

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
and
NOTICE OF PROPOSED DECISION
for the
SAGE CREEK WATERSHED ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA**

Introduction and Background

In 2015, a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) interdisciplinary team (IDT) assessed BLM-administered lands within the Sage Creek Watershed (SCW) to determine whether the five Western Montana Land Health Standards were being met. Those standards include: Upland, Riparian and Wetland Areas, Water Quality, Air Quality, and Biodiversity. The assessment covered uplands, riparian/wetland areas, and forested habitats and was conducted in accordance with the 4180 Land Health Standards Manual. The Assessment Report was completed and released to the public in December, 2015.

Following the Assessment, the BLM completed the Sage Creek Watershed Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA) (EA) which analyzed and disclosed environmental impacts of implementing up to three different management alternatives on the BLM administered land in the SCW. The EA included management alternatives to address three key issues: Riparian, Wetland and Aquatic Habitat, Upland and Sagebrush Steppe Habitat and Recreation and Travel Management. Additional resource concerns identified included; Special Status Species Habitat, Forest, Woodland and Priority Species Habitat, Noxious and Invasive Species, Wilderness Characteristics and Wilderness Study Area, Socioeconomics, Cultural and Paleontological Resources and Visual Resources Management.

Management alternatives are aimed at improving land health and enhancing biodiversity. The action alternatives analyzed in the EA were developed by the BLM in consultation with the grazing permittees, local landowners, conservation groups, state agencies, and other federal agencies. Additional information is available in the SCW Assessment Report available at http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/dillon_field_office.html and the SCW EA which is available at the Dillon Field Office or on the Internet at https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/nepa/nepa_register.do.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

I have reviewed the Sage Creek Watershed EA (DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA), including the explanation and resolution of any potentially significant environmental impacts, and reviewed and thoroughly considered public comments regarding the EA. I have reviewed the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at 40 CFR 1508.27 which define significance and found the actions analyzed in the Sage Creek Watershed Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA do not constitute a major Federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will not be prepared.

The definition of significance includes both “context” and “intensity.” These ten significance criteria are all related to “intensity.”

- (1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and/or adverse.
- (2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.
- (3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.
- (4) The degree to which the effects on the quality or the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.
- (5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.
- (6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.
- (7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.
- (8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.
- (9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.
- (10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

This document is adequate and in conformance with the Dillon Resource Management Plan (RMP) as amended as required by 43 CFR 4100.0-8.

Cornelia H. Hudson
Dillon Field Manager

September 30, 2016
Date

Proposed Decision

Therefore, **it is my Proposed Decision** to implement Alternative B, except for the Dell allotment, for livestock grazing. I will choose alternative C for the Dell allotment. I have decided to select a combination of Alternatives B and C for Travel Management. For the Aspen Protection/Restoration Treatments, I have decided to implement Alternative C. I have also decided to implement the Features Common to All Action Alternatives listed in the Sage Creek EA. These actions are further described below with the associated projects/programs.

The actions included in this Proposed Decision are described more specifically below, and in the SCW EA (DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA). Please refer to the maps provided in the SCW EA for further management and project clarification.



Sage Creek Watershed – June, 2015

Livestock Management and Structural Projects:

I have decided to renew Term Grazing Permits for a ten-year period on the eleven allotments that were determined to be meeting Land Health Standards, needed no changes to facilitate improved livestock management, or on which current livestock grazing management was not determined to be a causal factor for the failure to meet Land Health Standards. These allotments will continue

to be managed as described under Alternative A with the Terms and Conditions shown below added.

These allotments include:

- Big Spring Gulch
- Crooked Creek AMP
- Kent Price Canyon
- Knox Non-AMP
- Little Spring SGC
- Long Creek
- Mosman AMP
- Railroad
- Stanford
- Welborn-Dell
- Wolfe

I have decided to implement Alternative B for the Tallent AMP, Huntsman, Bull Heifer Creek, and Armstead Mountain allotments. Although these allotments met the five Rangeland Health Standards, there were site specific concerns, administrative changes, adjustment to the authorized season of use, and/or completion of structural projects that were addressed in the Sage Creek EA. Some of these changes were requested by the permittee. To address livestock induced resource concerns on the following four grazing allotments, I have decided to implement Alternative B.

- Gallagher Mountain AMP
- Mayberry
- Red Butte
- Red Butte SE

To address livestock induced resource concerns on the Dell allotment I have decided to implement Alternative C.

All five Land Health Standards were met in the Knox and Sage Creek AMP allotments, however livestock related impacts to localized areas were identified. To address these resource concerns, I have decided to implement Alternative B.

The term grazing permits for these eleven allotments will be modified and issued for a period of ten years with new terms and conditions and/or range improvement projects to address administrative changes or identified concerns.

Terms and Conditions:

In addition to the Terms and Conditions outlined below under individual allotments, the following terms and conditions will be added to all new livestock grazing permits:

- Use on the (allotment name) Allotment(s) will be in accordance with the Proposed Decision for the Sage Creek Watershed EA# DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA.
- Livestock management changes would be initiated during the 2017 grazing season. Implementation which is dependent on other proposals, e.g. rangeland projects, may take up to five years, due to financial, logistical, or other constraints.

- AUMs reduced from current active use will be held in suspended non-use on the revised Term Grazing Permits.
- All Term Grazing Permits will be amended to state that depredations from grizzly bears or wolves are possible.
- With prior approval, flexibility will be authorized for the season of use on each allotment if annual weather conditions and forage production warrant. The season of use begin and end dates may be adjusted up to seven days earlier or later than specified on the permit due to yearly variations in weather affecting forage production. Livestock may need to be removed from a specific pasture prior to the maximum number of days specified in the grazing schedule. If this occurs, the time allocated in subsequent pastures will be adjusted proportionally. Conversely, if annual production is unusually high, livestock may be allowed to remain in a given pasture for up to five additional days and the remainder of the rotation schedule adjusted accordingly.
- After consultation with the BLM, and written approval, the planned pasture grazing sequence (AMP) may be adjusted due to drought or other unforeseen natural events. Also, with prior approval, more livestock may be grazed for a shorter period within the authorized season of use. However, the maximum authorized AUMs, or season of use, as specified in the Term Grazing Permits cannot be exceeded by allowing this flexibility.
- Permittees shall provide reasonable administrative access across private and leased lands to the Bureau of Land Management for the orderly management and protection of the public lands.
- Annual utilization thresholds on cool season bunch grasses will be 50% (to maintain plant health/vigor and leave adequate residual cover for sage grouse).
- Utilization by livestock of sedge species in the riparian greenline (area of vegetation adjacent to the channel) on non-fisheries or non-native fisheries streams will leave a minimum of four inches of stubble. On westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) streams the threshold will be to maintain a herbaceous stubble height of at least 6 inches along the greenline and 3 inches on the flood plain to manage for the long term viability of remaining WCT populations.

The annual use thresholds will be added to the terms and conditions of the term grazing permits of all allotments included in the SCW, as a tool to determine moves between pastures and/or off the allotment, and in conjunction with long term trend data to determine management effectiveness. For example, when a threshold is met, livestock will be moved to the next pasture or off of the allotment.

