



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Owyhee Field Office
20 First Avenue West
Marsing, ID 83639



DECISION RECORD *Soda Fire Emergency Fuel Breaks*

The Soda Fire was one of the larger wildfires recorded in southwestern Idaho. The acreage of upper-elevation (4,500-6,500 feet) sagebrush steppe consumed by the Soda Fire was unprecedented, particularly in northern Owyhee County, Idaho. The Soda Fire destroyed private and public infrastructure, threatened multiple communities, and consumed valuable rangeland and wildlife habitat (sagebrush and bitterbrush communities). Nevertheless, even after the fire, substantial fuel loading remains around and within the urban interface on the northern edge of the fire boundary. This area consists of unburned areas and areas already invaded by invasive annual grasses resulting in a continuous fuelbed of fine flashy fuels that are particularly prone to fire.

After the Soda fire, BLM undertook massive emergency stabilization and rehabilitation (ESR) efforts within the burned area. This included new seedings and seedling planting to take initial steps toward restoration and improvement of the sagebrush-steppe habitat lost in the fire. The newly planted perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs are susceptible to invasive annual grass invasion, especially in the next few years, and thus those treated areas are particularly vulnerable to repeated wildfire in the near future.

The Soda Fire's impact to the vegetative community has left the ecosystem vulnerable to the spread/increase in invasive annual grasses, and in combination with unburned areas and areas with existing invasive annual grass dominance, the area is highly susceptible to the creation of continuous fuel loads that will be more likely to catch and carry fire, and in turn, will create the high potential for an increase in fire frequency in the area.

Decision

My staff is currently analyzing the effects of fuel break development in an Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-ID-B030-2016-0003-EA) (the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA) that proposes to construct approximately 400 miles of fuel breaks and road improvements along existing roads within and outside of the Soda Fire perimeter in both Owyhee County (Idaho) and Malheur County (Oregon). The EA is also analyzing a targeted grazing fuel break (biological thinning) along the Owyhee Front. Within the targeted grazing fuel break area, BLM is analyzing an approximate 70 mile forage kochia fuel break along existing roads. The fuel breaks analyzed in the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA 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 will be analyzed where necessary for fuel break construction and maintenance.

Previous BLM analyses and decisions have identified and supported the concept that implementation of fuel breaks can assist BLM to manage and reduce fire risk and threat to human life and property. *See also* (Maestas et. al, 2016 and Moriarti, K., L. Okeson, and M. Pellant, 2015) In addition, and as noted above, BLM is currently preparing the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA that is considering fuel breaks along approximately 400 miles of roads in and adjacent to the Soda Fire. However, the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA will not be completed in sufficient time to fully address all elements of the emergency created by existing and expected fuel loads, including emergency and imminent threats to human life, property, and the valuable resources in the form of ESR investments (seedings, seedling plantings, etc.). Therefore, I have decided to use the authority in 43 CFR § 4190.1 (see Authorities below) to authorize immediate implementation of emergency fuel breaks along up to 25 miles of the 400 miles of road being considered for fuel breaks in the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA.

Though I am authorizing emergency fuel breaks along 25 miles of road as part of this emergency fuels decision, the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA analysis and process will remain ongoing, and I will ensure that it proceeds timely. I expect to sign a Decision for the Soda Fire Fuel Breaks EA (DOI-BLM-ID-B030-2016-0003-EA) regarding implementation across the remainder of the project area early this summer. That decision will discuss fuel breaks along approximately 375 miles of road in the area.

I have decided to immediately authorize the establishment of 25 miles of fuel breaks along existing roads on the Owyhee Front adjacent to the Soda Fire burn area because an emergency fuels situation exists. Specifically, unburned vegetation in the Wildland Urban Interface combined with this spring's cheat grass "crop" have resulted in fuel loads (and additional expected fuel loads if invasive annual grasses continue to spread) that in my opinion require actions to protect life, property, and the ESR restoration treatments recently implemented as part of the Soda Fire ESR effort.

