SMW are part of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS). NLCS units include National Monuments, National Conservation Areas and Similar Designations, Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Scenic and Historic Trails. As specified in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (16 U.S.C. 7202), the NLCS was established in order to “conserve, protect and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values...” NLCS units are to be managed “in a manner that protects the values for which the components of the system were designated.” BLM Manual 6100 (USDI 2012c) provides general policy on managing public lands (also referred to as National Conservation Lands) in the NLCS. The BLM has additional manuals addressing policy specific to individual NLCS units.

BLM Manual 6100 (Section 1.6.I.5) indicates that facilities within NLCS units will be designed and sited in a manner that minimizes impacts to NLCS values. Section 1.6.J.4 states that, “To the greatest extent possible, subject to applicable law, the BLM should, through land use planning and project-level processes and decisions, avoid granting new ROWs [rights-of-way] through NLCS units (the BLM does not have the authority to designate new ROW[s] in designated wilderness). Subject to applicable law, the BLM shall exercise its discretion to deny ROW applications in NLCS units if the BLM determines that ROW proposals are:

- a. inconsistent with the authority that designated the unit; or
- b. incompatible with the protection of the values for which the unit was designated, subject to a compatibility determination by the authorized officer for the affected NLCS units.”

Management direction related to facilities within monuments is provided in BLM Manual 6220 (USDI 2012d). BLM Manual 6220 (Section 1.6.F.5) provides that “Facilities within Monuments and NCAs, including utility, water, and electrical supply lines, will be designed and sited in a manner that minimizes impacts to the objects and values and the area’s scenic characteristics...”

The manual (Section 1.6.E.2) also directs BLM “When processing a new ROW application, to the greatest extent possible, through the NEPA process the BLM will:

- a. determine consistency of the ROW with the Monument or NCA’s objects and values;
- b. consider routing or siting the ROW outside of the Monument or NCA;
- c. consider mitigation of the impacts from the ROW... (USDI 2012d).”

BLM Manual 6220 (Section 1.6.E.3) states, “Protection of the objects and values for which Monuments and NCAs were designated should be considered in the NEPA analysis for new ROW applications.”

BLM Manual 6340 - Management of BLM Wilderness (USDI 2012e) provides the following guidance, “In general, BLM does not prohibit uses outside a wilderness on public lands solely to protect wilderness character of the designated lands.” When activities are proposed on public lands adjacent to wilderness, such as new rights-of-ways, “the potential impacts, if any, of those activities upon the wilderness resource and upon public use of the adjacent wilderness area must be analyzed in the applicable NEPA document. In authorizing new uses, as long as the purpose and need can be met, a reasonable effort must be made to protect the character and values of the nearby wilderness (Section 1.6.D.2.a.)” The BLM may require actions to mitigate impacts to adjacent wilderness (such as minor changes to location, limited timing restrictions, using certain paint schemes on equipment, or requiring shades on lights) as identified through the NEPA process (Section 1.6.D.2.b.) if they do not impose undue financial burden on the operator.

LAND USE CONFORMANCE AND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

CONFORMANCE WITH LAND USE PLANS

This right-of-way grant proposal is designed to be in conformance with the *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (CSNM) Record of Decision (ROD) and Resource Management Plan (RMP)* (USDI 2008), as amended (USDI 2013) and the Medford District ROD and RMP (USDI 1995). The CSNM ROD/RMP incorporates by reference portions of the Northwest Forest Plan (NFP) (USDA/USDI 1994), as amended, and the Medford District RMP (USDI 1995) as they are consistent with the presidential proclamation. The analysis supporting this decision tiers to the *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* (USDI 2005) and the *Medford District Proposed Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* (USDI 1994).

CONSULTATION

Consultation under the Endangered Species Act with the USFWS is not necessary. The right-of-way grant would have no effect on listed species or their habitat.

There would be no effects to listed aquatic species nor their habitat, and consultation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries is not needed.

Consultation for federally-listed botanical species is not needed as the Soda Mountain Communications Site is outside the range of any federally-listed botanical species.

Letters describing the preliminary Proposed Action initiating consultation with the local federally recognized Native American Tribes were sent in June 2015. Further consultation in the form of meetings, phone calls, and emails did not identify any concerns with the proposed activities.

Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) was not needed as the BLM determined that the project will have “no effect” to cultural resources.

SPECIAL STATUS SPECIES

The Hunter Communications, Inc. right-of-way grant request is consistent with BLM Manual 6840 (USDI 2008), the purpose of which is to provide policy and guidance for the conservation of BLM Special Status Species and the ecosystems upon which they depend on BLM-administered lands. BLM Special Status Species include those species listed or proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), as well as those designated as Bureau Sensitive by the State Director. The objectives of the BLM Special Status policy are:

- To conserve and/or recover ESA-listed species and the ecosystems on which they depend so that ESA protections are no longer needed for these species; and
- To initiate proactive conservation¹ measures that reduce, or eliminate, threats to Bureau Sensitive species to minimize the likelihood of and need for listing of these species under the ESA (USDI 2008, Section .02).

STATUTES AND REGULATIONS

The Proposed Action is designed to be in conformance with the direction given for the management of public lands in the Medford District and the following:

- **Oregon and California Lands Act of 1937 (O&C Act)**. Requires the BLM to manage O&C lands for permanent forest production. Timber shall be sold, cut, and removed in accordance with sustained-yield principles for the purpose of providing for a permanent source of timber supply, protecting watersheds, regulating stream flow, contributing to the economic stability of local communities and industries, and providing recreational facilities.
- **Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA)**. Defines BLM’s organization and provides the basic policy guidance for BLM’s management of public lands.
- **National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)**. Requires the preparation of environmental impact statements for major federal actions which may have a significant effect on the environment.

¹ Conservation: as applied to Bureau Sensitive species, is the use of programs, plans, and management practices to reduce or eliminate threats affecting the status of the species, or improve the condition of the species’ habitat on BLM-administered lands (USDI 2008, Glossary p. 2).

- **Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA)**. Directs Federal agencies to ensure their actions do not jeopardize species listed as “threatened and endangered” or adversely modify designated critical habitat for these listed species.
- **Clean Air Act of 1990 (CAA)**. Provides the principal framework for national, state, and local efforts to protect air quality.
- **National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as amended (NHPA)**. Requires federal agencies to take into account the effect of their federal or federally-licensed undertakings on historic properties, whether those properties are federally owned or not.
- **Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (ARPA)**. Protects archaeological resources and sites on federally-administered lands. Imposes criminal and civil penalties for removing archaeological items from federal lands without a permit.
- **Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) of 1974 (as amended in 1986 and 1996)**. Protects public health by regulating the nation’s public drinking water supply.
- **Clean Water Act of 1987 (CWA)**. Establishes objectives to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation’s water.