Projects:

- Place new, taller structures, i.e. water storage tanks, out of line of sight or at least one km from occupied leks, where such structures would increase risk of avian predation.
- No repeated or sustained behavioral disturbance (e.g. visual, noise over 10 dbA at lek, etc.) to lekking birds from 6:00pm to 9:00am within 2 miles (3.2 km) of leks during lekking season (March 1 – May 15).

Distribution:

The BLM encourages, and if warranted, will require use of temporary electric fence, livestock supplement (e.g., salt, protein block) placement, riding, and herding as a means of improving

livestock distribution in all alternatives. When used, livestock supplement shall be placed on ridges or terraces at least ¼ mile from the nearest livestock water source. Supplement will be placed in existing disturbed areas to reduce impacts to sage grouse habitat.

Drought

During drought years when forage production is considerably reduced, the Dillon Field Office will follow the BLM drought policy Titled “Bureau of Land Management, Policy for Administering Public Land Grazing in Montana, North and South Dakota During Periods of Drought” and the BLM’s National Drought Policy which is outlined in Washington Office Instruction Memorandum 2013-094.

Water Developments:

- All water developments and troughs no longer in use will be removed, but spring enclosure fences may be retained and maintained.
- Wildlife escape ramps will be installed in all water troughs.
- Annual maintenance will be completed, as agreed to in Cooperative Agreements, to assure that water developments, including spring boxes, pipelines, troughs, valves, shutoff devices, and enclosures are functioning and in good condition.
- Design features to mitigate potential for West Nile Virus will be incorporated into water developments (USDI, 2015a, Appendix C), including:
 - Maintain a properly functioning overflow on troughs to prevent water from flowing onto the pad and providing for mosquito habitat.
 - Clean and drain stock tanks before and after the grazing season. Vegetation and soil free clean tanks are not conducive to mosquito reproduction.
 - Install and maintain float valves on stock tanks/troughs to minimize overflow which may provide mosquito habitat.
 - Modify developed springs, seeps and associated pipelines to maintain predevelopment riparian areas within sage grouse habitat where necessary.
- All applicable State and Federal Permits will be obtained and the terms and conditions applied.
- Spring sources and associated riparian wetland habitat will be fenced where appropriate, to exclude livestock use on developed springs.
- Any proposed pipelines and water troughs will be located in existing disturbed areas or unsuitable sage grouse habitat to the extent practical.
- Flow measurements will be gathered at springs proposed for new development. Springs that have inadequate flows to provide a reliable water source for authorized livestock, while maintaining wetland/riparian habitat would not be developed. Adequate water will be left at the spring source to maintain wetland hydrology, hydric soils, and hydric vegetation.
- No new roads will be authorized as a result of water developments. Permit holders may be authorized to travel along pipeline routes to perform maintenance as defined in the term grazing permit.
- All old materials (pipeline, troughs, head boxes, etc.) will be cleaned up and removed when springs are re-developed, maintained or abandoned.
- Soil disturbance resulting from pipeline installation will be seeded with a native seed mix during the fall, following construction.

- State of Montana Water Right laws and administrative procedures will be followed in applications for Water Rights on Public Land. The BLM would limit maximum flow rates to 35 gallons per minute or less and maximum volumes to 10 acre-feet or less for new developments. The BLM will submit proposed changes to Montana DNRC and comply with Public Notice requirements for changes to existing water rights. Approvals will be obtained prior to construction where additional stock tanks resulting in new points of use are to be added to existing systems and changes to existing water right claims would occur. Applications for new water rights will be submitted after construction in most cases. The BLM is committed to respect water rights of all parties and will not knowingly infringe on other water rights holders.
- Design features to mitigate potential for West Nile Virus would be incorporated into new water developments (USDI, 2015a, Appendix C), including:
 - Design new spring developments in sage grouse habitat to maintain or enhance the free flowing characteristics of springs and wet meadows to benefit wildlife including sage grouse.
 - Construct water return features and maintain functioning float valves to prohibit water from being spilled on the ground surrounding troughs to provide mosquito habitat.
 - Harden stock tank pads to reduce tracks that can potentially hold water and provide mosquito habitat.
 - Develop and maintain non-pond/reservoir livestock watering facilities, such as troughs and bottomless tanks, to provide livestock water.

Fences:

- Existing BLM fences that impede wildlife movement will be modified or rebuilt to BLM specifications on a prioritized schedule. Dysfunctional or unnecessary fences on public land will be removed, modified, and/or rebuilt.
- Fences and exclosures that are determined to be in a high use area for sage grouse (i.e. fences within ¼ mile of a lek and/or winter concentration areas; considering topography, vegetation, visibility, etc.) will be marked with flight diverters to reduce collisions (USDA, 2012).
- Any new or replacement boundary fences will normally be a four-wire fence and any new interior (pasture) fences will normally consist of three wires, constructed in conformance with BLM Fencing Handbook H-1741-1.
- High tensile electric fences would be considered in areas where they may provide an effective alternative to traditional barbed wire construction. These will also be constructed in conformance with BLM Fencing Handbook H-1741-1.
- Avoid building new wire fences within 2 km of occupied leks. If this is not feasible, ensure that high risk segments are marked to avoid collisions (USDI, 2015a, Appendix C).
- New fence construction, including exclosures, that are determined to be in a high use area for sage grouse (i.e. fences within ¼ mile of a lek and/or winter concentration areas; considering topography, vegetation, visibility, etc.) will be marked with flight diverters to reduce collisions (USDA, 2012).

Allotment-Specific Livestock Management and Range Improvement Structural Projects

The following section describes the allotment-specific livestock management changes and proposed rangeland improvement projects. The proposed projects are shown on individual

Allotment Maps in Appendix A of the SCW EA (available at the Dillon Field Office or on the Internet at https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/nepa/nepa_register.do).

Armstead Mountain #30008 and Gallagher Mountain AMP #30013 (Map #6)

History: As stated on page three of the Sage Creek Assessment Report, the grazing permittee for the Gallagher Mountain AMP has proposed to insert three Gallagher Mountain AMP allotment pastures (Sheep Canyon, Sage Creek and Divide Creek) into the Armstead Mountain allotment to improve management of both allotments. Due to topography, it is nearly impossible to move young calves from the northern pastures in the Gallagher Mountain AMP allotment to the three southern pastures in the allotment (Sheep Canyon, Sage Creek and Divide Creek). Moving the three southern pastures from the Gallagher Mountain AMP allotment into the Armstead Mountain allotment will eliminate the topography challenges for younger livestock.

Administration: Insert three Gallagher Mountain AMP allotment pastures (Sheep Canyon, Sage Creek and Divide Creek) into the Armstead Mountain allotment to improve management of both allotments. Nine hundred and fifty AUMs of authorized grazing along with the associated acres will be removed from the Gallagher Mountain AMP allotment and added to the Armstead Mountain allotment (See attached map 6).

Grazing Management:

Over the last 10 years, two herds of 600-750 cattle each grazed portions of the Armstead Mountain allotment. Under alternative B, two herds of < 500 cattle each will be authorized to graze the Armstead Mountain allotment.