The emergency fuel breaks being authorized by this decision will center on 25 miles of roads that already run through the area, and first and foremost, this emergency fuel breaks decision will authorize immediately road maintenance and improvement along that 25 mile stretch. *See* Map 1. Road maintenance and improvement will render this existing stretch of road a better fuel break and will also increase accessibility to the area by fire personnel. However, to create more effective fuel breaks along the 25 mile stretch of road identified for this action, this decision also authorizes approximately 1.5 miles of targeted grazing fuel break in an invasive annual dominated pasture along the stretch, along with 2-3 miles of temporary fencing to prevent the livestock being used for the targeted grazing from wondering onto an OHV recreation site. *See* Map 2. In addition, this decision authorizes approximately 75 acres of shrub mowing along certain portions of the 25 mile stretch of road. Shrub mowing fuel breaks will be 200 feet wide within 250 feet, on both sides, of selected routes. Though the road work alone creates a minimal fuel break and will increase fire personnel response time in the event of a fire, the targeted grazing and shrub mowing actions will increase the effectiveness of the road fuel break in the areas identified by making it less likely that fire will breach the fuel break.

This action is needed here and now to protect human life and property, as well as BLM's ESR investment made after the Soda Fire, from the imminent threat of wildfire during the summer and fall of 2016. This threat is imminent, as there remains heavy fuel loading and new annual invasive grass growth in both burned and unburned areas.

My Decision includes the following Stipulations:

- Mowing would not occur when soils are saturated and easily rutted or compressed.
- Mowing would not occur if dry, low fuel moistures exist that could result in high fire start potential.
- Mowing and seeding equipment, including vehicles and trailers, would be washed prior to use in the project area to reduce the potential for weed spread.
- Avoidance of National Register listed or eligible sites using appropriate avoidance measures, which would be designed in consultation with a BLM archeologist or the NRCS Cultural Resource Specialist on private and state lands.
- Consultation with Tribal entities will be completed.
- Any fuel break treatments occurring within an archeological site would be pre-approved in consultation with the Idaho SHPO.
- Temporary fences will be removed within 10 days after the completion of targeted grazing, which will occur after fuels reduction objectives are met (2-inch or less stubble height). Targeted grazing will be completed no later than June 30.

Boise District Fuel Break Analyses

Boise District has recent experience analyzing and implementing fuel break projects. I base my Decision for emergency action along the Owyhee Front on two NEPA analyses conducted on the Boise District that analyzed fuel break construction, mowing, and targeted grazing in the Four Rivers Field Office (Paradigm BLM-ID-B010-2011-0060-EA) and in the Bruneau Field Office (Bruneau Fuel Breaks Project DOI-BLM-ID-B020-2009-0005-EA). Fuel break construction, targeted grazing, and mowing were analyzed in both the Paradigm and Bruneau Fuel breaks projects. Furthermore, these analyses were conducted on the Boise District in relative close proximity to, and in similar fuel types as along the Owyhee front. Therefore, I am confident that the effects of Fuel break construction, targeted grazing, and mowing that result from my emergency Decision, will be similar to the effects analyzed in the Paradigm and Bruneau Fuel Breaks EA's. The effects of my Decision are covered under existing NEPA and Decisions, and will not require additional NEPA analysis.

Paradigm EA and Decision

The Paradigm project was designed to curtail fires that ignite along travel routes (I-84) which threaten human life and property and sensitive species habitat along the Snake River Plain in the Four Rivers Field Office. Fuel breaks, targeted grazing, and mowing were analyzed in the Paradigm EA BLM-ID-B010-2011-0060-EA (EA). The Paradigm project specifically analyzed the following:

- Seeding short statured perennial plants other than prostrate kochia
- Disking/bare ground
- Mechanical thinning and mowing
- Targeted grazing (There is no slickspot pepper grass in the Soda emergency decision area so the stipulations referenced in BLM-ID-B010-2011-0060-EA (EA) do not apply)

Several ranches and small communities in the area were at risk from wildfire including houses, outbuildings, and businesses on the periphery of Mountain Home. Past fires have also been a major factor in the conversion from big sagebrush-native perennial plant dominated communities

to invasive annual plant dominated communities. Implementation of the Paradigm project provided for firefighter and public safety and protection of sensitive species and their habitats by the following means:

- Reducing the amount of fires that ignite and burn near roadways;
- Providing additional and improved strategic locations for fire suppression tactics;
- Minimizing the size of fires in the project area by compartmentalizing the project area into more defensible units;
- Reducing the number of roadside fires that burn into the adjacent rangelands;
- Protecting remaining intact big sagebrush communities (which include slickspot peppergrass and greater-sage grouse habitat); and
- Protecting future habitat rehabilitation and restoration treatments.

