



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Medford District Office
3040 Biddle Road
Medford, Oregon 97504
www.blm.gov/office/medford-district-office

Public Scoping Notice
Strategic Operations for Safety
Salvage and Removal of Dead and Dying Conifers
Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-ORWA-M000-2024-0001-EA

Dear Reader,

The Medford District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is preparing an **Environmental Assessment of Strategic Operations for Safety – Salvage and Removal of Dead and Dying Conifers (SOS EA)**. The BLM is soliciting input on the potential issues, impacts, and alternatives the BLM should address in the environmental assessment as part of a public scoping process. The BLM will post information online at the following address:

<https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2027249>

Your input will be most beneficial if received by Sunday, January 7, 2024. At the end of this letter, you will find information on how to submit input.

Why is the BLM preparing an Environmental Assessment of Strategic Operations for Safety?

If you have driven lately in the woods of southwest Oregon, you may have noticed an unnerving number of fir and even pine trees that are dead or have red needles and are dying. Recent local studies have shown that in southwest Oregon more Douglas-fir trees died between 2015-2019 than in the previous four decades (Bennett et al. 2023a). These trees are dying in the largest numbers in the driest areas in the region. Douglas-fir are most at risk of dying in areas with an average precipitation of 35 inches or less per year (Bennett et al 2023b). A recent local study found strong evidence of confounding factors contributing toward this mortality. Where Douglas-fir trees growing on hot, dry sites are further stressed by drought and then exploited by the flatheaded fir borer (*Phaenops drummondi*), an insect (Bennett et al. 2023a p.1). We can expect trees to continue dying. In some areas, forests will shift to less Douglas-fir and more hardwoods, shrubs, and other conifer species (such as pine). Wildlife habitat will also change. Ultimately, large numbers of dead and dying trees pose threats to safety along traveled roadways, wildfire suppression actions, and create more fuel for wildfires to burn and increase wildfire risk.

What are the impacts of this widespread conifer mortality on public safety? The presence of large numbers of dead trees on the landscape make effective wildfire management more complex and less safe. These recently dead and dying trees have low moisture content and burn more easily than live vegetation. This increases the chances of wildfires starting, can cause wildfire to spread more quickly (including spotting embers), and make wildfires burn hotter, longer, and over larger

areas. In short, extreme fire behavior is more likely. This increases home and community exposure to wildfire. In addition, dead and dying trees, and even stressed green trees, are more likely to fall, whether from wind or during a wildfire. Hazard trees could fall onto roads and block prominent travel routes for the public and responding firefighters. The more extreme fire behavior and the increased risk of trees falling can make it difficult for wildland firefighters to safely engage and secure fire line and may require larger safety zones for firefighters. This increases fire line construction time, decreases direct firefighter engagement, and can result in larger wildfires. The impacts of this large-scale forest mortality could last for decades to come (Stephens et al. 2018), resulting in adverse, landscape-scale effects (Stephens et al. 2022).

Unfortunately, this issue needs immediate attention. The dead conifers are quickly deteriorating and typically only holding red needles for one year. Early intervention not only improves safety sooner but allows decaying trees to offset the costs of removing trees before they have lost merchantable value. This allows for treatment of more acreage and increases safety across more areas.

What is the BLM proposing?

To protect public and firefighter safety, the BLM Medford District is responding to recent tree mortality by proposing to salvage or remove dead and dying trees of all size classes within certain strategic locations and treatment of associated activity fuels. This salvage and tree removal is proposed across all BLM Land Use Allocations. The BLM will analyze potential environmental impacts of this proposal in an Environmental Assessment (EA).

To most effectively and efficiently address the safety need identified above, in the EA the BLM is only considering treatment in areas where dead and dying trees (for example, trees showing signs of Flatheaded Fir Borer infestation) are occurring within the following strategic locations:

- Within 1 mile of Wildland Developed Areas (WWRA 2013) to increase community safety.
- Along 500ft (each side) of prominent travel routes to facilitate safe evacuation and flow of responding resources and to improve safe and effective wildfire response and wildfire containment opportunities.
- Along 500ft (each side) from Potential wildfire Operational Delineation (POD) boundaries to improve safe and effective wildfire response and wildfire containment opportunities.

The BLM Medford District anticipates that the EA will cover an estimated 5,000 acres of commercial salvage, non-merchantable removal, and activity fuel treatments. Implementation of the work could utilize timber sales, stewardship contracts, and/or other service contracts to remove dead and dying material and associated activity fuels and begin in late 2024.

Nearly 70 percent of Medford District BLM-administered lands fall within the Rogue Valley Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) boundary (CWPP 2019, p. 75 – Figure 3.24). As such, the BLM is considering one Action Alternative aligned with The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) (P.L. 108-148) provisions for expedited environmental analysis of projects implemented under its authority within the WUI and within 1.5 miles of an at-risk-community.

What locations would this Environmental Assessment cover?