For herd number 1, six pastures in the Armstead Mountain allotment that contain BLM administered lands would be authorized for livestock use. Each pasture will be limited to <500 cattle and a specific number of grazing days during the grazed cycle as follows:

- Divide Creek 15 days
- Sage Creek 25 days
- Middle Creek 25 days
- Poison 15 days
- Sheep Canyon 25 days
- Freeman 25 days

In addition, the Divide Creek pasture will be rested every other year as compared to once every three years like the previous 10-year grazing management plan directed. All other pastures will receive rest once every third year, except Poison pasture under this new alternative. The Poison pasture can be grazed every year given that the pasture is grazed after August 15 annually as a deferred pasture.

For Herd number 2, six pastures that contain BLM administered lands in the Armstead Mountain allotment will be authorized for <500 cattle. Under alternative B, each pasture will be limited to a specific number of grazing days during the grazed cycle as follows:

- Spring Gulch 45 days
- Buck Creek 45 days
- High Field 25 days
- Horseshoe Timber 25 days

-Buckhorn (M. Canyon) 25 days

-Armstead 25 days

In addition, Spring Gulch and Buck Creek must be rested every other year. Of the remaining pastures (High Field, Horseshoe Timber, Buckhorn, Armstead), one must be rested every year during the four year grazing cycle and all pastures must be rested once every four years. The grazing rotation must begin in a different pasture every year.

***The Buck Creek holding water gap is closed to livestock grazing except for trailing to and from the Buck Creek pasture.

Projects:

- Install culverts at the following locations. For further description refer to page 20 of this Proposed Decision.
 - Install culvert on the crossing over Reach 9, Map 6.
 - Install culvert on the crossing over Reach 31, Map 6.

Table 1: Current Livestock Grazing Terms and Conditions for Armstead Mountain and Gallagher Mountain AMP allotments

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Armstead Mountain	7/11	12/10	43	1514
	06/01	7/10	63	580

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Gallagher Mountain AMP	05/01	11/20	52	4185

Table 2: Proposed Livestock Grazing Terms and Conditions for Armstead Mountain and Gallagher Mountain AMP allotments

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Armstead Mountain	7/11	12/10	43	2464
	06/01	7/10	63	580

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Gallagher Mountain AMP	05/01	11/20	52	3235

Bull Heifer Creek #10137 (Map #7)

Grazing Management:

- Rest the allotment every other year. Grazing days in the allotment during grazing years will not exceed 21 days.

Projects:

- Remove a portion of the northwest boundary fence and then rebuild the fence to incorporate about 100 acres of BLM administered lands currently included in the Knox allotment pasture #3.

Administrative:

- Incorporate the 100 acres of BLM administered lands and the associated 30 AUMs of authorized grazing from the Knox allotment pasture #3 into the Bull Heifer Creek allotment.

Table 3: Current Terms and Conditions for Bull Heifer Creek allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Bull Heifer Creek	06/01	9/30	63	78

Table 4: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Bull Heifer Creek allotment

Allotment/Category	Year	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
		06/01	9/30		
Bull Heifer Cr.	2	Rest	Rest	63	0
	Repeat Rotation				

*Includes 30 AUMs previously found in Knox allotment

Dell #20620 (Map #8)

Grazing Management:

- Authorized grazing period for the Dell allotment would be from February 1 to April 15.
- Livestock trailing across the Dell allotment for the permittee to get their livestock to and from their private land would be authorized, but no overnight use except during the authorized season of use.

Table 2.26: Current Terms and Conditions for Dell allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Dell	05/01	11/30	66	15

Table 2.27: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Dell allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Dell	2/01	04/15	66	15

Huntsman #10123 (Map #8)

Grazing Management:

- The authorized begin date will be moved from May 6th to May 25th.
- The permittee will be authorized to graze the allotment for a maximum of 31 days each year during the authorized grazing period of May 25 to July 15.

Table 7: Current Terms and Conditions for Huntsman allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Huntsman	05/06	7/15	75	331

Table 8: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Huntsman allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Huntsman	05/25	7/15	75	331

Knox #10136 (Map #7 and 9)

Grazing Management:

- Pasture #2 and #3 will be rested every other year and grazed for a maximum of 14 days during grazing years.
- Pasture #1 will be rested once every third year during the growing season.
- Pasture #6 and #7 will be grazed up to 30 days during the period of October 1 to November 30.

Projects:

- Construct a riparian exclosure fence around the wetland area #1152 in pasture #5 (Approximately two acres).
- Remove a portion of the east pasture fence in pasture #3 and rebuild it so it excludes riparian reach #1148 and most of riparian reach #1117.
- From an existing well on private land in T11s, R8W, section 12, extend a pipeline in an easterly direction and install a 1,000 gallon trough on either private or State DNRC lands pending engineering review. The pipeline will be placed along an existing disturbance corridor or in unsuitable sage grouse habitat to the extent possible.
- Obliterate and rehabilitate approximately 0.77 miles of illegal primitive road crossing East Creek along the section line between Section 1 and Section 6, T11S, R7W to reduce sediment impacts to WCT habitat related to unauthorized motorized use and associated road runoff.

Administrative:

- Remove 100 acres and an associated 30 AUMs from the Knox allotment pasture #3.

Table 9: Current Terms and Conditions for Knox allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Knox	06/01	6/30	57	901
	10/1	11/30		

Table 10: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Knox allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Knox	06/01	6/30	57	871
	10/1	11/30		

Table 11: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Knox allotment

Allotment/Category	Year	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Knox	1	06/01	6/30	57	871
		10/1	11/30		
	2*	06/01	06/30	57	605
		10/1	11/30		
	Repeat				

*Rest pastures #2 and #3.

Mayberry #10143 (Map # 10)

Grazing Management:

- No livestock grazing will be authorized in the newly constructed riparian pasture for four years. After that, the riparian pasture may be grazed for 5-7 days once every third year. Continue grazing management as stated in the No Action alternative for the remainder of the Mayberry allotment.

Projects:

- Construct a riparian pasture fence around reach #1501 (approximately 200 acres).
- Develop a new source of water for the existing pipeline called “Mayberry Pipeline” developed in 1994. A new water source on private land in T13S, R7W SE1/4 of the SE ¼ of Section 30 will be used to provide the water to the pipeline. This water source will travel for about 6,000 feet with about 3,000 feet on BLM administered land and 1,500 feet on private lands. The remainder of the pipeline will remain unchanged.
- Construct a riparian enclosure around reach 1197.
- Up to 6 acres of wetland restoration along a Little Basin Creek tributary (Reach 1501, Map 10). Please see description on pages 19-20 of this Proposed Decision.

Table 12: Current Terms and Conditions for Mayberry allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Mayberry	07/01	11/30	62	2,372

Table 13: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Mayberry allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Mayberry	07/01	11/30	62	2,372*

*During years the riparian pasture is rested, AUMs would be reduced to 2,342.

Red Butte #20030 (Map #11)

Grazing Management:

- The BLM administered lands (40 acres) will be rested once every three years.

Projects:

- Place permanent fence posts at intervals along the BLM administered land boundary. Use these permanent posts to string electric fence to prevent livestock from grazing these BLM administered lands once every three years.

Table 14: Current Terms and Conditions for Red Butte allotment

Allotment/ Category	Begin Date	End Date	Active AUMs
Red Butte	04/01	10/31	14

Table 15: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Red Butte allotment

Allotment	Year	Begin Date	End Date	Active AUMs
Red Butte	1	04/01	10/31	14
	2	04/01	10/31	14
	3	Rest	Rest	0
	Repeat Rotation			

Red Butte SE #30615 (Map #11)

Grazing Management:

- The BLM administered lands will be rested once every three years.

