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Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Enhancement on the Awapa Plateau

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Richfield Field Office (RFO) is proposing the Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Enhancement on the Awapa Plateau (project) which encompasses approximately 1,400 acres of BLM-managed land in Garfield County. This environmental assessment (EA) has been prepared to disclose and analyze the environmental consequences of the mechanical vegetation treatment to enhance Utah prairie dog (UPD) habitat on the Awapa Plateau in Garfield County, Utah. The EA is an analysis of potential impacts that could result with the implementation of the proposed action.

The goals of the project include:

1. Enhance habitat conditions for Utah prairie dog by maintaining adequate components to meet needs of UPD in accordance with current guidelines (USFWS)
2. Provide opportunities for UPD to ensure connectivity of habitat through corridors
3. Provide opportunity for UPD expansion and dispersal
4. Enhance brood-rearing habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse
5. Restore and improve sagebrush steppe ecosystem by resetting vegetation to early successional state
6. Increase plant species diversity
7. Improve health of sagebrush by increasing biological diversity in age class and/or stand structure
8. Enhance habitat conditions for other wildlife species

1.1.1 Utah Prairie Dog

The Utah prairie dog (Cynomys parvidens) (UPD) is a federally threatened species that is found only in southwestern and central Utah. The species habitat is divided into three recovery units by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. One of these management areas where prairie dogs occur is on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management within the Richfield Field Office within Wayne, Sevier, and Garfield counties (the Division of Wildlife Resources "Awapa" Recovery Unit). Between the three recovery units in Utah, the Awapa Recovery Unit (RU) has had the overall lowest colony counts consistently since surveys began in 1976. In 2021, the RU had 25,031.0 acres of mapped Utah prairie dog habitat (64.4% on protected land) and 2,330.7 acres of occupied Utah prairie dog habitat (69.7% on protected land). The RU currently requires the most improvement for delisting due to having one of the lowest overall counts and therefore should be a high priority for habitat improvement projects. As of spring 2021, this area had 15 UPDs in 3 active colonies with 54.8 acres of UPD mapped habitat and 33.4 acres of UPD occupied habitat (active areas plus 250 ft buffer within the project area). This is an area that has been known to support UPD populations but also contains areas of unsuitable habitat where more prairie dogs can be supported, if treated. The unsuitable habitat is due to shrub presence that is

over 24 inches tall and is greater than 25% density (See Appendix B for vegetation guidelines). The proposed action is needed to aid in the recovery of the threatened Utah prairie dog species. The brush expansion in the project area threatens the success of the Utah prairie dog colony on the Parker Mountain/Awapa Plateau. The dominance of sagebrush communities on the mountain impedes survey efforts and is potentially impacting UPD colony size across the Awapa Recovery Unit (USFWS UPD Revised Recovery Plan 2012). This in part is due to lower visibility for both the surveyor, and the prairie dog which depends on good visibility to protect itself from aerial predators.

1.1. Purpose and Need

Due to the combined effects identified in 1.1 above, habitat restoration is needed within the project area. The BLM, in coordination with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Parker Mountain Adaptive Resource Management local working group (PARM) propose to complete a habitat improvement project within Utah prairie dog and Greater Sage-Grouse habitat by mechanically treating up to 1,400 acres (See Appendix A).

The purpose of the proposed action is to utilize a variety of resource management tools (such as mechanical, chemical, hand thinning and seeding) to enhance habitat conditions for Utah prairie dog by maintaining adequate components to meet needs of UPD in accordance with current guidelines (USFWS), enhance Greater sage-grouse (GRSG) brood-rearing habitat, and improve/ maintain suitable and functional sagebrush habitat for other sagebrush-obligate wildlife species at a landscape level.

The need for this action is established in the USFWS Utah Prairie Dog, Final Revised Recovery Plan (2012), the Final Management Framework for Utah Prairie Dog Conservation and Recovery, and the goals and objectives in the Greater Sage-Grouse Environmental Impact Statement Record of Decision (ROD) and Approved Resource Management Plan Amendments (ARMPA) for Utah, approved September 2015.

1.2. Decision to be Made

The decision the Authorized Officer will make based on the analysis in this EA, is whether or not to implement the Proposed Action.

1.3. Scoping and Issues

The project underwent an internal scoping process using an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists. Resources which are not present or are not affected by the Proposed Action (or alternatives) are not included in the detailed analysis. Resources that were identified for analysis were those that could potentially be affected from project implementation. The resources discussed in analysis include livestock grazing, rangeland health, greater sage-grouse, Utah prairie dog, and vegetation excluding designated/special status species and can be found in Table 1. The resource issues identified in Table 1 are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this EA. The project was made available to the public by post of the project on the BLM's ePlanning website on March 24th, 2022. To date, no comments were received as a result of this posting.

Coordination and consultation with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has occurred through the development of this EA.