The “Project Area” for this EA encompasses the strategic locations mentioned above within the WUI and the high-risk Douglas-fir mortality zone (annual average precipitation of 35 inches and less) exhibiting the highest concentrations of Douglas-fir mortality and anticipated Douglas-fir mortality on the Medford District. Proposed actions would occur within 1 mile of Wildland Developed Areas (WWRA 2013), and along Potential wildfire Operational Delineations (PODs) and prominent travel routes within 1.5 miles of a Community at Risk. A map is enclosed.

How can you participate?

We are seeking comments, issues, and concerns you have. Your input is most helpful when it assists in developing proposed actions and drawing attention to issues or information that may indicate a potential for significant effects. We recognize that people place a wide range of values on various resource uses of public lands. The BLM is mandated by federal law to manage the lands it administers in the planning area according to the current Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the area and the O&C Act of 1937. This environmental assessment will not amend or modify any current RMPs. Opinions agreeing or disagreeing with current laws, policies, or decisions already established in land use plans do not help in refining actions or analysis for this environmental assessment. In addition to the input requested above, the BLM is interested responses to the following questions:

- What prominent roads used in your community are showing signs of tree die off?
- Are there notable areas of tree die off you would like to share with the BLM?

Depending on public response and interest, the BLM may hold public meetings, field trips, and/or provide additional public comment opportunities prior to releasing a decision on the proposed actions. For more information concerning the Strategic Operations for Safety – Salvage and Removal of Dead and Dying Conifers Project, you may contact Lisa Meredith at (541) 618-2333, Jena Volpe at (541) 618-2295, or Todd Bowen at (541) 618-2365. Please submit your written comments through one of the following methods:

Online at: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2027249>

By email: BLM_OR_MD_Safety_EA @blm.gov

By mail or delivery service:

Attn: Strategic Operations for Safety EA

Medford District

Bureau of Land Management

3040 Biddle Road

Medford, Oregon 97504

If you do not have comments at this time but would like to be kept informed about this project, please complete and return the enclosed Interest Response Form and you will be placed on the project mailing list. Once we have completed the environmental assessment, we will notify each

person on the project mailing list. In the interest of efficiency and conserving resources, the environmental assessment will not be sent out in hard copy but will be available online.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in a comment or interest response, please be aware that your entire comment or interest response, including your personal identifying information (such as address, phone number, email address, etc.), may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

All submissions from organizations or businesses and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organization or businesses will be made available for public inspection and disclosure, including possible posting on the BLM websites in their entirety.

We appreciate your interest in the management of your public lands.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth R. Burghard
District Manager
Medford District

INTEREST RESPONSE FORM

MAIL TO: Medford District BLM
ATTN: Todd Bowen
3040 Biddle Road
Medford, Oregon 97504

Please include me on the Strategic Operations for Safety- Salvage and Removal of Dead and Dying Conifers Environmental Assessment mailing list.

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY:

Name: _____

Email address: _____

In the interest of efficiency, reducing costs and conserving resources, we prefer to communicate by email. For those who do not have an email address or a consistently reliable source of internet access, we can provide information by Regular Mail:

☐ Please send information via **Regular mail** rather than email.

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY:

Street Address: _____

**City, State, and
Zip Code:** _____

Maps

Figure 1 - The map shows the “Project Area” for this EA, which includes forested BLM Medford District administered lands (dark brown) within the high-risk Douglas-fir mortality zone (annual average precipitation of 35 inches and less) (gray highlighted zone). The BLM is proposing actions in the Project Area within 1 mile of Wildland Developed Areas (WWRA 2013) (light blue dotted area), and along Potential wildfire Operational Delineations (PODs) (dark blue lines) within 1.5 miles of communities at risk (red line). Prominent travel routes are not currently displayed. Estimated red stage conifer mortality estimated from remote sensed imagery (June 2022) is shown in scattered red. BLM Medford administered lands outside of this Project Area are shown in yellow and pink (Cascade Siskiyou National Monument).

Figure 2-5 – The remaining maps show various project area delineations such as 35 inch or less precipitation zone, wildland developed areas, forested lands, red stage mortality, and communities at risk.

References

Bennett, M., Shaw, D.C. and Lowrey, L., 2023 a. Recent Douglas-fir Mortality in the Klamath Mountains Ecoregion of Oregon: Evidence for a Decline Spiral. *Journal of Forestry*, p.fvad007.

Bennett, M., Adlam, C, 2023 b. Trees on Edge. Oregon State University Extension Service, EM 9406