RELEVANT ASSESSMENTS AND PLANS

The following documents contain information related to existing conditions and management practices associated with the Soda Mountain Communications Site and the surrounding area. These documents are incorporated by reference into the project documentation.

Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan (USDI 2012a)

In accordance with the CSNM ROD/RMP (USDI 2008, VER-6, p. 117), the *Soda Mountain Communications Site Management Plan* was completed in 2012. This site plan was incorporated into all the existing leases or right-of-way grants and is required to be used in conjunction with the granting authorization.

The site plan provides applicable guidance and adds current policy and technical standards for better management of the Soda Mountain Communications Site. It also provides guidance for additional telephone service at the communications site.

Soda Mountain Wilderness Final Stewardship Plan (USDI 2012b)

The Soda Mountain Wilderness was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System by the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11, March 30, 2009). The *SMW Final Stewardship Plan* provides the primary guidance for managing the Soda Mountain Wilderness. The plan 1) identifies the conditions and opportunities which will be managed within the wilderness; 2) creates specific guidance for managing the resources and activities

existing in the wilderness; and 3) preserves the area's wilderness characteristics cumulatively identified as untrammeled quality, outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive form of recreation, undeveloped character, and naturalness and primeval character.

Southwest Oregon Fire Management Plan (ODF 2014)

The Southwest Oregon Fire Management Plan (FMP) provides Southwest Oregon with an integrated concept for coordinated wildland fire planning and protection among federal, state, local government entities and citizen initiatives. The Fire Management Plan is not a decision document.

The FMP introduces fire management concepts addressing fire management activities in relation to resource objectives stated in the current land and resource management plans or land use plans (parent documents) of the federal agencies, the laws and statutes that guide the state agencies and private protective associations, and serves as a vehicle for local agencies and cooperators to more fully coordinate their participation in relation to those activities.

Soda Mountain Wilderness Fire Suppression Information and Specific Action Plan (USDI and ODF 2015)

This plan provides guidance for all fire suppression activities within the Soda Mountain Wilderness. It includes fire suppression guidance from BLM Manual 6340 – *Management of BLM Wilderness* Section 1.6.C.7 (USDI 2012e). It is updated annually and includes delegation of authority, dispatch procedures, and identifies resource advisors for the SMW.

SCOPING

Scoping is the process the BLM uses to identify issues related to the proposal (40 CFR 1501.7) and determine the extent of environmental analysis necessary for an informed decision. It is used early in the NEPA process to identify (1) the issues to be addressed, (2) the depth of the analysis, (3) alternatives or refinements to the Proposed Action, and (4) potential environmental impacts of the Proposed Action. Scoping is performed not to build consensus or get agreement on a project proposal, but rather to solicit relevant site-specific comments that could aid in the analysis and final design of the proposal.

Scoping has occurred for the Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project Hunter Communications, Inc. Right-of-Way Grant (OR 068168). The Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project appeared in the Ashland Resource Area's Schedule of Proposed Actions published in Medford's Messenger (BLM's quarterly newsletter) beginning in the spring 2015 edition. A letter briefly describing the Proposed Action and inviting comments was mailed to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, organizations, and other agencies and posted on the Medford BLM planning website on June 15, 2015 for a 15-day comment period. No public comments were received.

RELEVANT ISSUES

An interdisciplinary (ID) team of resource specialists reviewed the right-of-way proposal and all pertinent information, and identified relevant issues to be addressed during the environmental analysis.

Authorizing a fiber optic right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. has the potential to impact the protection of the objects of biological interest for which the CSNM was designated (Presidential Proclamation 7318).

The presidential proclamation reserved the CSNM in recognition of its remarkable ecology and to protect a diverse range of biological, geological, aquatic, archaeological and historic objects. The communication facility has the potential to impact wildlife, such as various bird species including bluebird, meadowlark, and other species mentioned in the proclamation, as well as archaeological and historic objects.

Authorizing a fiber optic right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. may impact the visual quality of the CSNM and the adjacent SMW and may alter the character of the landscape.

The CSNM is assigned Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class II (USDI 2008, VIS-2, p. 114). The objective within the CSNM is to “retain the existing character of the landscape.” The long-term management objectives for the CSNM are to preserve the natural landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant *natural* features of the characteristic landscape (USDI 1986, BLM Manual H-8410-1(V)(B)(2)).”

Approximately 18.8 miles of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCNST) is located within the CSNM. The trail allows visitors to experience scenic, historical, natural and cultural resources within the CSNM and SMW. The Soda Mountain Communications Site is visible from multiple locations along the trail. Authorizing the right-of-way grant for fiber optic cable to Hunter Communications, Inc. may affect the visual quality from the PCNST.

Authorizing a fiber optic right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. has the potential to affect wilderness character in the adjacent Soda Mountain Wilderness.

The Soda Mountain Wilderness was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System by the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11, March 30, 2009). Wilderness areas provide a contrast to lands where human activities dominate the landscape. Wilderness areas are managed for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a manner that will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, for their protection,

for the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness.

Wilderness character is composed of four mandatory qualities and a fifth, optional quality (Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964), summarized as:

- Untrammeled – wilderness is unhindered and free from modern human control or manipulation.
- Outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation – wilderness provides opportunities for people to experience solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, including the values of inspiration and physical and mental challenge.
- Undeveloped – wilderness is substantially without permanent developments or modern human occupation.
- Natural – wilderness ecological systems, being affected primarily by the forces of nature, retain their primeval character and influence substantially free from the effects of modern human civilization.
- Unique/Supplemental Values – wilderness may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

BLM Manual 6340 - Management of BLM Wilderness (USDI 2012e) provides the following guidance, “In general, BLM does not prohibit uses outside a wilderness on public lands solely to protect wilderness character of the designated lands.” When activities are proposed on public lands adjacent to wilderness, such as lease renewals or facility modification requests at the communications site, “the potential impacts, if any, of those activities upon the wilderness resource and upon public use of the adjacent wilderness area must be analyzed in the applicable NEPA document (Section 1.6.D.2.a.)” The BLM may require actions to mitigate impacts to adjacent wilderness (such as minor changes to location, limited timing restrictions, using certain paint schemes on equipment, or requiring shades on lights) as identified through the NEPA process (Section 1.6.D.2.b.) if they do not impose undue financial burden on the operator.

Maintains vital communication coverage (including emergency 911 services) to the surrounding area.

Placing fiber optic cable along the existing utility network will increase the bandwidth available to the public and increase the functionality of smart phones and wireless media devices to meet public need. In addition, by increasing the extent and quality of wireless communications coverage in remote and mountainous areas, the ability to initiate 911 calls for emergency services will also increase. Certain new generation data services will also be enhanced and made usable for the area covered by this particular project. These services include future enhancements

in the ability to “geo-locate” users who initiate 911 calls in remote areas. The communications site serves several Ranally Metro Areas (RMAs). The largest population zone served by this site is Medford, OR, with a population of 100,000 to 299,999 (Zone 6).