Projects:

- Place permanent fence posts at intervals along the BLM administered land boundary. Use these permanent posts to string electric fence to prevent livestock from grazing these BLM administered lands once every three years

Table 16: Current Terms and Conditions for Red Butte SE allotment

Allotment/ Category	Begin Date	End Date	Active AUMs
Red Butte SE	06/01	11/30	110

Table 17: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Red Butte SE allotment

Allotment	Year	Begin Date	End Date	Active AUMs
Red Butte SE	1	04/01	10/31	110
	2	04/01	10/31	110
	3	Rest	Rest	46*
	Repeat Rotation			

*No grazing on the 160 BLM administered acres on the west side of the allotment during year three of rotation.

Sage Creek AMP (30012 (Map #12)

Grazing Management:

- Continue the grazing management plan as specified in the no action alternative.

Projects:

- Develop a spring and short (100 meter) pipeline off the spring near reach #1129 in T13S R6W, Section 2 or 3. Install one to two 1,000 gallon troughs at the end of the pipeline for livestock water. Fence the spring source to exclude it from livestock grazing. The pipeline will be placed along an existing disturbance corridor or in unsuitable sage grouse habitat to the extent possible.
- Develop a spring on private lands in T12S, R7W Section 22 and run two, 3,000 foot pipelines in a west and south easterly direction. Install one to two 1,000 gallon troughs on the end of both pipelines. Fence the spring source to exclude it from livestock grazing. The pipelines will be placed along an existing disturbance corridor or in unsuitable sage grouse habitat to the extent possible.
- Develop spring near reach #1135 on private lands in T11S, R7W Section 27 or 28. Install a short pipeline that may be located on BLM administered lands pending engineering survey. The pipeline will be placed along an existing disturbance corridor or in unsuitable sage grouse habitat to the extent possible.
- Work with MT DNRC to develop a spring on Montana DNRC lands near reach #1193 in T12S, R7W Section 1 and 12, and install a short pipeline with one or two 1,000 gallon troughs on BLM administered lands for livestock water. Fence the spring source to exclude it from livestock grazing. The pipeline will be placed along an existing disturbance corridor or in unsuitable sage grouse habitat to the extent possible.
- The following are wetland restoration projects as described on pages 19-20 of this Proposed Decision.
 - Up to 15 acres of wetland restoration along Clover Creek (Reach 1129, Map 12).
 - Up to 16 acres of wetland restoration along East Creek (Reach 1113, Map 12).
 - Up to 12 acres of wetland restoration along a Little Sage Creek (Reach 1135, Map 12).
- Install culverts at the following locations. For further description refer to page 20 of this Proposed Decision.

- Install culvert on the crossing over Little Sage Creek upstream of Reach 1159 (Map 12). This reach is on private land and an agreement with the landowner to install the culvert is in place.
- Install culvert on Little Basin Creek (Reach 1102, Map 12).
- Install Culvert on crossing over Little Sage Creek tributary downstream of Reach 1124 (Map 12). This reach is on private land and an agreement with the landowner to install the culvert is in place.

Optional Projects:

- Extend/expand the exclosures on both Bog Hole Spring (T12S, R7W, Section 11) and reach 1124 (T12S, R7W, Section 2) to include more of the wetland/reach area.
- Replace the culvert on Little Sage Creek tributary immediately upstream of Reach 1121 with a larger capacity culvert (Map 12). For further description refer to page 20 of this Proposed Decision.

Table 18: Current Terms and Conditions for Sage Creek AMP allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Sage Creek AMP	5/15	12/10	51	5,933

Table 19: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Sage Creek allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Sage Creek AMP	5/15	12/10	51	5,933

Tallent #20027 (Map #9)

Grazing Management:

- Rest rotation – continuation of past grazing management (No action alternative).

Projects:

- As part of a larger pipeline system on private lands, build about 200 meters of new pipeline in T11S, R8W Section 19 on BLM administered lands with one 1,000 gallon livestock watering trough.

Table 20: Current Terms and Conditions for Tallent allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Tallent	05/15	12/10	50	331

Table 21: Proposed Terms and Conditions for Tallent allotment

Allotment/Category	Begin Date	End Date	% Public Land	Active AUMs
Tallent	05/15	12/10	50	331

Travel Management

Travel management will be implemented as prescribed in the Dillon RMP as amended. Roads identified as open to public use will be signed with a white arrow symbol on a flexible sign post. Roads not identified as open to public use will be:

- Left unsigned unless there is evidence of regular use.
- Signed closed if there is evidence of regular use.
- If signing is ineffective at discouraging use, roads will be obliterated to the extent possible (made unnoticeable), at least at the intersection with an open route, or physically closed when continued use is causing significant unacceptable resource impacts or user conflicts.

In addition to the management identified above, Alternative B and portions of Alternative C will be implemented through this decision. Implementing Alternative B will include adjustments to the designated routes identified in the amended RMP to correct mapping errors, and to address changes in access opportunities on surrounding lands. In light of ongoing issues regarding non-compliance with travel management designations, BLM will:

- Install an informational kiosk at key access locations.
- Obliterate or reclaim user-created routes in select areas by scarifying the route surface and planting live and placing dead brush within the linear disturbance to obscure the visual presence of the route from the adjoining route junction.
- Barricade or obstruct access to closed routes that have been habitually traveled and/or routes that have been physically obliterated
- Change authorization of snowmobiles, tracked OHVs, and any other over-snow machines to designated routes only, between May 15-December 2.

Alternative B and a portion of Alternative C will be implemented for travel management. Up to 20.1 miles of BLM administered roads will be closed under this Proposed Decision. The recommended changes are shown on the enclosed map. Routes marked in red on the enclosed map are being closed to improve wildlife security and hunter opportunity, as well as reduce the spread of noxious weeds. These routes will be physically closed using signing, barricades, or obliteration to deter unauthorized motorized use that occurs especially during the big game hunting season. The routes marked in blue on the enclosed map are where the general public cannot access the routes across adjacent private lands. The amended RMP Appendix P describes the Authorized Route Designation Principles used in the public process to develop the original route designations. Among other things, it suggested that, "BLM roads not accessible to the public should be closed except for BLM lease and administrative and emergency use." This criteria was established both to encourage private landowners to allow public access to public lands, and to prevent those landowners from having exclusive motorized use of those lands for hunting or other recreational purposes. Routes marked in green on the enclosed map are mapping error corrections.

Forest and Woodland Treatments:

Personal use firewood and Christmas tree permits will continue to be issued.

5-Needle Pine Treatments

Limber pine are found in mixed conifer stands throughout the SCW. Whitebark pine hasn't been positively identified in the watershed, but could potentially be present at harsh, high-elevation sites. Some individual 5-needle pine trees have withstood multiple bark beetle

attacks, and more recently, exposure to white pine blister rust. The following actions will be considered for all action alternatives.