Table 1. Issues Analyzed in Detail

RESOURCE AND ISSUE #	ISSUE STATEMENT
[Livestock Grazing, Rangeland Health Standards, Vegetation Excluding Designated/ Special Status Species] - Issue 1	How would the removal of sagebrush stands impact livestock grazing, rangeland health, and the vegetative community within the project area?
[Greater Sage-Grouse] – Issue 2	How will the proposed action affect the habitat quality for sage-grouse?
[Threatened and Endangered Species] – Issue 3	How will the proposed action affect the Utah prairie dog habitat in this area?

CHAPTER 2. ALTERNATIVES

2.1. Alternative A – No Action Alternative

Under the No Action, no seeding or mechanical vegetative treatment would occur within the proposed project area for treatment at this time. Although the No Action would not meet the purpose and need for the action, it is analyzed in this EA because it provides the existing condition and future baseline against which other alternatives are compared.

2.2. Alternative B- Proposed Action

In an effort to enhance the habitat and expand the UPD populations on the Awapa Plateau, the BLM (in collaboration with the Division of Wildlife Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) proposes to implement a 1,400-acre habitat enhancement/vegetation treatment. The treatment may be implemented in phases depending on funding availability. In addition to mechanical treatment, the BLM plans to construct an exclosure in the project area. The exclosure will serve as a monitoring plot where visual data can be collected on post treatment effects on vegetation and wildlife species.

This project proposition is to assist in the recovery of the species by implementing a total 1,400-acre vegetation treatment spanning the Tanks and the Lakes management units on the Awapa Plateau, connecting currently active and previously active UPD colonies.

If treated, the habitat would be suitable for UPD, with a secondary benefit to GRSG. If deemed necessary and prudent, translocations could be utilized through additional NEPA analysis, as a management tool to support UPD populations and improve genetic variability between recovery units in the years following treatment. The proposed treatment method would be a two-way chain harrow to treat decadent sagebrush, and sagebrush that is too dense and tall to qualify as suitable UPD habitat. Because of the extensive native plant diversity present in the area that is

suitable for UPD's, it is not anticipated that seeding after treatment would be required. In the event that an adequate vegetative response is not seen following treatment, as outlined by UPD Vegetation Guidelines (Appendix B), seeding of the project area may occur using a native seed mix. Additional coordination with grazing permittee's may be needed if rest is required for seedling establishment. Per the Richfield Field Office Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision, we recognize and support United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources in managing this threatened species with this project. The timeline for completion of this project is to implement as early as Fall of 2022 but may be shifted to following years based on funding availability.

The vegetation treatment areas have been identified on the Parker Mountain in the Utah prairie dog Awapa Recovery Unit. The total project area equals roughly 1,400 acres of Federal land. Funding dependent, treatment may be implemented in two phases. In the treatment area, the BLM has identified specific objectives:

- Mechanically treat 1,400 acres of BLM administered sagebrush steppe habitat with a 2-way chain harrow
- Chemically treat the project area (1,400 acres), if determined necessary for project maintenance
- Maintain the project area including maintaining shrub cover under 10% as suggested in the UPD habitat objectives (USFWS 2017) (See Appendix B)
- Maintain the treatment to preserve diverse grass and forb community for Utah prairie dog (UPD) and greater sage grouse brood-rearing habitat
- Install 1-acre square exclosure within project area for monitoring and research purposes.

2.2.1 Design Features

Project design features are listed below. These features were developed to avoid or eliminate adverse impacts from project activities and are incorporated as an integrated part of the Proposed Action. Project design features are based upon best management practices and standard operating procedures that have been employed and proven effective in similar circumstances and conditions.

- Equipment will be washed and inspected prior to entering the project area to remove any soil, seed, and debris that may contribute to the spread of noxious weeds.
- All trash and other waste will be properly contained, removed from the project area, and disposed of at the proper facilities each day. No open burning of trash will occur.
- Vegetation removal should be avoided during peak migratory bird nesting season (April 1- July 31). A variance to this may be granted upon completion of a migratory bird survey by a qualified wildlife biologist. Surveys would be completed 7-10 days before construction begins. If active nests were located, appropriate spatial and temporal buffers would be applied.

- The project area contains GRSG brood-rearing and nesting habitat, which are protected during the following periods: February 15 – June 15 for breeding (leks), nesting, and early brood-rearing habitat and April 15 – August 15 for brood-rearing habitat.

- Pygmy rabbit: No off-road travel, surface use, or otherwise disruptive activity would be allowed within 300 feet of occupied pygmy rabbit habitat as determined through wildlife clearance surveys prior to implementation.

- A cultural resource survey will be conducted and determinations of eligibility and effect will be made by a BLM archaeologist in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office prior to initiating any mechanical treatment.