CHAPTER 2 - ALTERNATIVES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the Proposed Action and alternatives developed by the BLM to achieve the objectives identified in the Purpose and Need section in Chapter 1. A “No-Action” Alternative is presented to form a baseline for analysis. Project Design Features (PDFs) are specific measures developed by the interdisciplinary team to eliminate or minimize adverse impacts from the Proposed Action. The PDFs apply the guidance of the 2008 Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Resource Management Plan.

ALTERNATIVE 1 - NO ACTION

A right-of-way grant for fiber optic cable would not be issued to Hunter Communications, Inc. under this alternative.

ALTERNATIVE 2 - PROPOSED ACTION

The BLM is proposing to issue a right-of-way grant to Hunter Communications, Inc. that would authorize placement of 24-count fiber optic cable both on existing utility poles and underground. The proposed alignment would connect with an existing fiber optic cable that is located on utility poles currently ending at the intersection of Road 39-2E-34 and Buckhorn Springs Road to the United States Cellular Corporation (USCC) tower which is located on the top of Soda Mountain. This proposed project would cross several BLM properties both outside and within the CSNM. The right-of-way would be issued for a period of 30 years.

The total length of aerial (on utility poles) fiber optic cable placement on BLM property would be approximately 8,243 feet (5,100 feet would be located within the CSNM and 3,143 feet would be outside the CSNM). The total length of underground fiber optic cable (including that within the Soda Mountain Communications Site) would be approximately 7,996 feet and would be placed within the road prism of BLM Roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road) (Map 1).

To install the fiber optic cable onto the existing utility poles, the crew would climb each pole and attach a three bolt mechanism to the pole. A steel strand would then be pulled through this mechanism followed by the fiber optic cable. The fiber optic cable would be lashed to the strand and then pulled to tighten it to its final sag elevation. The three bolt mechanism would then be secured so the cable is held in place.

For the underground portion, a backhoe/excavator would be used to dig a trench 2 feet wide by 2 feet deep (Figure 1). The conduit for the fiber optic cable would then be placed in the trench, the

soil backfilled and compacted. If excessive rock is encountered, a rock saw may need to be used. Along the alignment, four vaults (18 inches by 24 inches by 24 inches deep) would be installed flush with the ground to allow access and long-term maintenance of the fiber optic line. Each vault would require the excavation of a hole approximately 3 feet by 3 feet by 2 feet deep.

Figure 1. Example of trenching and location of proposed trenching.



Installation of three other vaults is proposed within the communications site area, in order to facilitate the current tower owners upgrading technology in the future to use the fiber optics.

Because mergers, buy-outs, and name changes are common in the communication industry, this right-of-way grant would be re-assignable in these specific instances.

Project Design Features

Project Design Features (PDFs) are an integral part of the Proposed Action (Alternatives 2). They are developed to avoid or reduce the potential for adverse impacts to resources. PDFs include seasonal restrictions on certain activities in order to minimize erosion and reduce disturbance to wildlife. Where applicable, PDFs reflect standard operating procedures.

PDFs included in this project description are carried forward into the right-of-way grant as terms and conditions. The BLM will monitor the operations of the right-of-way holder to ensure that terms and conditions are implemented as designed. The PDFs listed below apply to Alternative 2 (Proposed Action).

- Should a new spotted owl nest be discovered within 200 feet of BLM Road 40-3E-21.2, a seasonal restriction would be imposed for trencher use along the road to reduce disturbance during the nesting season (March 1- September 30).

- A seasonal restriction would be necessary if a new great gray owl nest is located adjacent to the right-of-way authorization.
- To prevent the spread of noxious weeds, all heavy equipment used for maintenance and installation of any approved installations would be washed prior to entering BLM lands and free of mud and debris.
- Highly disturbed areas will be seeded, re-vegetated, and/or mulched as requested by the resource area botanist. Only certified weed-free mulch and/or native seed will be used.
- If the right-of-way holder encounters or becomes aware of any objects or sites of paleontological or cultural value on federal lands, such as fossils, historical or pre-historical ruins, graves, grave markers, or artifacts, the contractor shall immediately suspend all operations in the vicinity of the cultural value and notify the Authorized Officer of the findings. The Authorized Officer may require measures to protect the cultural resource values present, or require evaluation and mitigation procedures based on recommendations from the BLM archaeologist with concurrence by the Ashland Field Manager and State Historic Preservation Office.

CHAPTER 3 – AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

INTRODUCTION

This Affected Environment sections in this chapter describes the existing conditions of the Soda Mountain Communications Site and associated analysis areas and it sets the environmental baseline for comparing the effects of the alternatives, including the No Action Alternative. The affected environment is described to the level of detail needed to determine the significance of impacts to the environment of implementing the Proposed Action or an alternative.

The Environmental Consequences portions of this chapter provides the analytical basis for the comparisons of the alternatives (40 CFR § 1502.16) and the reasonably foreseeable environmental consequences to the human environment of each alternative on the relevant resources. The existing environmental conditions serve as the baseline for determining potential impacts from the project. Impacts can be beneficial, neutral, or detrimental. The impact analysis addresses direct, indirect, and cumulative effects on all identified affected resources of the physical, biological, and human environment.

GENERAL SETTING

The Soda Mountain Communications Site is located at the top of Soda Mountain on BLM-administered lands within the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument. In 2000, the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument was reserved in recognition of its remarkable ecology and to protect a diverse range of biological, geological, aquatic, archeological and historic objects (Presidential Proclamation 7318). The Soda Mountain Wilderness was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System on March 30, 2009. The Soda Mountain Communications Site is within the CSNM and is surrounded on all sides by the SMW.

The *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* (DEIS) (USDI 2002, pages 13-130), the *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Proposed Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) (USDI 2005), the *Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument Record of Decision (ROD) and Resource Management Plan* (RMP) (USDI 2008), the *Soda Mountain Wilderness Stewardship Plan and Environmental Assessment* (USDI 2011), and the *Soda Mountain Wilderness Final Stewardship Plan* (USDI 2012) provide detailed descriptions of the affected environment within the CSNM and SMW, and are incorporated here by reference.

Some (3,143 feet) of the aerial (on existing utility poles) fiber optic cable placement would occur on BLM-administered lands outside the CSNM. The *Medford District Proposed Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* (USDI 1994) and the *Medford District Resource Management Plan* (USDI 1995) provide detailed descriptions of the affected environment on BLM lands within the Ashland Resource Area outside the CSNM, and are incorporated here by reference.

FORESEEABLE ACTIONS

The analysis of the effects of other present and reasonably foreseeable actions relevant to the effects of the Proposed Action is necessary. How each resource analysis uses information concerning other ongoing or reasonably foreseeable activities is, however, dependent on the geographic scale of concern and attributes considered during each resource analysis.