- Cones will be collected from limber and/or whitebark pine trees suspected to be resistant to white pine blister rust and will be sent for testing to determine their resistance level.
- Pheromones (e.g. verbenone) will be applied to selected trees to help resist mountain pine beetle attack. (Refer to Pheromone Use in the Dillon Field Office EA #DOI-BLM-B050-2011-007-EA).
- Additional cones will be collected as funding and cone crops allow. This seed may be sent to the national seed bank and genetic restoration program and/or incorporated into an office-wide operational collection that has been banked for future management efforts.

Aspen Protection/Restoration Treatments

The following design features will be common to all treatments designed to protect existing aspen, and to promote the successful regeneration of aspen.

- Aspen Protection/Restoration treatment areas are shown on Maps 6 and 7 in Appendix A of the SCW EA. The actual treatment areas may vary in width, depending on where aspen currently exists or has the potential to regenerate. Treatments will occur between the upland vegetation on one side of a stream or riparian area, and the upland vegetation on the opposite side.
- BLM resource specialists will be consulted prior to treatment implementation to ensure mitigation measures adequately address site specific concerns. If mitigation measures cannot adequately address those concerns, aspen restoration treatments will not be implemented in the affected portions of the treatment area.
- Existing roads which are not designated open routes may be used to access treatment areas. Vehicle and/or equipment use on closed routes will be minimized to the extent possible. Upon completion of the vegetation treatment projects, routes will be reclaimed appropriately to discourage future unauthorized use.
- Treatments will be monitored for noxious weeds and cheatgrass and treated if necessary. If noxious weeds or other undesirable vegetation is likely to increase as a result of treatment implementation, then the treatment method will be modified or not implemented.
- Treatment areas will be surveyed for raptor nesting prior to implementation. If an active nest is found in a treatment area, timing stipulations will be enforced to avoid disturbing nesting activity.
- The implementation of Aspen Protection/Restoration treatments will occur over the next ten years.
- Treatments to protect aspen from ungulate browse will include a combination of one or more of the following methods:
 - Creating browse protection structures using on-site woody materials (i.e. downed trees, branches, slash). The structures will be constructed by hand, or by utilizing low ground pressure, tracked equipment (skidsteer, excavator). Tracked equipment will be limited to operation on slopes less than 20%.
 - Felling dead or dying aspen trees, and live conifers where they are present, within or near live aspen clones to create browse obstacles to ungulates.
 - Constructing temporary exclosures using fencing materials that will prohibit all ungulate access to aspen regeneration. Exclosure fences may be up to eight feet in height or may follow other fence specifications that have proven effective in

prohibiting ungulate access. Exclosure fences will be removed when aspen regeneration has exceeded browse height.

Browse protection structures will be constructed where aspen is currently regenerating but is being severely browsed by ungulates. On-site woody material, such as fallen trees and other debris will be piled or pushed together to create obstacles that deter both livestock and wildlife from browsing aspen regeneration. The structures will be constructed by hand or by utilizing low ground pressure, tracked equipment where sufficient woody material is nearby. The browse protection structures will be less than eight feet in height and resemble piles or short windrows of woody debris. The overall goal is to allow patches of aspen regeneration to grow through the woody debris, eventually growing taller than browse height.

The ten aspen treatment areas identified in Alternative B of the EA will be carried forward along with the two additional treatment areas located in the Crooked Creek drainage identified in Alternative C of the EA. The aspen protection/restoration treatment design features, narrative description and overall goal identified in Alternative B will also apply. Mechanical aspen root disturbance will be considered within all 12 treatment areas on a case-by-case basis. Low ground pressure, tracked equipment, such as a skidsteer or tracked excavator, will be used to disturb the interconnected aspen root systems to encourage suckering. The following design features will apply to mechanical aspen root disturbance treatments:

- Soil disturbance will be limited to less than twelve inches in depth and be implemented with equipment-mounted ripping teeth, or other suitable equipment attachment.
- Treatment areas will be limited to relatively flat ground minimizing sediment transport potential.
- Maintain a strip of undisturbed soil and vegetation near stream banks to slow or dissipate overland flow to capture and retain sediment before entering the streams. If the vegetated buffer is deemed inadequate in width or vegetation density to properly filter runoff, structural erosion control (e.g.; straw wattles) will be temporarily installed until the site has vegetated.
- The direction of surface ripping will be parallel to the stream channel so the rows of soil left by the ripping teeth are parallel to the channel. These rows should capture and pond any overland flow dramatically reducing the likelihood of a concentrated flow path developing through the disturbed ground directly to an adjacent stream channel.
- Seeding of native grasses and forbs will be considered if natural revegetation is not occurring.
- Following aspen root disturbance treatments, browse protection structures or aspen exclosures will be constructed to protect regeneration from ungulate browse.

Table 22: Aspen Protection/Restoration Treatments, Alternative C

Treatment Name	Stream Name	Length (miles)
Aspen 1118	Heifer Creek	1.45
Aspen 1147	Heifer Creek Tributary	0.37
Aspen 1164	Heifer Creek Tributary	0.30
Aspen 1115	East Creek	0.32
Aspen 1116	East Creek	Lower 0.50

Aspen 1185	East Creek Tributary	0.32
Aspen 1186	East Creek Tributary	0.37
Aspen 1161	East Creek Tributary	0.27
Aspen 1162	East Creek Tributary	0.30
Aspen 1117	Heifer Creek	Lower 0.30
Aspen 1110	Crooked Creek	0.64
Aspen 1153	Crooked Creek	0.50
Total Miles		5.64

Riparian, Wetland, and Aquatic Habitat Improvement or Restoration

Features common to all riparian, wetland, and aquatic habitat improvement or restoration projects:

- Prior to action that will disturb any riparian or aquatic habitat, all applicable State and Federal permits will be obtained.
- Surveys for botanical sensitive species will be completed prior to implementation of any project. Results of the survey will be incorporated into project design to enhance and/or protect identified populations; or an area would be eliminated from action if survey results indicate disturbance will be detrimental to known sensitive species.
- Surveys for cultural resources will be completed prior to implementation of any project. Results of the survey will be incorporated into project design to protect identified resources; or an area will be eliminated from action if disturbance to an identified resource will be unavoidable.
- Surveys for noxious weeds and cheatgrass will be completed prior to implementation of any project. Results of the survey will be incorporated into the design to limit the spread and/or propagation of the species identified.

As determined by resource specialists and as identified by permitting agencies on a site by site basis, a native seed mix and/or erosion control material in the form of straw/coconut fiber blankets and/or rolls (wattles) will be used on as needed basis to stabilize and minimize loss of soil and sediment contribution to any adjacent aquatic habitat.

Wetland Restoration

Sites for proposed wetland restoration are identified within the allotment descriptions above for Mayberry and Sage Creek allotments. Sites selected received a Functioning-At-Risk rating during the assessment due to extensive hummocking leading to an alteration in hydrology and degraded wetland function as further described in Chapter 3 of the EA.

The restoration proposed will include the use of tracked heavy equipment to physically eliminate the hummocks and restore soil elevations across the wetland complex to more closely resemble pre-disturbance conditions. Site specific design will incorporate features to encourage and improve diversity in wetland vegetative species composition and distribution. This will be accomplished by matching existing topography of the valley, drainage, or meadow and if applicable, slight undulations within portions of the restored wetland area will provide for further variation in duration of saturation.