- If historic properties are recorded in the project area, consultation with the SHPO and other interested parties will be conducted per the 36 CFR 800 and the State Protocol Agreement between the BLM and SHPO prior to the beginning of the project.

- If it is determined that not treating the vegetation on specific eligible sites may increase erosion or promote illegal collection, these sites may be treated. Treatments within the boundaries of eligible sites will need to avoid altering the characteristics that make these sites eligible. The SHPO will be consulted before any eligible sites are treated.

- Treated areas will be monitored for noxious weeds during the spring and summer, especially during the first and second year following treatment. Noxious weeds will be controlled when detected.

- Maintenance of the treatment would occur periodically (every 2-10 years) to prolong life of treatment and reduce re-treatment frequency. Maintenance may require additional chemical, mechanical, or hand treatment.

- Precautions will be taken to ensure that contamination by fuels, motor oils, grease, etc. does not occur and that such materials are contained and properly disposed of off-site. Inadvertent spills of petroleum-based or other toxic materials will be removed immediately or upon completion of the project.

- All trash and other waste will be properly contained, removed from the project area, and disposed of at the proper facilities each day. No open burning of trash will occur.

2.3. Conformance

The proposed action is consistent with the Utah Greater Sage-Grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (2015). Objectives met with this proposed action include:

- Objective SSS-2: In all GRSG habitat, manage activities that result in habitat loss and degradation to provide a net conservation gain of GRSG habitat. Exceptions to net conservation gain for GRSG shall be made for vegetation treatments to benefit Utah prairie dog.

- Objective SSS-3: In all GRSG habitat, where sagebrush is the current or potential dominant vegetation type or is a primary species within the various states of the ecological site description, maintain or restore vegetation to provide habitat for lekking, nesting, brood rearing, and winter habitats.

The proposed action is consistent with the Richfield Field Office Resource Management Plan (2008). The management actions, desired conditions and decisions included in the RMP are listed below:

Vegetation

Desired Outcomes (Goals and Objectives) are addressed on page 78 as:

- Manage and mitigate activities to restore, sustain, and enhance the health of plant associations.

- Manage all resources and resource uses to achieve the Standards for Rangeland Health.

- Enhance and/or restore native and desirable naturalized plant species.

- Enhance biological and genetic diversity of natural ecosystems.

Management Actions

VEG-1: Treat areas determined to need reseeding with a variety of plant species that are desirable for wildlife habitat, livestock, watershed management, and other resource values while maintaining vegetation species diversity.

VEG-4: Maintain existing vegetation treatments and implement additional treatments (e.g., prescribed fire and wildland fire use, mechanical, biological, manual, and chemical) to achieve or maintain Standards for Rangeland Health and desired vegetation condition.

VEG-6: The use and perpetuation of native species would be emphasized. However, when restoring or rehabilitating disturbed or degraded rangelands, non-intrusive, non-native plant species may be used.

Fish and Wildlife

Desired Outcomes (Goals and Objectives) are addressed on page 93 as:

- Maintain, restore, protect, and enhance habitats to support healthy populations of diverse fish and wildlife species, recognizing crucial habitats as management priorities.

Management Actions

-WL-3: Implement the conservation actions identified in Executive Order 13186, Federal Agency Responsibilities under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, with particular emphasis on those migratory birds identified as Priority Species in the Utah Avian Conservation Strategy (Parrish et al. 2002).

WL-13: Accomplish habitat treatments to meet terrestrial, aquatic, and riparian habitat objectives through the use of prescribed and/or wildland fire, chemical, biological and mechanical methods.

WL-24: Restrict surface disturbing activities in crucial mule deer and elk habitats from December 15 through April 15 for protection of winter habitats, unless the action is carried out to enhance habitats for mule deer, elk, and/or other wildlife.

WL-30: Implement the following direction: "Raptor management will be guided by the use of "Best Management Practices for Raptors and Their Associated Habitats in Utah", utilizing seasonal and spatial buffers, as well as mitigation, to maintain and enhance raptor nesting and foraging habitat, while allowing other resource uses."

Fire and Fuels

Desired Outcomes (Goals and Objectives) are addressed on page 99 as:

- Manage fire and fuels to protect life, firefighter safety, property, and critical resource values.

- Manage fire and fuels, where appropriate, to restore natural systems to their desired future conditions, considering the interrelated social and economic components.

Management Actions

FIRE-1: Employ Fire and Fuels Management according to national policy to meet vegetative treatment goals.

FIRE-8: Manage fire and fuels through treatments using the full range of the treatment types (e.g., prescribed and wildland fire use, mechanical, chemical, biological, and cultural treatments).

Livestock Grazing

Desired Outcomes (Goals and Objectives) are addressed on page 106 as:

- Provide for the orderly use, improvement, and development of the range for livestock grazing.

- Maintain healthy, sustainable rangeland ecosystems and restore degraded rangelands to meet Utah's Standards for Rangeland Health and to provide a wide range of public values, such as wildlife habitat, livestock forage, recreation opportunities, clean water, and functional watersheds.