The following list of activities is presented to provide an overview of additional foreseeable actions associated with the Soda Mountain Communications Site beyond the proposed Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project (OR 068168).

NEW CINGULAR WIRELESS PCS, LLC (AT&T) (OR 48563)

The New Cingular Wireless PCS, LLC (AT&T) right-of-way grant was recently renewed for a period of 10 years; it included modifications to the original grant to address special resource considerations associated with the CSNM and adjacent resource values associated with the SMW. The right-of-way grant authorizes New Cingular Wireless PCS, LLC (AT&T) to operate and maintain their existing communication facility and use and maintain BLM roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road).

Approved modifications to the existing facilities would not exceed their current tower height or building footprint. An existing 4-foot diameter microwave dish located 50 feet high on the tower will be removed and replaced with a 2.5-foot diameter microwave dish at 80 feet on the tower. A new 6-foot diameter microwave dish with an ice shield will be placed at 70 feet on the existing tower.

The equipment shelter, coax cable bridge, propane tank, and all microwave dishes and ice shields will be painted with shadow gray paint (from the BLM Standard Environmental Color Chart (2008)) to better blend with the natural background and minimize the visual contrast of the facility in the landscape.

The two existing subleases (AT&T and the State of Oregon) will continue per their existing agreement with the right-of-way holder (New Cingular Wireless PCS, LLC (AT&T)). If either sublease agreement is terminated, no new subleases will be allowed.

U.S. CELLULAR (OR 49604)

US Cellular is requesting to renew their existing right-of-way grant (OR 49604) to occupy a 30-foot x 30-foot area at the Soda Mountain Communications Site. The facilities include a 40-foot communication tower with a 6-foot and two 10-foot diameter micro-wave dishes, a 12-foot x 10-foot equipment shelter, an existing coaxial cable bridge from the equipment shelter to the tower, two 20-foot metal poles with antennas, a generator, and a propane tank. US Cellular is requesting five proposed additions: (1) route a hybrid cable in the existing buried conduit from the tower to the two metal poles to increase communication capacity; (2) attach a horizontal bar at the base of the two antenna poles to run a coaxial cable; (3) add an 8-foot panel antenna and 12-foot support frame on the existing tower at 29 feet; (4) replace two 8-foot panel antennas; and (5) attach three small electronic boxes behind the antennas on the backside of the poles.

The authorization request includes use and maintenance of BLM roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1, and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road). The renewal application requests a grant for a 30-year period.

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (OR 34999)

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is requesting to renew their right-of-way grant to occupy a 50-foot x 50-foot area at the Soda Mountain Communications Site. The existing facilities consist of a 10-foot x 20-foot radio equipment building, a 20-foot self-supporting tower, generator, underground utilities, and a propane tank. ODOT is requesting the following modifications: (1) replace a 6-foot antenna with a 4-foot antenna for a link to Table Mountain; (2) replace one existing yagi antenna; (3) replace one omni antenna with a Telewave antenna; (4) upgrade grounding to meet current requirements; and (5) maintain existing authority to sublease to other users.

Future plans for upgrades in the region would allow ODOT to remove two dish-type antennas from the site. When this occurs, ODOT is requesting for a temporary Cell Site on Wheels (COW) if required to maintain radio communications during the migration of radio communications to new antennas and new sites. If approved the COW would be placed in the existing parking area between the ODOT site and the PacifiCorp site for approximately 30 days.

The authorization request includes use and maintenance of BLM roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1, and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road). The renewal application requests a grant for a 20-year period.

PACIFICORP (OR 038053)

PacifiCorp is requesting renewal of their existing right-of-way grant (OR 038053) for their communication facility at Soda Mountain. The right-of-way for their communication facility is approximately 50 feet x 50 feet with approximately 30 feet x 50 feet fenced. The existing

facilities include a 20-foot x 22-foot building, a 20-foot high lattice tower, a generator, and propane tank. No expansion or modifications are requested.

The authorization request includes use and maintenance of BLM roads 39-3E-32.3 (Soda Mountain Road), 40-3E-21.1, and 40-3E-21.2 (Soda Mountain Lookout Road). The renewal application requests renewal for the longest period the BLM will consider.

QWEST (OR 20137)

Qwest has not requested renewal of their right-of-way grant (OR 20137) at this time, but it is reasonably foreseeable that they will, as their lease is set to expire in 2019. Their current authorization includes two 15-foot x 20-foot passive reflectors.

PACIFICORP (OR 047785)

This right-of-way grant (OR 047785) is for the overhead power lines that service the Soda Mountain Communications Site. PacifiCorp has not requested renewal of their right-of-way grant) at this time, but it is reasonably foreseeable that they will, as their lease is set to expire in 2022.

SODA MOUNTAIN RESTORATION OF FORMER ROADS

The BLM is in the process of actively restoring and stabilizing former roads within the SMW as approved in the *Soda Mountain Wilderness Final Stewardship Plan* (USDI 2012b, pp. 29-40). Treatments include removing culverts, laying back stream banks to a 2:1 slope, restoring channel gradient, installing waterbars and rolling dips, spot and full recontouring of areas with elevated grade or to remove unstable road shoulders using material on site (waste material from culvert removals or elevated grade), scatter available vegetation over road, and spread native seed as needed to prevent erosion. Wilderness-incompatible infrastructure (cattle guards, fencing, stock tanks, trash, etc.) will be removed at the time the stabilization/recontouring is taking place.

The former roads below the Soda Mountain Communications Site were identified as a Priority Area 4 for restoration and include BLM Roads 40-3E-27, 39-3E-32.3 and two non-system roads located in T. 40 S., R. 3 E. Sections 27, 28 and 34. This restoration was completed this past summer. The total length of road restored in this area was approximately 4.2 miles (14 stream crossing, 3 cross drains).

RECREATION, VISUAL RESOURCES AND WILDERNESS CHARACTER

ISSUES

This section discusses the potential impacts to recreation, visual resources, and wilderness character from the Proposed Action or alternatives as described in Chapter 2 of this document. Recreation, visual resources and wilderness character issues associated with the Proposed Action have been identified and will be addressed in this section of the document. These relevant issues are:

- Authorization of the Hunter Communications, Inc. right-of-way grant may impact the visual quality of the CSNM and the adjacent SMW and may alter the character of the landscape.
- Authorization of the Hunter Communications, Inc. right-of-way grant has the potential to affect wilderness character in the adjacent Soda Mountain Wilderness.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The Soda Mountain Communications Site is located within the CSNM and surrounded by the SMW. Recreation in the project area includes hiking, sightseeing, equestrian use, fishing, hunting, wilderness exploration, and winter recreation activities.

Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail

The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCNST) is about 0.25 air-miles from the Soda Mountain Communications Site and in some locations immediately parallels BLM Road 40-3E-21.1 where the fiber optic cable would be buried underground in the road prism. The PCNST also crosses underneath the power lines where the fiber optic cable will be hung from the utility poles (Maps 1 and 2).