If the wetland area has a defined outlet that has degraded and lost elevation or if the channel within a wetland has degraded, restoration will include action to restore the outlet elevation

and/or the channel bed elevation in one or more locations to restore the elevation of the affected water table at the site. This will require the installation of grade control and will require work with a tracked excavator or by hand crew with shovels.

Ground disturbing activity will occur during driest possible conditions following the growing season (typically between but not limited to August 1 and September 30) and/or in the spring immediately before start of the next growing season, when the ground may be partially frozen (for example but not limited to; February 15 through April 1). This timing will minimize ground disturbance, maximize growth in the first season following disturbance, and provide equipment access to a greater amount of area. Duration of activity at each site will vary on site size but would consist of approximately 4-8 acres per day.

Following restoration, the area restored will be fenced off from the surrounding pasture for a minimum of two growing seasons (electric fence may be used). This will allow adequate time for the area to vegetate and become a productive, sustainable portion of a grazing rotation again. If after two years, BLM evaluation of the site indicates that vegetation has not recovered to a level that will meet the BLM's land health standard for riparian and wetland areas, the area will remain segregated and re-evaluated after each growing season thereafter.

Stream Crossings:

Stream crossings currently identified for improvement are identified in the *Projects* section of the allotment descriptions. Stream crossing improvements are not limited to these sites but these and all stream crossings projects will adhere to the following guidelines:

- All applicable State and Federal Permits will be obtained and all permit conditions would be followed for construction of stream crossings.
- The most appropriate stream crossings, e.g. culverts, hardened crossings or temporary bridges will be selected based on site specific conditions and impacts: floodplain fill, economics, road safety as well as long term impacts to stream channel function (e.g.; scour/deposition) and vegetation.
- Temporary and/or permanent culverts placed under roads will be adequately sized to maintain stream dimensions, patterns and profiles.

Noxious and Invasive Species

Management of noxious weeds will continue in cooperation with Beaverhead County, federal and state agencies, private landowners and other partners. All invasive species on the Montana noxious weed list will be treated on a prioritized basis to the degree financial resources allow. Any new noxious weed infestations will be targeted for prompt eradication before they have a chance to get well established. When a biological control becomes available for houndstongue it will be considered for release on infestations within the watershed.

An average of 35 acres in the Sage Creek Watershed will be treated with herbicides annually, pending funding. Roads, trails and washes as well as areas where private landowners actively cooperate, participate, and support the BLM's weed management strategies, will be given a higher priority for treatment.

Three herbicides that have been analyzed in the "Vegetation Treatments Using Aminopyralid, Fluroxypyr, and Rimsulfuron on BLM Lands in 17 Western States" Programmatic EIS will be

used, where appropriate. All applicable Standard Operating Procedures and Best Management Practices discussed in the EIS will be followed.

Special Status Species

Special Status Plant Habitat

Activities that disturb mineral soil (such as blading, plowing, ripping, etc.) may not be allowed within the boundaries of populations of special status plant species. In habitats likely to support rare plants, field inspections will be conducted to search for special status plant species prior to authorizing surface disturbing activities. If rare plants are found in the course of the botanical survey, adverse impacts will be mitigated through project redesign or abandonment.

Special Status Fish and Wildlife Habitat

The BLM, in cooperation with other agencies and partners, will continue to monitor sage grouse leks. In areas where sage grouse use may be more concentrated, such as within ¼ mile of leks or wintering areas, depending on topography, vegetation, visibility, etc., fences will be marked so they are more visible and collision with wires is reduced (USDA, 2012). Seasonal habitat objectives from the BLM's Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-Grouse Approved RMP Amendment will be incorporated including: maintenance of existing habitat so that 80% or more of big sagebrush communities within SCW provide vegetative composition and structure for sage grouse nesting/early brood rearing, >40% sagebrush habitat meets summer/late brood habitat characteristics, and >80% meets winter habitat characteristics where appropriate (relative to ecological site, etc.), an average of 7 inches herbaceous understory within site potential within sage grouse nesting/early brood rearing habitat, and composition of highly nutritious forbs (e.g. composites and legumes) in sage grouse nesting/early brood rearing habitat will be maintained or increased (USDI, 2015). As stated in the RMP Amendment (page 2-4): *“These habitat objectives are not obtainable on every acre within the designated GRSG habitat management areas. Therefore, the determination on whether the objectives have been met will be based on the specific site's ecological ability to meet the desired condition identified in the table”*.

West Nile Virus (WNV) has been linked to sage grouse mortality in multiple areas. WNV has not been documented on BLM lands within the Dillon Field Office, nor in sage grouse in Beaverhead County. Appendix C in the Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-Grouse Approved RMP Amendment provides guidance for WNV. Management to reduce impacts of WNV focuses on eliminating man-made water sources that support breeding mosquitoes known to vector the virus.

Term grazing permits shall be amended to state that depredation losses from wolves and grizzly bear are possible. A stipulation will also be added to grazing permits stating that the permittee, agency personnel, and Montana FWP will jointly determine how to properly treat or dispose of livestock carcasses on BLM administered land to reduce the potential for attracting predators. Although there have not been any grizzly bear conflicts reported in SCW, permittees must notify the BLM, MT FWP, or Wildlife Services as soon as is practical of any grizzly bear depredation on livestock or conflicts between grizzly bears and livestock, even if the conflict does not result in the loss of livestock. This notification will likely reduce the potential for livestock depredation and removal of the grizzly bear. Food storage recommendations will also be posted and encouraged to reduce potential conflicts between grizzly bear and public land users. These food storage recommendations may be required at some point in the future.

Stream temperature monitoring of WCT and selected fishery streams will continue on a 5 year schedule. Population monitoring of WCT populations within the Sage Creek watershed will continue to be conducted on a 5 to 10 year schedule. The ongoing nonnative brook trout removal project in East Creek will also continue.

Wilderness

There is no congressionally designated wilderness within the Sage Creek Watershed planning area. Roughly 2,900 acres on the northwest portion of the 17,479 acre Blacktail Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA) lies within the Sage Creek watershed boundary (Map 1 in the EA). This portion of the WSA contains the only route within the WSA that is designated open to wheeled motorized vehicles since it was an inventoried 2-track vehicle route at the time of the wilderness inventory in 1980. This route accesses the top of the Blacktail Ridge, but is not open to the public across the private land below, and should therefore not be open to the adjacent landowner for recreational use according to the travel management policies in the amended RMP. The route is subject to an easement that allows the private landowners access to their property. The access authorized under that easement will continue, but public recreational access will not be allowed, and there will be no access allowed beyond the limits of the easement or the private property. The WSA is also closed to snowmobile use in the amended RMP.

The Blacktail Mountains WSA contains 10,586 acres that were recommended by the BLM as suitable for wilderness designation (essentially the northern 60%), including that portion within the SCW. The Wilderness Study Area will continue to be managed in accordance with BLM Manual 6330, Management of BLM Wilderness Study Areas until such time as it is either designated as wilderness or released from further consideration as wilderness by Congress.

Recreation

Dispersed recreational activities will continue to be managed consistent with other resource management objectives. Special Recreation Permits will continue to be considered on a case-by-case basis with the exception of big game hunting. Outfitted big game hunting will continue to be limited to existing permits and use levels. Opportunities for big game hunting, wildlife viewing, horseback riding, and other backcountry recreation will be maintained.