- Integrate livestock use and associated management practices with other multiple use needs and objectives to maintain, protect, and improve rangeland health.

Management Action

GRA-3: Use livestock grazing to enhance ecosystems health or mitigate resource problems (e.g., noxious/invasive weed control and hazardous fuel reduction) where supported by site-specific environmental analysis.

Special Status Species (SSS)

Desired Outcomes (Goals and Objectives) are addressed on page 88 as:

- Conserve and recover all SSS (including listed species) and the ecosystems on which they depend.

-Manage, minimize, and mitigate impacts to plant, fish, and animal species and habitats so that the need to list any of these species as threatened or endangered does not become necessary.

-Promote recovery and conservation of special status plant, fish, and animal species, including those listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

-Continue to work with United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and others to ensure that plans and agreements are updated and implemented as necessary to reflect the latest scientific data.

-Where possible, implement the conservation actions identified in the Utah Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (Utah Division of Wildlife Resources [UDWR] 2005c), which identifies priority wildlife species and habitats, identifies, and assesses threats to their survival, and identifies long-term conservation actions needed, including those on BLM-administered lands.

Management Actions

-SSS-1. For listed species that do not have designated critical habitat, cooperate with the USFWS and other agencies, such as the UDWR, in managing the species and their habitat.

-SSS-7. Conduct habitat improvement treatments for SSS. Future consultation would be needed for biological controls in SSS habitat.

-SSS-8. Retain habitat for federally listed and candidate species in federal ownership. Exceptions may be considered in exchanges with the State of Utah and others after consultation with and concurrence from the USFWS.

-SSS-12. Implement the goals and objectives of recovery plans, conservation agreements and strategies, and activity level plans using best available information to recover and conserve species to the point where requirements of the ESA are no longer necessary.

-SSS-13. Work with USFWS and others to ensure that plans and agreements are updated and implemented as necessary to reflect the latest scientific data.

-SSS-17: Provide habitat improvements and other management actions to promote conservation and recovery of listed species.

- SSS-19: Allow translocations of listed and non-listed SSS to aid in conservation and recovery efforts. Implement necessary habitat manipulations and monitoring in translocation plans and allow identification and manipulation of Utah prairie dog translocation sites to achieve suitable conditions for successful translocations.

RELATIONSHIPS TO STATUTES, REGULATIONS, OR OTHER PLANS

- Utah Greater Sage-Grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (2015) guides future land and resource management on BLM-administered surface and federal mineral estates within Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) habitat management areas in the Great Basin Region.

- National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy (2011) provides a framework for establishing adequate regulatory mechanisms (design features) in applicable BLM Land Use Plans throughout the range of the Greater sage-grouse.

- USFWS Utah Prairie Dog Final Revised Recovery Plan provides the best available information to identify reasonable actions for protecting and recovering listed species. The recovery strategy relies on effective conservation response to the issues facing the species. The issues include plague, urban expansion, overgrazing, cultivated agriculture, vegetation community change, invasive plants, Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) and recreational use, climate change, energy resource exploration and development, fire management, poaching, and predation. Strategically, these issues can be reduced to two overriding concerns: loss and fragmentation of habitat, and plague. The recovery strategy for the UPD focuses on the need to address habitat loss and fragmentation, and disease through a program that encompasses plague abatement and monitoring.

- The Utah Prairie Dog 5-Year Management Unit Plan "A Path to Recovery" sets forth goals and objectives on a landscape level within each Management Unit toward recovery of the species.

- Utah Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) - The amended Wildlife Action Plan was created with the explicit purpose and goal "to manage native wildlife species and their habitats, sufficient to prevent the need for additional listings under the Endangered Species Act.

- Endangered Species Act (ESA), 1973 (as amended) – Provides for the conservation of Threatened and Endangered (T&E) species of fish, wildlife, plants, and the ecosystems upon which they depend which is the reason the BLM analyzed the Proposed Action for T&E species and any designated critical habitat.

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 1969 (as amended) – The broad national framework for protecting our environment and assessing the impacts from alternative courses of action from projects on public lands which is the reason the BLM analyzed the impacts of the Proposed Action on BLM lands.

- Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), 1976 (43 U.S.C. 1701 et seq.) – Establishes public land policy and guidelines for the administration of BLM lands; and provides for the management, protection, development, and enhancement of public lands, which guides the BLM NEPA process.

- Taylor Grazing Act (TGA), 1934 – Instituted grazing districts and regulations on the livestock industry on public lands, which also provides for range improvement projects.

BLM proposes to thin sagebrush cover by means of mechanical treatment and benefit UPD, GRSG, and enhance the range for livestock foraging.