The communications site can be seen on a limited basis from the trail. The Medford District BLM manages 42.5 miles of the PCNST. Approximately 18.8 miles of the PCNST is located within the CSNM, of which 7.1 lies within the boundary of the Soda Mountain Wilderness. The trail was established through the National Trails System Act (1968) “in order to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population and in order to promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation.” The PCNST passes through California, Oregon and Washington from Mexico to Canada. Use of the PCNST is limited to hiking and stock use.

The PCNST is also designated as a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) under the Medford District RMP, which are areas identified with high concentrations of recreation use (USDI 1995, p. 66 and Map 9). Within the CSNM, the PCNST is managed in accordance with the *Comprehensive Management Plan for the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail* (USDA 1982) and the national interagency *Memorandum of Understanding between USDA Forest Service, USDI National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, California State Parks, and the Pacific Crest Trail Association* (2003) (USDI 2008, PCT-1, p. 110).

Since the portion of the trail that is in the vicinity of the communications site is within the SMW, no timber harvesting or vegetation removal would occur; therefore, ample foreground vegetation screening along the trail currently provides two main vantage points where the casual observer could prominently view the communications site from the PCNST (Map 2).

Visual Resources

The Soda Mountain Communications Sites is within the CSNM and is assigned Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class II (USDI 2008, VIS-2, p. 114). The objective within the CSNM is to “retain the existing character of the landscape.” The long-term management objectives for the CSNM are to preserve the natural landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant *natural* features of the characteristic landscape (USDI 1986, BLM Manual H-8410-1(V)(B)(2)).

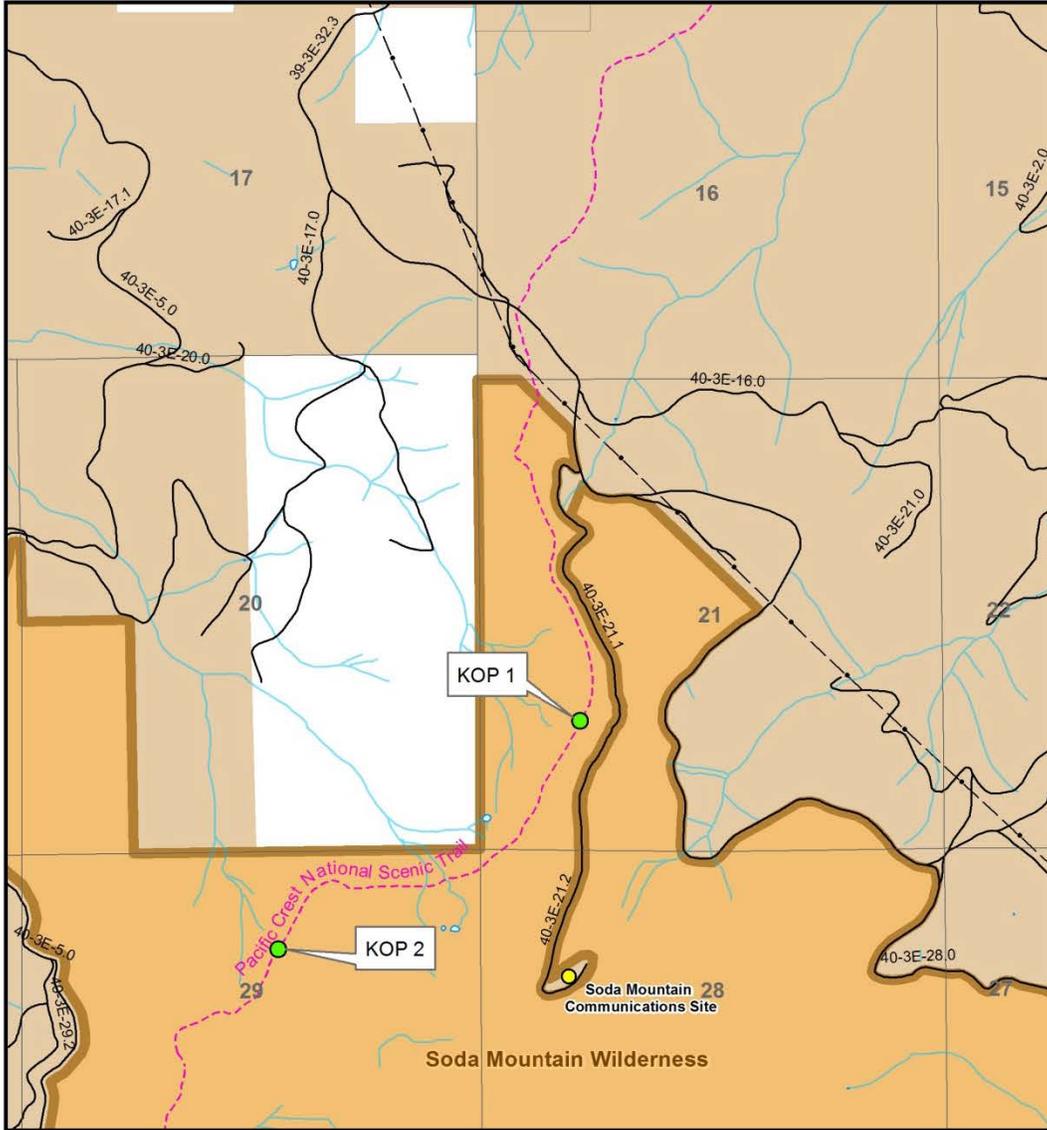
The Visual Contrast Rating Worksheet was completed from Key Observation Points (KOPs) as a field tool to assess if the proposed activities would change the natural characteristic of the landscape (Map 2) (USDI 2005). The overall vision for management of the CSNM is to protect, maintain, restore or enhance relevant and important objects and natural processes. The area evaluated for potential visual and recreation effects encompasses KOPs where Hunter Communications, Inc. fiber optic cable could potentially be seen from the PCNST. This area will be referred to as the Analysis Area (Map 2).

Dispersed Recreation

The lands surrounding the communications site and the locations where the fiber optic cable is proposed provide dispersed recreation opportunities including, but is not limited to, camping, hiking, hunting, horseback riding, scenic driving in a primitive to semi-primitive environment. These areas are characterized as moderate use recreational areas where developed or designated recreational sites or activities do not exist.

Map 2. Visual Resource Management Key Observaton Points

**Soda Mountain Communications Site
Visual Resource Management Key Observation Points**

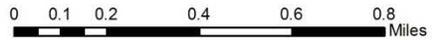


Legend

- Greater CSNM Boundary
- Other Bureau of Land Management
- State
- Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail
- Roads
- Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument
- U.S. Forest Service
- Private/Unknown
- Power Line
- Key Observation Points
- Soda Mountain Wilderness
- Other Federal



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Bureau of Land Management
Medford District
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No warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual or aggregate use with other data. Original data were compiled from various sources and may be updated without notification.

