SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE

Soda Fire Fuel Breaks

Owyhee and Malheur Field Offices

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to establish a strategic system of fuel breaks inside and outside the Soda Fire perimeter in the Owyhee (Idaho) and Malheur (Oregon) Field Offices in Western Idaho and Eastern Oregon (see project map, Attachment 1). BLM proposes to construct approximately 400 miles of mechanical fuelbreaks along existing roads. BLM would also develop a targeted grazing fuelbreak along the Owyhee Front. Within the targeted grazing fuelbreak area BLM would also analyze an approximate 70 mile forage kochia fuelbreak along existing roads. This proposal is in conformance with the Owyhee Resource Management Plan (RMP) (1999) as amended by the 2015 Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-Grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (ARMPA) and the Southeastern Oregon RMP (2002) as amended by the 2015 Oregon Greater Sage-Grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (OARMPA). Additionally, the proposal complies with strategies set forth in Secretarial Order No. 3336 to address rangeland fire prevention, management, and restoration. Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this information package is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with review of the proposal within the context of both NEPA and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of May 30, 2016. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the purpose of and need for the project. The EA will be made available to the public for review and comment prior to BLM making a decision on how to proceed with the alternatives analyzed.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The Soda Fire was one of the larger wildfires recorded in southwestern Idaho. The acreage of upper-elevation sagebrush steppe (4,500-6,500 feet) consumed by the Soda Fire is unprecedented, particularly in northern Owyhee County, Idaho. The Soda Fire destroyed private and public infrastructure, threatened multiple communities, and consumed valuable wildlife habitat (sagebrush and bitterbrush communities). The impact to vegetative communities has left the ecosystem vulnerable to the spread/increase in invasive annual grasses, the creation of continuous fuel loads that will be more likely to catch and carry fire, in turn, create the high potential for an increase in fire frequency in the area.

After the fire, the BLM undertook massive ESR efforts including seeding and seedling planting to take the initial steps toward restoration and improvement of the sagebrush-steppe habitat lost in the Soda Fire. Newly planted perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs will become vulnerable to repeated wildfire as non-native invasive annual grasses are expected to become established in the affected area. Therefore, the purpose or goal of the fuel break project is to protect the investment of ESR efforts, to protect surrounding intact sage-grouse habitat, and to stem the subsequent threat of invasive plant expansion within and adjacent to the fire.

There is a need to limit the ability of wildland fires to burn into the Soda Fire restoration area from the outside and to limit the ability of wildfires from starting inside the fire restoration area to burn out into intact native vegetation. Strategically placed fuel breaks would meet this need. Fuelbreaks enhance fire suppression efforts by (1) providing tactical and logistical opportunities to fire personnel, including easy and efficient access to fire prone areas, (2) compartmentalizing areas between fuel breaks to contain

wildfires into more manageable units, and (3) minimizing fire spread after ignition. Fuel breaks, if implemented and maintained, provide fire suppression personnel with an opportunity to safely engage wildfires and to more effectively attack wildfires across a larger area with fewer resources. A system of fuel breaks created by a combination of mechanical, chemical and biological treatments would protect Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (ESR) investments and remaining habitat from future fires, including human-caused fires ignited near the highway and agricultural lands in the burned area.

Existing Condition

Since the Soda Fire burned the majority of the vegetation within the fire boundary, most of the vegetation that will regrow first is expected to be a mixture of annual and perennial grasses. As the burned area recovers over the next 5-10 years, it is expected that shrubs, willows and other woody vegetation will become more prevalent within the landscape. Most of the approximately 280,000 acres of burned area is within Important or Priority Habitat Management Areas for sage-grouse.

The unburned vegetation surrounding the Soda Fire perimeter is a mixture of sagebrush steppe habitat with some areas dominated by juniper. Invasive species are also found outside the fire perimeter. If this vegetation burns in the future, it would then become vulnerable to repeated wildfire as non-native invasive annual grasses are expected to become established in these areas.

Proposed Action

BLM proposes to construct approximately 400 miles of mechanical fuelbreaks along existing roads. BLM would also develop a targeted grazing fuelbreak (biological thinning) along the Owyhee Front (see project map, Attachment 1). Within the targeted grazing fuelbreak area, BLM would also analyze an approximate 70 mile forage kochia fuelbreak along existing roads.