- Pronghorn Management Plan (UDWR): Pg. 5; III-Issues and Concerns, Habitat Degradation and Loss-In other areas, as sagebrush ranges and other desert browse habitats mature and lose forb understory, there is a need for range enhancement to improve or even maintain carrying capacity for pronghorn. Pronghorn populations on the Parker Mountain have struggled in recent years and treatments of mature sagebrush should restore understory plant health and provide a nutritional boost to the pronghorn.

- Parker Mountain Greater Sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) Local Conservation Plan, October 1, 2006. 2. Strategy: 2.5. Action: Treat areas where undesirable vegetation has become or is at risk of becoming a factor in sage-grouse habitat loss or fragmentation. This treatment area has portions of SG brood rearing habitat. This treatment will improve suitable sagebrush and grass/forb vegetation types and site visibility for sage grouse.

CHAPTER 3. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

This chapter defines the scope of analysis contained in this EA, describes the existing conditions relevant to the issues presented in Table 1 in Section 1.3, and discloses the potential impacts of the Proposed Action and alternatives.

3.1. Issue 1: How would the removal of sagebrush stands impact livestock grazing, rangeland health, and the vegetative community within the project area?

3.1.1. Affected Environment

The project area is in the southern part of the Cedar Peak and Hare Lake pastures of the Bicknell Spring grazing allotment. Cattle and sheep are permitted to graze the allotment during the spring (May-June) and fall (September-October).

Vegetation on the Bicknell Spring Allotment is comprised of grasses, forbs, and low shrubs. Percent foliar cover for vegetation in the project area is 25% for grasses, 4% for forbs, and 71% for shrubs. Key forage species include Sandberg bluegrass, saltgrass, blue grama, squirrel tail, prairie Junegrass, needle and thread grass, sheep fescue, Douglas sedge, phlox, buckwheat, Lewis flax, greenstem paperflower, lupine, broom snakeweed, black sagebrush, and big sagebrush.

3.1.2. Environmental Impacts

3.1.2.1. *Methodology*

Impacts were assessed based on a qualitative assessment of rangeland resources and quantitative analysis of the proposed disturbance using Rangeland Health Assessments as well as vegetative cover data.

3.1.2.2. *Impacts of Alternative A – No Action Alternative*

Under this alternative, the proposed vegetation treatments will not be implemented. Livestock grazing would continue as it has in the past. No changes to Rangeland Health, due to the project, would be expected. The diversity of shrubs, forbs, and grasses would likely remain in its current state.

3.1.2.3. *Impacts of Alternative B – Proposed Action*

The proposed action would likely benefit livestock grazing in the area as a decrease of sagebrush should result in an increase of palatable herbaceous vegetation and improve the quality and quantity of forage in the area. Although livestock numbers will not increase, the project may improve livestock distribution throughout the area. Forage utilization levels should also decrease because of increased palatable vegetation.

Although the allotment is meeting the Standards for Rangeland Health, the project is expected to further benefit Biotic Integrity of Rangeland Health by decreasing the amount of decadent sagebrush, restoring more desirable perennial species, and allow for a more diverse vegetation type that consists of grasses, forbs and browse. This vegetation change would satisfy multiple use management, especially wildlife, range, watershed, and fuel reduction values.

3.1.2.4. *Cumulative Impacts*

Known past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the project area include livestock grazing, hunting, and OHV use. While minimal, most impacts to vegetation in the area are due to surface disturbance associated with these activities.

There would be no cumulative impacts to livestock grazing, rangeland health, and the vegetative community with implementation of the No Action Alternative because there would be no direct or indirect effects.

Disturbance from implementation of the Proposed Action could cause temporary adverse impacts to vegetation. These impacts would reduce as vegetation was re-established. There would be no cumulative adverse effects to livestock grazing, rangeland health, and the vegetative community with implementation of the Proposed Action.

3.2. Issue 2: How will the proposed action affect the habitat quality for sage-grouse?

3.2.1. Affected Environment

In 2010, the USFWS issued a determination that the greater sage-grouse was warranted for protection but precluded under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Greater sage-grouse is currently managed as a BLM sensitive species (BLM 6840 manual) and is managed in accordance with the Utah GRSG Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment. The proposed project is located within the Parker Mountain GRSG priority habitat management area which encompasses 1,789,644 acres managed by USFS, BLM, SITLA, and private landowners. The treatment is located within mapped, occupied, lekking, nesting, and brood-rearing (summer) habitat for greater sage-grouse. The project area is not considered winter habitat for GRSG but winter range is mentioned in the further analysis below. Current vegetation conditions can be described as having limited understory growth and sagebrush exhibiting little vigor. Rangeland

species inventory data collected on the Parker in 2017 includes species such as black sagebrush, rabbitbrush, sheep fescue, big sagebrush, prairie junegrass, needle and thread, phlox and sandburg bluegrass. There are currently 4 leks located within or near (< 2 miles) the treatment area. These leks coincide with occupied UPD habitat. Often, GRSG leks coincide with livestock ponds/ water development areas and UPD colonies.