Cultural and Paleontological Resources

As required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, a Class III cultural resource inventory is required prior to the implementation of any proposed range or habitat improvement project. Should significant cultural resources be identified, impacts will be mitigated through project abandonment or redesign. Care will be taken to avoid and protect significant cultural resources and any standing structures (should they be present) during the course of any proposed project. As required by the Paleontological Resources Preservation Act, a paleontological inventory is required in areas with a high potential for paleontological resources prior to the implementation of any proposed range or habitat improvement projects. Should paleontological resources be identified, impacts will be mitigated through project abandonment or redesign. In addition, personnel from the BLM should be notified of the presence and location of any cultural or paleontological resources encountered by contractors or permittees during the course of operations on public lands.

Monitoring

Under all alternatives, resource monitoring will be completed to measure progress toward meeting site-specific objectives. Monitoring will be done according to the monitoring plan shown as Appendix B of the Sage Creek Watershed EA.

Rationale for Decision

My decision is based on the Sage Creek Watershed Assessment Report, the Sage Creek Watershed EA (DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA), detailed reports and site-specific monitoring and assessments in the related allotment files, first-hand knowledge of my staff and I, meetings with public stakeholders and review of public comments. I have reviewed the alternatives analyzed in detail to determine if they were responsive to the purpose and need for this proposal and the issues relevant to it. I also reviewed the alternatives that were considered but not analyzed in detail to help me decide if the analysis had considered a reasonable range of alternatives. I find that the alternatives considered address the key issues and provide a reasonable range to consider.

It is necessary to change livestock management on five of the Sage Creek Watershed allotments to be consistent with the BLM's Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health and to ensure progress is made toward achieving the objectives of the proposed action. Implementing the management strategies as detailed above authorizes sustainable use of public lands while making progress toward meeting the land health standards and site-specific resource objectives identified for BLM-administered lands within the Sage Creek Watershed. The BLM's analysis shows that the management plans described above will allow progress towards meeting the resource management goals and objectives identified for the five grazing allotments, as well as initiating significant progress toward meeting the Land Health Standards (43 CFR 4180) where concerns were identified. Progress will be determined by continuing trend monitoring, as well as implementing AIM monitoring within the Sage Creek Watershed.

The livestock management strategies I have selected include shorter grazing periods, additional rest, reduced active AUMs, construction of range improvement projects, such as riparian pastures or exclosures, and/or grazing thresholds and responses which are anticipated to enhance herbaceous plant vigor, production, and residual cover on BLM-administered lands within the watershed. This is expected to maintain good sagebrush habitat conditions for sagebrush obligate species, and enhance habitat for big game and many other wildlife species. Functional-at risk riparian and wetland habitats are expected to trend toward proper functioning condition under these livestock management strategies. Increased vegetative cover in the uplands and improving riparian areas will result in reduced sediment input in streams thereby improving water quality on a localized scale.

I have determined that all grazing permittees currently permitted on the SCW allotments have satisfactory records of performance and are in substantial compliance with the terms and conditions of their existing Federal grazing permits that are being renewed with this decision.

Maintaining and promoting aspen within riparian corridors is likely to improve the hydrologic function of affected streams. Robust aspen root systems would stabilize streambanks, reducing sediment input during high streamflow events. Aspen leaf canopies will provide shade, reducing

water temperature and evaporation. Aspen protection/restoration treatments will increase forage and nesting, thermal, and security cover for wildlife. Although this browse species will be unavailable until exclosures can be removed or protection structures break down, in the long-term aspen habitat will be retained compared to the current intense browsing, as well as conifer expansion into aspen stands, that is inhibiting aspen regeneration. Vigorous aspen regeneration that is not being restricted in height growth by annual browsing will allow carbohydrate energy produced in the leaf canopy to be stored in the clone's root system. Energy stored in the root system will promote the persistence of the clone and enable future aspen regeneration.

Westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) habitat on BLM lands will be improved over the long term by implementing this plan, specifically by cooperating with MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks to expand the current distribution of WCT in the Sage Creek drainage and the ongoing periodic nonnative brook trout removal in the headwaters of East Creek.

The wetland restoration projects will improve wetland function by restoring the hydrologic regime and improving the quantity and quality of wetland vegetation. Currently the inter-hummock channels act as flow paths that can drain the wetland area prematurely. These inter-hummock channels also lack vegetation. Similarly, if a wetland area has a defined channel flowing through that has been degraded and vertically disconnected from the adjacent wetland; the wetland area may drain prematurely. By physically eliminating the inter-hummocks channels and adding grade control in adjacent channels, the amount of vegetated wetland area should increase and the area as a whole may hold water for longer periods of time.

Changing livestock grazing management to improve upland and riparian/wetland health, marking fences in areas with a high collision risk, removing/modifying fences, and other conservation actions identified in the SCW EA are intended to reduce wildlife, including sage grouse, mortality and improve habitat. Continuing to coordinate with other agencies and volunteers to complete sage grouse lek counts will contribute to long-term population trend data for male sage grouse lek attendance. Implementing seasonal habitat objectives from the BLM's Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-Grouse Approved RMP Amendment will maintain and enhance vegetative composition and structure for sage grouse and sagebrush obligate species throughout the year, including maintaining or increasing big sagebrush communities, sagebrush canopy cover, herbaceous height, and forb diversity. Incorporating the goals, objectives, land use allocations, management actions, required design features, and monitoring established in the RMP Amendment will help protect sage grouse and its habitat on BLM administered lands within SCW.

Protecting individual 5-needle pine trees, and collecting cones from these trees will contribute to the genetic breeding program, and could help the long-term sustenance of these species on the landscape. Improving whitebark and limber pine will promote habitat and encourage this food source for wildlife species, such as red squirrels, Clark's nutcrackers, and bears.

Prevention, detection, treatment and monitoring of noxious weeds will continue or be intensified in the SCW to maintain/increase biodiversity. Aggressive treatment of all noxious and invasive species will result in meeting the objectives for weed management outlined in the SCW Watershed EA. These objectives include; containment, control and/or eradication of existing infestations of noxious weeds using Integrated Weed Management methods and utilizing the

three new herbicides, preventing establishment of new infestations, and preventing or minimizing the spread of cheatgrass.

The proposed travel management changes include corrections of mapping errors and responses to changes that have occurred in the area (i.e. routes that were no longer accessible across private lands and other routes that were added to restore access where it was lost). One route at the north end of the Blacktail Mountains WSA that was identified to be “undesigned” or identified as closed is not accessible to the public through adjacent private land. This route is identified to be closed to ensure that all users of public land are treated equally with respect to motorized access to public lands. The designated open route in the Bull Heifer allotment is proposed to be undesigned since it is the main route providing access across this area, with off-road and motorized travel on undesigned routes ever increasing, especially in this part of the watershed. Changes to travel management under this Proposed Decision involve closing around 20.1 miles of currently designed open routes to motorized vehicle use.