Fuel breaks would be created using a variety of methods, including mechanical, chemical, seeding, and targeted grazing methods. Roads that are currently accessible to wildland fire engines and other suppression equipment, as well as those that would produce the greatest benefit for protecting ESR treatments and habitat, would be selected for fuel break development. Road maintenance and improvements would be analyzed where necessary for fuel break construction and maintenance. The exact widths and types of treatment employed for each fuel break would depend on treatment method (see specifications below), site conditions (e.g., terrain, ecological site, pre-existing vegetation, pre-existing road condition) and resource concerns/constraints (e.g., cultural resources, proximity to riparian areas, special status species, etc.). Methods are described in detail below.

Treatment Methods

The following methods and combinations thereof are being proposed to create the fuel breaks desired:

Road Maintenance or Improvement

Proposed road improvement and maintenance actions would include using heavy equipment to blade or grade existing roadways to remove vegetation and improve access. Grading of road surfaces would allow for maintenance, improvement and creation of ditches and shoulders; the maximum width for any type of road improvements would be 22 feet. Maintenance of roads may also include installing culverts, constructing rolling dip gravel stream crossings, road resurfacing, installing cattleguards and sediment barriers, and surfacing areas with gravel. Some roadways may need to be permanently re-routed to allow for access of suppression vehicles. Application of pre-emergent herbicides after grading is also proposed to reduce the spread and establishment of noxious weeds. Road shoulders may be seeded with fire resistant/resilient grass and forb species in areas where seeding is deemed appropriate and additional shoulder and bar ditch maintenance is complete. Once maintained, roads would serve as fuel breaks and

offer better access for fire suppression equipment. All existing and proposed road improvements would be subject to periodic maintenance.

Mowing
Where the condition of the road, terrain and vegetation would allow, a deck mower would be used to reduce vegetation height on sites having vegetation dominated by either grasses or shrubs. Mowing treatments applied to grass dominated sites would be employed during late spring/early summer to reduce grass heights prior to the fire season. Shrub mowing may occur during any season. The mowing would likely be accomplished by pulling a mowing implement behind a tractor. Treatment width and residual height of mowed vegetation would be determined on a case-by-case basis, but it is expected that most mowing treatments would extend 200 feet or less on either side of the roadway.

Hand Cutting
Often times, individual or small groups of trees or thick shrubs are within the perimeter of the desired fuel break (e.g., within 200 feet of a road), and the removal of those trees or shrubs is necessary to create an effective fuel break. In those situations, hand cutting individual or small groups of trees or shrubs may be utilized in concert with other methods where a few trees may limit the use of the other methods or on its own where terrain impairs the use of other methods. Trees or shrubs would be cut with chainsaws or loppers, and branches would be scattered on the ground. In areas having large amounts of residual debris following treatment, piles would be burned to reduce ground fuel loading. Hand cutting treatments would extend 200 feet or less on either side of the roadway.

Chemical Treatment
Chemical treatment would involve applying herbicides at appropriate plant growth stages to suppress or kill unwanted plants. Herbicides could be used to prepare the seedbed for a seeding, for maintenance by reducing the amount of fuel available for wildfire, and for reducing the prevalence of annual grasses in stands of perennial grass. Chemical application as the exclusive method of establishing or maintaining fuels breaks may also occur primarily in areas dominated by noxious and invasive weeds. If glyphosate application is used as the exclusive method, the fuel break would eventually require re-vegetation to prevent the loss of soil. Chemical treatments would occur within 200 feet or less of either side of the roadway.

Only those herbicides approved for use on public lands would be employed in chemical treatments, subject to the standard operating procedures presented in the Record of Decision for the *Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on Bureau of Land Management Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement* (DOI-BLM 2007b). For public lands in Oregon, only those herbicides authorized through the *Vegetation Treatments Using Herbicides on BLM Lands in Oregon Record of Decision (*2010*)* would be analyzed.