Prepared By: Kathy Minor
Current Date: 7/29/15

Wilderness Character

The Soda Mountain Wilderness surrounds the communications site and BLM Roads 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2. Immediately adjacent to the communications site, the SMW provides opportunities hiking, scenic viewing, dispersed camping, horseback riding/packing, hunting and exploration.

Wilderness areas provide a contrast to lands where human activities dominate the landscape. Wilderness areas are managed for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a manner that will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, for their protection, for the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness.

Wilderness character is summarized as:

- Untrammeled – wilderness is unhindered and free from modern human control or manipulation.
- Outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation – wilderness provides opportunities for people to experience solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, including the values of inspiration and physical and mental challenge.
- Undeveloped – wilderness is substantially without permanent developments or modern human occupation.
- Natural – wilderness ecological systems, being affected primarily by the forces of nature, retain their primeval character and influence substantially free from the effects of modern human civilization.
- Unique/Supplemental Values – wilderness may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Alternative 1 (No Action)

Under the No Action Alternative, the right-of-way would not be granted and Hunter Communications, Inc. would not be able to provide fiber optic technology to the US Cellular tower at the top of Soda Mountain, eliminating the possibility of existing communications site users reducing their visual impact within the CSNM and SMW in the future through the removal of large microwave dishes by connecting to the fiber optic technology. The footprint of the Soda Mountain Communications Site would still continue to exist and be seen by users of the PCNST from the two KOPs.

The other lease holders at Soda Mountain would continue to operate at the site. The visual impact from foreseeable right-of-way authorizations for New Cingular Wireless PCS, LLC

(AT&T), US Cellular, ODOT, and PacifiCorp would largely remain unchanged from the pre-existing structures and facility, the foreseeable renewals would meet Visual Resource Management Class II criteria of the Visual Resource Inventory Handbook (H-8410-1), (V)(B)(2). Such limited changes may be seen but would not attract the attention of the casual observer and would repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, texture, and scale found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

Under this alternative, recreation opportunities would remain unchanged. Dispersed recreational activities such as hiking, horseback riding, sightseeing, fishing, hunting, and dispersed camping would continue. Activities on the PCNST would remain unchanged.

Since the communications site would remain, the impact from the presence of the communications site on wilderness resources would remain unchanged. The communications site is visible from within the wilderness and affects the opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation within the SMW on the edges adjacent to the communications site. The site does not, however, impact the untrammeled, undeveloped, natural, or unique/supplemental qualities of wilderness character because it is located outside of the wilderness. Uses outside a wilderness on public lands are not generally prohibited solely to protect wilderness character inside the designed lands (BLM Manual 6340, USDI 2012e).

Improvements associated with the present and foreseeable former road restoration within the wilderness will directly improve three of the five qualities of wilderness character: outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; undeveloped; and natural. The implementation of the road stabilization and restoration has a short-term impact to the untrammeled quality of the wilderness.

Alternative 2 - Proposed Action

Under Alternative 2, recreation opportunities would remain unchanged. However, the user experience may improve in the future through a reduced visual impact associated the fiber optic technology available at the communications site and the possible removal of some microwave dishes. The overall visual impact from the two KOPs would not change with the installation of the fiber optic cables.

The project will not alter the existing visual appearance of the communications site access road nor the communications site, as the fiber cable would be buried underground for over a mile leading to the site. Fiber optic cables and vaults would be placed underground in the tower compound areas and in the 30-foot roadway prism within previously disturbed soils. The vaults along the roadway and within the tower compound area would be placed flush with the ground.

Installation of fiber optic cable on the existing set of poles and wires below the underground segment on the mountain will create little or no visual change.

The proposed Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project meets the criteria of the Visual Resource Inventory Handbook of VRM II as it would repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, texture, and scale found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape. However, the footprint of the overall Soda Mountain Communications Site would still continue to be seen by users of the PCNST from the two KOPs.

Short-term impacts on the opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation within the SMW on the edges adjacent to BLM Roads 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E21.2 would occur during the installation of the fiber optic cable. The communications site is visible from within the wilderness and affects to the communications site. The site does not, however, impact the untrammeled, undeveloped, natural, or unique/supplemental qualities of wilderness character because it is located outside of the wilderness. Uses outside a wilderness on public lands are not generally prohibited solely to protect wilderness character inside the designed lands (BLM Manual 6340, USDI 2012e).

Cumulative Effects for Alternatives 2

The cumulative effects of the foreseeable right-of-way grants on the Soda Mountain Communications Site are described in Alternative 1. Collectively, the foreseeable authorizations for New Cingular Wireless PCS, LLC (AT&T), US Cellular, ODOT, PacifiCorp, and Hunter Communications, Inc. would largely remain unchanged from the existing condition of the visual landscape.

Under Alternative 2, the Visual Resource Management Class II criteria of the Visual Resource Inventory Handbook (H-8410-1), (V)(B)(2) would be met as limited changes may be seen but would not attract the attention of the casual observer and would repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, texture, and scale found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

Improvements associated with the present and foreseeable former road restoration within the wilderness will directly improve three of the five qualities of wilderness character: outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; undeveloped; and natural. The implementation of the road stabilization and restoration has a short-term impact to the untrammeled quality of the wilderness.

BOTANICAL RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

Special Status plants include federal threatened and endangered, Bureau Sensitive, and Survey and Manage (S&M) plants and fungi. Different policies apply to the different categories, but the main objectives for managing these species are:

- 1) protect and conserve federal listed species and manage their habitats to achieve their recovery in compliance with the Endangered Species Act;
- 2) manage for the conservation of Bureau Sensitive species and their habitats so as not to contribute to the need to list and to contribute to the recovery of the species (USDI 1995, pp. 50-51); and
- 3) manage S&M species to maintain their persistence across the Northwest Forest Plan area (USDA and USDI 2001, pp. S&G 3-4).

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The communication facility atop Soda Mountain is in a dry-rocky meadow with clay soils and several large rock outcrops. The plant community consists of scattered shrubs, forbs, and grasses dominated by buckwheats (*Eriogonum* species) and big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) with oceanspray (*Holodiscus discolor*) dominated shrub-lands fringing the summit that transition into the mature white fir/Douglas-fir coniferous forest that BLM Roads 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 roads pass through. The 39-3E-32.3 road passes through multiple habitats including grassy meadows, shrub lands and mixed conifer forests.

Surveys

The summit of Soda Mountain and the road prisms for BLM Roads 39-3E-32.3, 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 were surveyed for the presence of federally-listed, Bureau Special Status and S&M vascular plants during the 2007 field season by qualified botanists with an additional survey of the summit and BLM Roads 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 in 2015. Some segments of these roads and the summit of Soda Mountain were also surveyed for Bureau Special Status and S&M nonvascular species in 2007. This project is within the range of Gentner's fritillary (*Fritillaria gentneri*) but surveys have not documented occurrences of this species within the project area.