3.2.2. Environmental Impacts

3.2.2.1. *Methodology*

The impact analysis of the proposed treatment and its effects on GRSG habitat was carried out by review of statewide GIS data and literature review.

3.2.2.2. *Impacts of the Alternative A – No Action Alternative*

Under this alternative, there would be no gain of new edge habitat (42,631 feet) for GRSG brood-rearing habitat. The sagebrush would remain unaltered and no new age classes or desirable forbs would establish in the project area. The composition of forbs in the understory would remain in a diminished state.

3.2.2.3. *Impacts of the Alternative B – Proposed Action*

Should the proposed project be implemented, approximately 1,400 acres would be chain harrowed. The mechanical treatment impacts to GRSG habitat have been analyzed in seasonal habitats below:

<u>Brood-rearing habitat/ Summer:</u>

Sage grouse brood-rearing habitat is likely to improve as 42,631 feet of new edge habitat would be created with the completion of this treatment. The proposed treatment would thin sagebrush cover in a mosaic pattern leaving islands of untreated sagebrush. Retaining some of this sagebrush component would prevent major loss of the overall sagebrush cover in the project area, leaving areas of cover for nesting and brood-rearing grouse.

The treatment proposed would introduce multiple age classes of sagebrush and allow for desirable forbs to compete. A study published by Utah State University suggests that some sagebrush communities on the Parker Mountain have an increased canopy cover at high densities which reduces the herbaceous understory and may impact the productivity of GRSG (Dahlgren et al. 2006). Sage grouse depend on this herbaceous understory for the brood-rearing part of their life history. Calculated shrub (foliar) cover from rangeland data collected on three sites within the project area in 2022 equal 50.7%. The ecological site description and rangeland health data suggest the project site can produce a vegetative understory that is important to GRSG during the nesting and brood-rearing season. Vegetative species observed in this project area include buckwheat, penstemon, Indian paintbrush, broom snakeweed, needle and thread, Sandberg bluegrass, greenstem paperflower, yellow rabbitbrush, and cinquefoil. Sage grouse depend on forbs, and insects attracted by these forbs, during nesting and brood-rearing for nutrition. Dahlgren et al. also mention a study by Connelly at al. (2000) and Beck and Mitchell (2000) that suggests sagebrush canopy cover should be reduced to 10-25% in brood-rearing habitats that exhibit a low grass and forb component. Although, based on observed species, the Parker

Mountain/Awapa Plateau can exhibit a higher forb component, the current sagebrush density is likely preventing the establishment of more grasses and forbs.

Winter habitat:

GRSG habitat objectives for winter season include over 10% of sagebrush cover to be above snow, and sagebrush height should be over 8 inches. In addition, 80% of the habitat should meet these objectives. The area in which the project will be implemented does not meet these objectives and therefore is not mapped as winter habitat. There is no loss of seasonal winter habitat here.

Direct impacts during implementation to greater sage-grouse could occur as a result of increased human activity, noise levels, and vehicles nearby the project area. These impacts are considered temporary in nature and would subside once treatment is complete. Temporary displacement of these individuals can occur but is unlikely as the timing of the treatment is planned outside of the season of use for this area. Based on timing and location, there would be no adverse impacts on nesting success or chick survival. The mechanical treatment is not likely to adversely affect the species.

To sum, general impacts of implementation are considered temporary; these include increased human presence during implementation, noise during implementation, and vehicles within project area. Additionally, there could be some displacement of sage grouse but based on timing and location of treatment, this is a minimal risk. The majority of sage grouse use in this area is in the brood-rearing season from April 15 to August 15. All of these impacts are considered temporary in nature.

3.2.2.4. *Cumulative Impacts*

Known past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the area of the project include livestock grazing, hunting, and OHV use. While minimal, most impacts to GRSG in the area are due to surface disturbance associated with these activities.

There would be no cumulative impacts to GRSG with implementation of the No Action Alternative because there would be no direct or indirect effects.

Based on quality and quantity of GRSG habitat on the Parker Mountain/Awapa Plateau and considering there are no planned or expected land actions within the local geographic area, there are no cumulative adverse impacts expected with implementation of the Proposed Action.

3.3. Issue 3: How will the proposed action affect the Utah prairie dog (UPD) habitat in this area?

3.3.1. Affected Environment

The Awapa has a large amount of dense sagebrush that is limiting the colony size and expansion of the Utah prairie dog (USFWS 2012, 3.5-5) making the recovery goal of maintaining 1,000 UPD's in each recovery unit for 5 consecutive years, a challenging one to attain. Vegetative data collected in the project area represents much of the proposed treatment area where prairie dogs are found and shows shrub foliar cover at 50.7%, forb foliar cover at 4.7%, and grass foliar cover at 18.7%. Vegetative species observed in the area include fringed sagebrush, black sagebrush,

mountain sagebrush, Douglas' sedge, penstemon, Indian paintbrush, Indian rice grass, needle and thread, yellow rabbitbrush, broom snakeweed, Sandberg bluegrass and cinquefoil. In the Spring of 2021, there were about eight active areas equaling approximately 8.56 acres. The historically mapped UPD colonies equal 212.5 acres within the project area.