Vegetated fuel break
A vegetated fuel break (i.e., a “green strip”) could be created after a seedbed preparation has occurred. Areas identified for vegetated fuel breaks may or may not require mechanical seedbed preparation such as disking or chemical treatments to reduce competition prior to planting. Seedbed preparation may occur over multiple seasons to ensure proper site conditions and will act as temporary fuel breaks in the un-vegetated state. Application of applicable herbicides such as glyphosate following mechanical treatments may occur to eliminate any later germination of invasive plants or noxious weeds. Vegetated fuel breaks may be vegetated with a mix of native and non-native species above 4,000 feet elevation. Vegetated fuel breaks below 4,000 feet and primarily across the base of the Owyhee Front will be vegetated with forage kochia.

Drill or broadcast seeding during the fall, winter, or spring would be utilized to establish desirable perennial vegetation for the purposes of creating vegetated fuel breaks .Rangeland drills or no-till drills would be utilized to seed proposed grass, forb, and shrub mixtures after seedbed treatments (e.g., herbicide, disk plowing). The rangeland drill was developed to seed rough rangeland sites. The rangeland drill is typically used in open, relatively flat topography that is fairly absent of larger rocks (8-10" in diameter). This method works well in most soil types and is the primary seeding method that would be used. A no-till drill may be utilized where less rocky conditions allow its use. The advantage to using the no-till drill is less soil disturbance; however, no-till drills are not readily available and can only be used in non-rocky soils. The drill seeding method has the greatest probability of seeding success among various seeding tools and methods. Broadcast seeding would be utilized where the terrain is not conducive to drill seeding. Broadcast seeding would be followed with a cover treatment using a harrow, culti-packer or roller packer implement wherever possible. Mechanical treatments would occur within 200 feet of either side of roadways.

Targeted Grazing
Targeted grazing is the purposeful application of a specific species of livestock at a determined season, duration and intensity to accomplish defined vegetation or landscape objectives (American Sheep Industry, Launchbaugh, Karen and John Walker, 2006). Targeted grazing requires the use of livestock at a high intensity over a short duration to remove fine fuels. Targeted grazing may be implemented as a stand-alone treatment or in concert with other treatments such as green strips. Targeted grazing may require temporary facilities for implementation such as water haul sites, temporary fencing, and salt or mineral supplementation.

Preliminary Issues
Preliminary issues relating to the need for and objectives of the proposed action identified by the BLM include:

- Effects on cultural resources and other sensitive resources, such as riparian areas and special status species
- Methodology, location, width and timing for targeted grazing treatments
- Effects of road improvement on public access and recreation
- Effects on migratory birds
- Effects to lands found to possess wilderness characteristics (Oregon only)
- Natural resource concerns related to the use of forage kochia

Preliminary Alternative Development
There are no preliminary alternatives developed at this time due to the fact that a specific proposed action has not been defined. Any alternatives proposed by the public or other governmental agencies must be in conformance with the appropriate resource management plans as amended by the ARMPA or OARMPA, must satisfy all aspects of the BLM's purpose and need, and must comply with applicable Federal and State laws and regulations.

Decision to Be Made
The Owyhee and Malheur Field Managers will decide whether to implement the project and, if so, when and where the project would occur. If the Field Managers decide to apply treatments to create fuel breaks, they will also determine the design features, mitigation measures, or restrictions needed to reduce impacts to the natural and cultural resources in the project area.

Public Input Needed
Written comments are specifically requested on the proposed action as well as identification of preliminary issues and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are

received **by April 5, 2016**, and are directly relevant to this proposal and project area. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. BLM will make the EA available for public comment prior to making a decision.

As stated above, this proposal occurs in both the Owyhee (Idaho) and Malheur (Oregon) field offices. In order to efficiently address and consolidate comments, the Owyhee Field Office will be the lead agency to collect and manage comments. Therefore, written comments must be submitted to Michelle G. Ryerson, Field Manager, 20 First Avenue West, Marsing, ID 83639. The office business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are 7:45-8:30 Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or portable document format (.pdf) to BLM_ID_OwyheeOffice@blm.gov. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed, in other formats than those listed, or containing viruses will be rejected. To be most helpful, comments sent electronically should include the title of this project in the subject line. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, be advised that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold from public review your personal identifying information, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Jeremy Bisson, Soda Fire ESR Lead (Interim), (208) 677-6600.