Special Status Species in the Project Area

Grimmia dry rock moss and Pringle's rim lichen are the only Special Status plants that have been located at the summit of Soda Mountain (Table 1); they are non-vascular plants that occur on rock outcrops between the various communications buildings. They are both S&M Category D species with poorly understood life histories. Grimmia dry rock moss is a cushion forming moss found on igneous or serpentine rocks typically in white oak, Douglas fir, mountain hemlock, Pacific silver fir and white fir forest habitats. Threats include road construction and global

warming (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/sfpnw/issssp/species-index/flora-bryophytes.shtml>, 2015/6/22). Pringle’s rim lichen occurs in sheltered areas of siliceous, often igneous rocks, usually above 5500’ in white bark pine, mountain hemlock and Douglas fir forest habitats. Threats include damage by rock climbers, declining air quality and fire (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/sfpnw/issssp/species-index/flora-lichens.shtml>, 2015/6/22).

Roadside sites: *Grimmia* dry rock moss-adjacent to the 39-3E-32.3 road just past intersection with 40-3E-21.1 road is not expected to be impacted by project activities, it is adjacent to project area, not in, but will be buffered to ensure no incidental damage occurs from equipment staging, vehicle parking or turn around.

Grimmia dry rock moss-adjacent to 39-3E-32.3 road near power lines in section 40-3E-17 is not expected to be impacted by project activities because it is adjacent to project area, not in, but will be buffered to ensure no incidental damage from equipment staging, vehicle parking or turn around.

Table 1. Survey and Manage Species Documented in the Hunter Communications Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Installation Right-of-Way Grant (OR 068168)			
Species	Common Name	Status	Occurrences
<i>Grimmia anomala</i>	Grimmia dry rock moss	S&M D	3
<i>Lecanora pringlei</i>	Pringle’s rim lichen	S&M D	1

Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds are plants growing outside their native lands or habitats that are injurious to public health, agriculture, recreation, wildlife, or public or private property (ODA 2013). Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) classifies noxious weeds based on their economic threat and the ability to control them. ‘A’ listed weeds have small enough infestations to make eradication or containment possible. ‘B’ listed weeds are regionally abundant and control is limited to site specific efforts. ‘T’ listed species include weeds from the A and B list that are identified as priorities for treatment. The BLM’s objectives for noxious weeds are to continue to survey for, avoid introducing or spreading, and contain or reduce infestations on BLM-administered land (USDI 1995, pp. 92-93). The BLM treats noxious weeds on their lands by manual, mechanical, chemical, or biological means under the *Medford District Integrated Weed Management Plan and Environmental Assessment* (EA #OR-110-98-14) (USDI 1998).

Weeds spread into new locations when there is a seed source, a transportation mechanism, and when conditions at the new site are favorable for germination and growth. Newly disturbed areas are the most vulnerable to noxious weed establishment. Weeds are spread through a variety of activities, including road or trail construction, timber harvest, mining, farming, over-grazing, vehicular traffic, recreation, and residential development. Natural processes, such as wind, seasonal flooding, fire, and the migration patterns of birds or animals also contribute to the spread of noxious weeds. Newly disturbed areas are most vulnerable to noxious weed establishment. Soil disturbance creates favorable conditions for the establishment of noxious weeds by removing competing vegetation. Weed seeds that have been suppressed in the soil have an opportunity to germinate and develop before native species are able to become re-established. The disturbed soil is also a ready seed bed if weed seeds or other plant parts are transported into the area by natural processes.

Vascular surveys in 2007 and 2015 documented occurrences of Canada thistle, bull thistle and yellow star thistle (Table 2). Surveys previous to 2007 documented many occurrences of Canada thistle. There have been repeated treatments along this road system and currently many of the historic Canada thistle sites have no plants present but re-infestation will be possible for some time as this species has seeds that are known to last up to 20 years in the seed bank.

Table 2. Noxious Weeds Documented in the Hunter Communications Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Installation Right-of-Way Grant (OR 068168)				
NOXIOUS WEED	ODA STATUS	HABITAT in PROJECT AREA	ESTIMATED NUMBER of SITES	CONTROL STRATEGY
Bull thistle	B	In and along BLM Roads 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2	15	Treat and monitor.
Canada thistle	B	Next to BLM Road 39-3E-32.3	1	Treat and monitor.
Yellow star thistle	B	Next to BLM Road 39-3E-32.3	3	Treat and monitor.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Alternative 1 (No Action)

Special Status Plants

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative affects to Bureau Special Status or Survey & Manage or Federally listed vascular or nonvascular plant species because no disturbance would occur. However, the footprint of the Soda Mountain

Communication Site compound would continue to exist and be used by authorized lessees. Since the two Special Status species on Soda Mountain (*Grimmia* dry rock moss and Pringle's rim lichen) are on rock outcrops rather than on open ground, the threat from use and maintenance of the communication site would be minimized. However, they will be buffered or otherwise marked as sensitive habitat to reduce the risk of incidental damage by equipment or workers.

Noxious Weeds

Under the no action alternative, no direct actions that would contribute to an increase in noxious weeds would occur in the project area. For the foreseeable projects and current lessees, BLM Roads 39-3E-32.3, 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 would continue to be used for access and maintenance, activities which may contribute to the spread of noxious weeds. However, the rate at which this potential spread would occur is unknown due to the indistinguishable causal effect of other activities and factors such as seed transport by vehicular traffic, wildlife, and other natural dispersal methods. The BLM would continue to treat existing noxious weed populations as funding and personnel are available under the *Medford District Integrated Weed Management Plan and Environmental Assessment* (EA #OR-110-98-14). Noxious weeds would continue to increase unless treated and the risk of new weeds invading the area from ongoing natural processes and from surrounding lands would continue.

Alternative 2 - Proposed Action

Special Status Plants

Under Alternative 2 (Proposed Action), there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to Bureau Special Status or Survey & Manage or Federally listed vascular plant species because there are no plant sites within the proposed project area. The two non-vascular plant sites that occur at the summit of Soda Mountain between the communications buildings will be buffered to reduce the risk of incidental damage by equipment or workers but are not within the proposed action area expected to be disturbed. The two non-vascular plant sites that occur adjacent to Road 39-3E-32.3 are not expected to be disturbed by this project but will be buffered to provide additional protection from incidental damage from equipment staging, vehicle turn around or other activities.