Threats across the range include plague, urban expansion, cultivated agriculture, invasive species and noxious weed expansion, OHV and recreational uses, poaching, predation, energy resource exploration/ development, increasing drought conditions/climate change, wildfire, and overgrazing.

3.3.2. Environmental Impacts

3.3.2.1. *Methodology*

The following analysis was conducted using multiple resources including DWR spring count data, vegetation data, USFWS UPD conservation plan, USFWS Revised Recovery Plan, and local knowledge.

3.3.2.2. *Impacts of the Alternative A – No Action Alternative*

Under this alternative, no habitat modifications would be carried out. The UPD habitat would continue to be covered by heavy brush, restricting the species from expanding. Success of the species in this area will continue to be impaired by the brush density and limited forb availability. Shrub cover across three sites in the project were calculated to be at 50.7%. Suggested vegetation guidelines for UPD state that shrub cover should be between 0 – 8% ground cover and <10% canopy cover (See Appendix B).

3.3.2.3. *Impacts of the Alternative B – Proposed Action*

Under the proposed action, the BLM would use appropriate management tools to meet and enhance habitat goals for this species. Implementation of the proposed treatment is expected to improve UPD habitat by thinning dense sagebrush and preventing the UPD colonies from expanding.

Direct impacts associated with the proposed chain harrow treatment in occupied UPD habitat could potentially include injury or mortality to individuals. The burrows of UPD may be filled with soil or debris from mechanical treatment. There would also be temporary disturbance associated with the project such as displacement of individuals, noise, human presence, and the presence of machinery. These implementation-related impacts are all considered temporary in nature and would subside once implementation is complete.

3.3.2.4. *Cumulative Impacts*

Known past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the area of the project include livestock grazing, hunting, and OHV use. While minimal, most impacts to UPD in the area are due to surface disturbance associated with these activities.

There would be no cumulative impacts to UPD with implementation of the No Action Alternative because there would be no direct or indirect effects.

There are no planned or expected land actions within the local geographic area. There are no cumulative adverse impacts expected with implementation of the Proposed Action.

CHAPTER 4. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

4.1. Public Involvement

Notice of the proposed action was posted on the BLM's ePlanning website on March 24, 2022. The project was opened for a 15-day public comment period starting on September 7, 2022. The BLM's response to the comments received will be discussed in Appendix C – Comment Matrix. To date, no comments were received in regard to the project proposal.

4.2. Consultation and Coordination

Tribal consultation as required by the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (42 U.S.C. 1531) was initiated with tribes in a letter dated July 19, 2022. Letters were sent to the Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians, the Moapa Band of Paiute Indians, the Navajo Nation, the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, the Pueblo of Zuni, the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, the Hopi Tribe, the Ute Indian Tribe, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. As of September 2, 2022, responses have been received from the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, and the Navajo Nation stating that there are no sites of importance in the tribe's traditional religions or culture in the APE and they have no objections to the project. The Southern Ute have responded deferring to the Ute and Ute Mountain THPO which have had not responded.

Consultation with the Utah State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was initiated on August 22, 2022. The SHPO has yet to concur with the Agency determination of "No Adverse Effect".

Based on an analysis of the species and habitats that may occur within the area, consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act was required. The Fish and Wildlife Service has yet to issue an effects determination.

Coordination with UDWR has occurred throughout the planning of the project and preparation of the EA.

There were no cooperating agencies for development of this EA.

CHAPTER 5. LIST OF PREPARERS

Name	Affiliation	Title	Resource Area
Karolina Wasilewska	Bureau of Land Management	Wildlife Biologist	Wildlife and NEPA Document Preparation
Brandon Jolley	Bureau of Land Management	Planning and Environmental Specialist	NEPA Document Preparation and Review
Paul Caso	Bureau of Land Management	Rangeland Management Specialist	Livestock Grazing, Rangeland Health Standards, Vegetation

References

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Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. 2019. Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Efforts 2019 Progress Report. Publication No. 20-13. Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Cedar City, Utah.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2012. Utah Prairie Dog *(Cynomys parvidens)* Final Revised Recovery Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, CO. 169 pages.

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2018. Utah Prairie Dog Occupancy and Habitat Survey Protocol for Federal Section 7 Consultations. 14 pages.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. 1991. Utah prairie dog Recovery Plan. Denver, CO. 41 pages.