The Paradigm Fuel Break Project also complies with the following pertinent statutes, regulations and other requirements:

- Secretarial Order 3336 (2015); Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management and Restoration;
- Instruction Memorandum (IM) 2013-128; Sage-Grouse Conservation in Fire Operations and Fuels Management;
- Oregon Trail Management Plan – This plan outlines the BLM Boise Districts responsibilities in managing, protecting, and interpreting the Oregon National Historic Trail. The plan was signed by the Boise District Manager in 1984;
- Cultural Resource Laws and Executive Orders - State Protocol Agreement between the Idaho State Director, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) regarding the manner in which the BLM will meet its responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) as provided for in the National Programmatic Agreement (NPA). This protocol implements the BLM's National Programmatic Agreement in Idaho by describing how Idaho SHPO and the BLM will interact and cooperate under the NPA in regards to the BLM Section 106 responsibilities under the NHPA; and
- Executive Order 13186 expressly requires that Federal agencies evaluate the effects of proposed actions on migratory birds (including eagles) pursuant to NEPA "or other established environmental review process;" restore and enhance the habitat of migratory birds, as practicable; identify where unintentional take reasonably attributable to agency actions is having, or is likely to have, a measurable negative effect on migratory bird populations; and, with respect to those actions so identified, the agency shall develop and use principles, standards, and practices that will lessen the amount of unintentional take, developing any such conservation efforts in cooperation with the Service.

Bruneau Fuel Breaks EA and Decision

The Bruneau Fuel Breaks project (DOI-BLM-ID-B020-2009-0005-EA) was designed to develop a network of fuel breaks to restore and maintain sage-grouse habitat and enhance firefighting capability in the Bruneau Field Office. The southern portion of the Bruneau Field Office was

identified, by the Oregon/Idaho/Nevada Cooperative Shrub-Steppe Restoration Partnership and BLM's Healthy Land Initiative Conservation Policy Team, as being in a high risk category for large-scale wildfire. Fuel breaks are being created and maintained using a combination of treatments, including mowing roadside shrubs, application of BLM-approved herbicides, and rangeland seeding

The Bruneau Fuel Breaks Project implements the intent of the 1983 Bruneau Management Framework Plan (MFP) the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, as amended and Executive Order 13186; National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended; Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979; and Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, as amended; American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1979 (AIRFA); Executive Order 13007-Indian Sacred Sites; and Southwestern Idaho BLM Fire Management Plan (2011).

Road Maintenance Analysis

My Decision includes up to 25 miles of road improvement along the Owyhee Front. Road improvement will widen roads (further breaking up fuel continuity) and allow quicker firefighter response time so fires could be extinguished with the least amount of burned acres. I have decided to implement road improvement as part of this emergency action prior to the completion of an analysis of the effects to the human environment due to the emergency and pressing reasons stated above.

Authorities

I authorize this emergency action to protect life property and the ESR investment in the Soda in and around the Soda Fire area under the following authority:

43 CFR 4190.1 Effects of Wildfire and Management as follows:

“(a) Notwithstanding the provisions of 43 CFR 4.21(a)(1), when BLM determines that vegetation, soil, or other resources on the public lands are at substantial risk of wildfire due to drought, fuels buildup, or other reasons, or at immediate risk of erosion or other damage due to wildfire, BLM may make a rangeland wildfire management decision effective immediately or on a date established in the decision. Wildfire management includes but is not limited to:

(1) Fuel reduction or fuel treatment such as prescribed burns and mechanical, chemical, and biological thinning methods (with or without removal of thinned materials)”

(b) The Interior Board of Land Appeals will issue a decision on the merits of an appeal of a wildfire management decision under paragraph (a) of this section within the time limits prescribed in 43 CFR 4.416.

PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY:

I have reviewed this emergency action and found to be in conformance with and specifically provided for in the following BLM Land Use Plans and the associated decision(s):

Owyhee Resource Management Plan (1999) - Management Action Fire 2 (page 26);

Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (2015) – See the attached plan conformance worksheet for a list of applicable Management Decisions and accompanying rationale for why this decision complies with the Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment.

Michelle G. Ryerson

Michelle G. Ryerson
Owyhee Field Manager

5/2/2016

Date

Attachments: Maps; and the *Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (2015)* plan conformance worksheet

Literature Cited

Maestas, J., M. Pellant, L. Okeson, D. Tilley, D. Havlina, T. Cracroft, B. Brazee, M. Williams, and D. Messmer. 2016. Fuel breaks to reduce large wildfire impacts in sagebrush ecosystems. Plant Materials Technical Note No. 66. USDA-NRCS. Boise, ID.

Moriarti, K., L. Okeson, and M. Pellant. 2015. Fuel breaks that work. Great Basin Fact Sheet Series. No. 5. http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/5_GBFS_Fuel-Breaks.pdf