Noxious Weeds

Under Alternative 2, the proposed aerial fiber optic cable is not expected to involve any direct actions that would contribute to an increase in noxious weeds. Indirect actions that may contribute to the spread of noxious weeds along the power line corridor below the aerial portion of the fiber optic cable include transport of existing and import of new weed seeds by personnel or vehicles. This contribution does not vary significantly beyond that expected through normal routine maintenance of the power line infrastructure and corridor. The proposed underground portion of the fiber optic cable is expected to contribute to the spread of noxious weeds and the associated soil disturbance may trigger germination of new infestations of Canada thistle from

the seed bank. The BLM would continue to treat existing noxious weed populations as funding and personnel are available under the *Medford District Integrated Weed Management Plan and Environmental Assessment* (EA #OR-110-98-14).

WILDLIFE RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

Only federally-listed, Bureau Sensitive, Survey and Manage, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Birds of Conservation Concern, or Game Birds Below Desired Conditions known or suspected to be present within the project area and impacted by the action alternatives are addressed in this EA.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The communications site atop Soda Mountain is in a dry-rocky meadow with clay soils and several large rock outcrops. The plant community consists of scattered shrubs, forbs and grasses dominated by buckwheats (*Eriogonum* species) and big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) with oceanspray (*Holodiscus discolor*) dominated shrub-lands fringing the summit that transitions into mature coniferous forest.

The summit of Soda Mountain and BLM Roads 39-3E-32.3, 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 prisms do not provide suitable habitat for federally-listed, Bureau Sensitive or Survey and Manage, or Game Birds Below Desired Conditions species as these roads and the Soda Mountain Communications Site has been in use for many years. The area surrounding the project area does provide habitat for species using forested lands.

Threatened and Endangered (T&E) Species

This project is in the range of the northern spotted owl (NSO). The nearest known NSO nest (Dutch Oven) is approximately one mile to the southwest of the project area. The top of Soda Mountain is within the home range of the Dutch Oven NSO site. There is no suitable habitat (nesting, roosting, foraging, or dispersal (NRF)) directly within the project area. There is NRF habitat adjacent to BLM Road 40-3E-21.2 for a half mile. Should a new spotted owl nest be discovered within 200 feet of the road, a seasonal restriction would be imposed for trencher use along the road to reduce disturbance during the nesting season (March 1- September 30).

This project area is in the NSO Critical Habitat Unit (CHU) ECS-2. A long narrow strip of critical habitat follows the road prism of BLM Roads 40-3E-21.1 and 40-3E-21.2 up to and around the communications site. There is no suitable habitat (NRF and dispersal) directly in the project area.

The project is within the range of the federally endangered gray wolf; however the project area is outside of any Area of Known Wolf Activity (AKWA) as indicated by the Department of Oregon Fish and Wildlife. The Pacific Fisher (a federal proposed species) has a low likelihood of using the project area due to the open condition but could use suitable habitat adjacent to the project area. There have been camera survey stations in the area but no fishers have been detected.

BLM Sensitive Species

The forested area adjacent to the project provides potential habitat for a number of BLM sensitive species including, birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. The project area provides potential habitat for sensitive bat species in the form of green trees and snags which could be used for roosts.

Special Status wildlife species that could occur adjacent to the project area are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Special Status Species (Terrestrial Wildlife)	Species Status*
Lewis’ woodpecker (<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>)	BS
white-headed woodpecker (<i>Picoides albolarvatus</i>)	BS
pallid bat (<i>Antrozous pallidus</i>)	BS
fringed myotis (<i>Myotis thysanodes</i>)	BS

*BS – Bureau Sensitive

Survey and Manage Species

There is no suitable habitat in the project area for any Survey and Manage species known to occur in the Ashland Resource Area. There is suitable great gray owl habitat adjacent to the project area. The nearest known great gray owl nest site is approximately one mile north of the project area. A seasonal restriction would be necessary if a new nest is located adjacent to the project area.

Neotropical Migratory Land Birds

BLM issued guidance for meeting BLM’s responsibilities under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order (EO) 13186. Both the Act and the EO promote the conservation of migratory bird populations. The interim guidance was transmitted through Instruction Memorandum (IM) No. 2008-050. The IM relies on two lists prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in determining which species are to receive special attention in land management activities; the lists are *Bird Species of Conservation Concern* (BCC) found in various Bird Conservation Regions and *Game Birds Below Desired Condition* (GBBDC).

The project area does not have habitat for these species because it consists of roads and open areas that have already been disturbed.

Table 4 shows BCC and GBBDC birds that could occur adjacent to the project area.

Table 4. Bird Species of Conservation Concern and Game Birds Below Desired Condition	Species Status
black-throated gray warbler (<i>Dendroica nigrescens</i>)	BCC
flamulated owl (<i>Otus flammeolus</i>)	BCC
Lewis' woodpecker (<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>)	BCC
white-headed woodpecker (<i>Picooides albolarvatus</i>)	BCC
olive-sided flycatcher (<i>Contopus cooperi</i>)	BCC
rufous hummingbird (<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>)	BCC
mourning dove (<i>Zenaida macroura</i>)	GBBDC
band-tailed pigeon (<i>Columba fasciata</i>)	GBBDC

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Alternatives 1 – 2

There would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to Bureau Special Status or Survey and Manage or federally-listed wildlife species because no disturbance or habitat modification would occur.

No habitat modification would occur under the conditions of this right-of-way grant.

Disturbance to wildlife species would remain at current levels which occur on a regular basis from ordinary vehicular traffic and casual hiking activities.

CHAPTER 4 - PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project Hunter Communications, Inc. Right-of-Way Grant (OR 068168) appeared in the Ashland Resource Area's Schedule of Proposed Actions published in Medford's Messenger (BLM's quarterly newsletter) beginning in the spring 2015 edition. A letter briefly describing the Proposed Action and inviting comments was mailed to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, organizations, and other agencies and posted on the Medford BLM planning website on June 15, 2015. No public comments were received during the 15-day comment period that ended June 30, 2015.

As described in Chapter 1 of the EA, the BLM interdisciplinary team of resource specialists identified relevant issues to be addressed during the environmental analysis. Some issues identified as relevant to this project proposal were analyzed in association with broader level environmental analyses. Where appropriate, this EA incorporates by reference the analysis from broader level NEPA documents (40 CFR § 1508.28), to be considered along with project specific analysis.

This Soda Mountain Fiber Optic Project Hunter Communications, Inc. Right-of-Way Grant EA will be made available online, through publication of a legal notice in the Medford Mail Tribune newspaper, and at the Medford District BLM office to all individuals for a 15-day public comment period. A copy of the EA will be sent to the eight right-of-way grant holders at the Soda Mountain Communications Site, those parties who expressed interest in the project, and to the organizations and agencies listed below. Copies will be sent either via email or via standard mail depending on what was requested.

ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES

American Forest Resource Council
Pacific Crest Trail Association
The Wilderness Society
Friends of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument
Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center
Soda Mountain Wilderness Council
Greensprings Learning Institute
Pinehurst School
Green Diamond Resource Company

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