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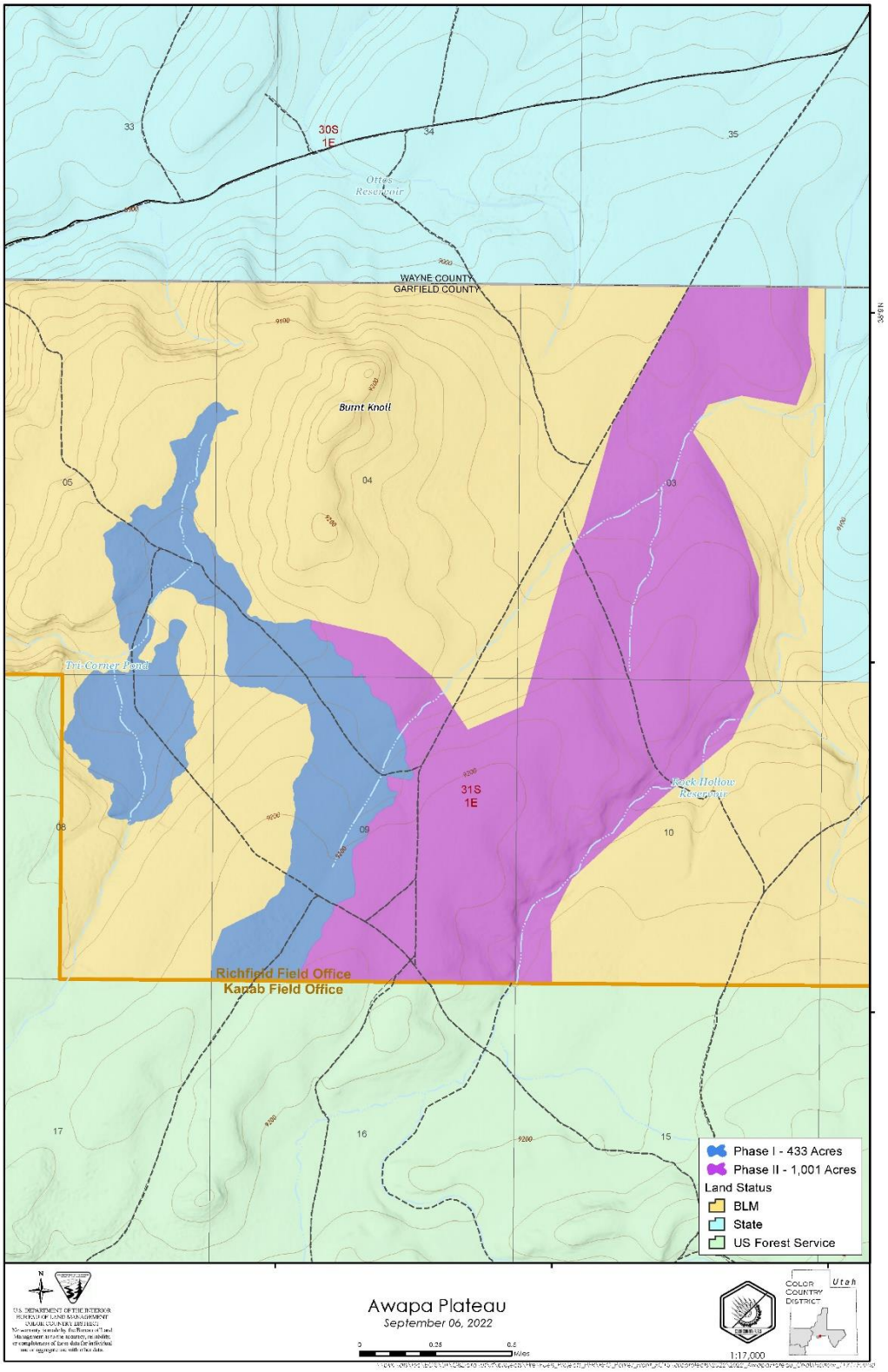
APPENDIX A:

Map of proposed vegetation treatment area:



APPENDIX B:

Vegetation Guidelines from the Final Management Framework for Utah Prairie Dog Conservation and Recovery

USFWS 2017

The vegetation objectives represent best current knowledge of ideal parameters. Individual locations may vary from these parameters; however, each deviation from the vegetation objectives should be noted and explained. For example, *shrub ground cover at site xyz equals 10%. Of this 10%, 8% are subshrubs (generally <6" in height), and only 2% is big sagebrush. Other vegetation objectives are met at site xyz. Since the amount of subshrubs is not expected to interfere with Utah prairie dog visibility or compete with the herbaceous understory, site xyz is recommended as a translocation site.*

Warm season grasses: 1 - 20% ground cover
Cool season grasses: 12 - 40% ground cover
Forbs: 1 – 10% ground cover (perennial, non-noxious)
Shrubs: 0 – 8% ground cover and <10% canopy cover