A study completed in southwest Montana during the fall hunting season found that, “*female elk selection for areas restricting public hunting access was stronger than selection for security habitat, and the density of roads open to motorized use was the strongest predictor of elk distribution*” (Proffitt et al., 2013). Many of the elk in the SCW move onto alfalfa pivots north of the watershed in the Beaverhead Valley during the archery and rifle hunting seasons. This shift in elk distribution from publicly accessible to inaccessible lands is a challenge for MFWP and public land managers trying to manage the elk population while meeting the public’s demand for hunting opportunities. The elk that contribute intense browse pressure on aspen communities in the SCW are largely inaccessible during hunting season. Addressing the travel management issues in SCW will likely enhance elk distribution on public lands, increase hunter opportunity under fair chase conditions, and make big game population management efforts more effective (pers. comm. Waltee, 2016). These are the goals of the selected travel management changes, including reducing the spread of noxious weeds, which are ever-increasing on both open and closed routes throughout the watershed.

The proposed decision meets the non-impairment criteria for Wilderness Study Area and is expected to maintain or improve wilderness characteristics within the Blacktail Mountains WSA.

The decision outlined above is not expected to have an overall negative impact on socio-economics of the local community or high impacts to any individual or group of public land users.

The plan outlined in this decision is in conformance with the Dillon RMP as amended by the Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-Grouse Approved RMP Amendment. This plan has been reviewed to determine if the Proposed Action conforms with the amended land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5. The proposed decision is also in conformance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the Taylor Grazing Act, the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management (43 CFR 4180) and with BLM policies and Federal regulations.

The proposed action was developed while considering the goals, objectives and management recommendations in the Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement for

Westslope Cutthroat Trout in Montana, the BLM's National Sage-grouse Strategy, and the Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana.

In response to the BLM's request for comments, questions, and concerns on the Sage Creek Watershed EA (DOI-BLM-MT-B050-2016-0008-EA), several individuals or organizations submitted comments. I have considered their comments prior to making the proposed decision outlined above. The BLM welcomes and appreciates the input and interest expressed in the management of the public's land.

Authority

The authority under which this decision is contained is Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations. The Land Use Plan and Rangeland Management program authority is found in 43 CFR 4100, the Forest Management Program authority is found in 43 CFR 5003. Pertinent authorities for administrative remedies are stated below.

4160.1(a) **Proposed Decisions** - Proposed decisions shall be served on any affected applicant, permittee, or lessee and any agent and lien holder of record, who is affected by the proposed actions, terms or conditions, or modification relating to applications, permits, and agreements (including range improvement permits) or leases, by certified mail or personal delivery. Copies of proposed decisions shall also be sent to the interested public.

4160.2 **Protests** - Any applicant, permittee, lessee, or other affected interests may protest the proposed decisions under Sec. 4160.1 of this title in person or in writing to the authorized officer within 15 days after receipt of such decision.

4160.3 Final decisions

(a) In the absence of a protest, the proposed decision will become the final decision of the authorized officer without further notice unless otherwise provided in the proposed decision.

(b) Upon the timely filing of a protest, the authorized officer shall reconsider her/his proposed decision in light of the protestant's statement of reasons for protest and in light of other information pertinent to the case. At the conclusion to her review of the protest, the authorized officer shall serve her final decision on the protestant or her agent, or both, and the interested public.

(c) A period of 30 days following receipt of the final decision, or 30 days after the date the proposed decision becomes final as provided in paragraph (a) of this section, is provided for filing an appeal and petition for stay of the decision pending final determination on appeal. A decision will not be effective during the 30-day appeal period, except as provided in paragraph (f) of this section. See 4.21 and 4.470 of this title for general provisions of the appeal and stay process.

4160.4 **Appeals** - Any person whose interest is adversely affected by a final decision of the authorized officer may appeal the decision for the purpose of a hearing before an administrative law judge by following the requirements set out in 4.470 of this title. As stated in that part, the appeal must be filed within 30 days after the receipt of the decision or within 30 days after the date the proposed decision becomes final as provided in 4160.3(a). Appeals and petitions for a stay of the decision shall be filed at the office of the authorized officer. The authorized officer

shall promptly transmit the appeal and petition for stay and the accompanying administrative record to ensure their timely arrival at the appropriate Office of Hearings and Appeals.

5003.2 **Notice of forest management decisions**

(a) The authorized officer shall, when the public interest requires, specify when a decision governing or relating to forest management shall be implemented through the publication of a notice of decision in a newspaper of general circulation in the area where the lands affected by the decision are located, establishing the effective date of the decision. The notice in the newspaper shall reference 43 CFR subpart 5003—Administrative remedies.

(c) For all decision relating to forest management except advertised timber sales, the notice and decision document shall contain a concise statement of the circumstances requiring the action.

Provisions for Protest and Appeal

Protests

Actions described in this Decision may be protested by any applicant, permittee, lessee, or other interested public. Protest related to grazing management and associated activities (i.e. water developments, fencing modifications, etc.) must be filed in this office within 15 days of receiving this Decision in accordance with 43 CFR 4160.1. Protest related to forest management (i.e. aspen protection/restoration) must be filed in this office within 15 days of the publication of the notice of decision in accordance with 43 CFR 5003.3. The time period for protest of the forest management decision will be concurrent with the protest period of this Proposed Decision.

The protest period for this proposed decision will end on **October 20, 2016**.

Protests may be received in person or in writing to:

Pat Fosse
Acting Field Manager
1005 Selway Drive
Dillon, Montana 59725

The protest, if filed, should clearly and concisely state the reason(s) as to why the Proposed Decision is in error.

In the absence of a protest, the Proposed Decision will become my final decision.

Appeals

Any applicant, permittee, lessee, or other person whose interest is adversely affected by the final decision may file an appeal and petition for stay of the decision pending final determination on appeal under 43 CFR 4160.4, '4.21, and '4.470. The appeal and petition for stay must be filed in writing within 30 days following receipt of the final decision. The appeal, or the appeal and petition for stay, must be in writing and delivered in person, via the United States Postal Service mail system, or other common carrier, to the Dillon Field Office as noted above. The BLM does not accept appeals by facsimile or email.

The appeal shall state the reason(s), clearly and concisely, why the appellant thinks the final decision is in error.

Should you wish to file a motion for stay, the appellant shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- (1) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied.
- (2) The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits.
- (3) The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and
- (4) Whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

As noted above, the petition for stay must be filed in the office of the authorized officer.

Within 15 days of filing the appeal, or the appeal and petition for stay, with the BLM officer named above, the appellant must serve copies to any other person named in this decision and to the Office of the Solicitor located at the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor, 2021 4th Avenue North, Suite 112, Billings, MT 59101 in accordance with 43 CFR 4.70 (a) and 4.471(b).

Any person named in the decision from which an appeal is taken (other than the appellant), who wishes to file a response to the petition for a stay, may file with the Office of Hearings and Appeals a motion to intervene in the appeal, together with the response, within 10 days after receiving the petition. The address for the Office of Hearings and Appeals is:

Office of Hearings and Appeals
Department Hearings Division
405 South Main Street, Suite 400
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111

Within 15 days after filing, the person must serve copies on the appellant, the Office of the Solicitor, and any other person named in the decision (43 CFR 4.472(b)).

~~Cornelia H. Hudson~~
Dillon Field Manager

~~September 30, 2016~~
Date

Attachment: List of Recipients

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Michael T Garrity
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Blackfeet Tribal Council
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