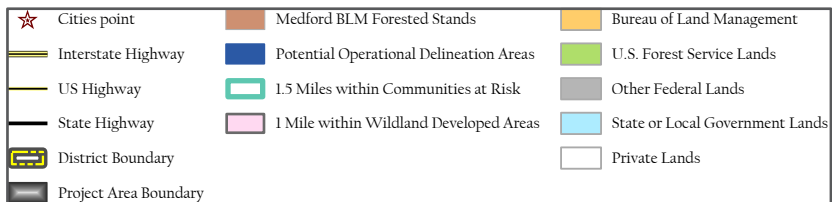
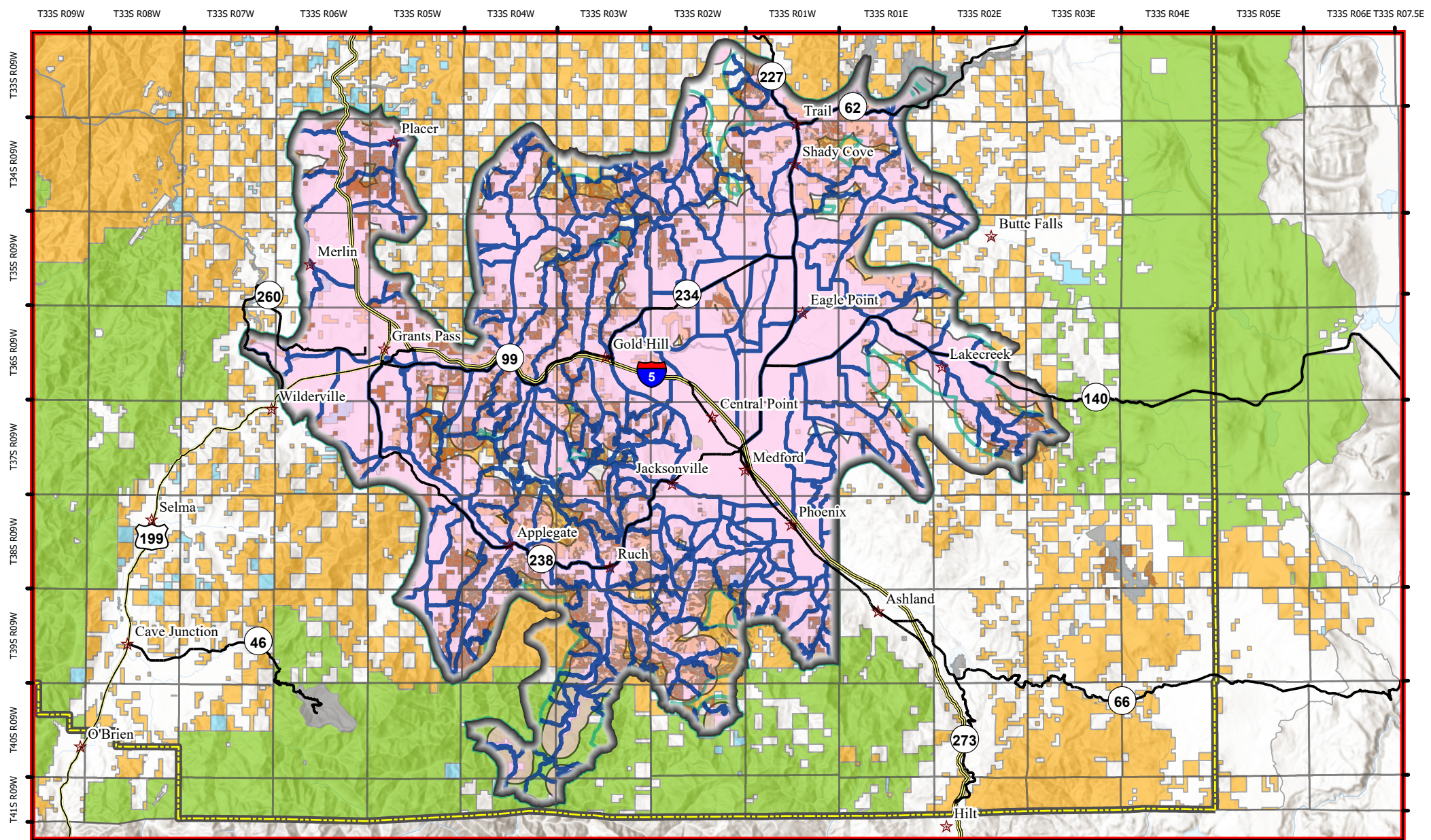
Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). 2019. Rogue Valley Integrated Fire Plan, Jackson & Josephine Counties, Oregon. <https://jacksoncountyor.org/emergency/County-Plans/Fire-Plan>. Story map <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=613a03c1e0274c1e9f09ff5a921f67c0>

Halofsky, J. and Peterson, D.L., 2022. Climate change vulnerability and adaptation in southwest Oregon. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-995. Portland, OR: US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station. 445 p., 995, pp.1-445.

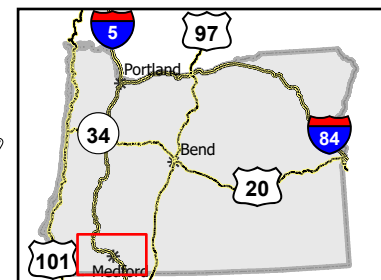
Stephens, S.L., Collins, B.M., Fettig, C.J., Finney, M.A., Hoffman, C.M., Knapp, E.E., North, M.P., Safford, H. and Wayman, R.B., 2018. Drought, tree mortality, and wildfire in forests adapted to frequent fire. *BioScience*, 68(2), pp.77-88

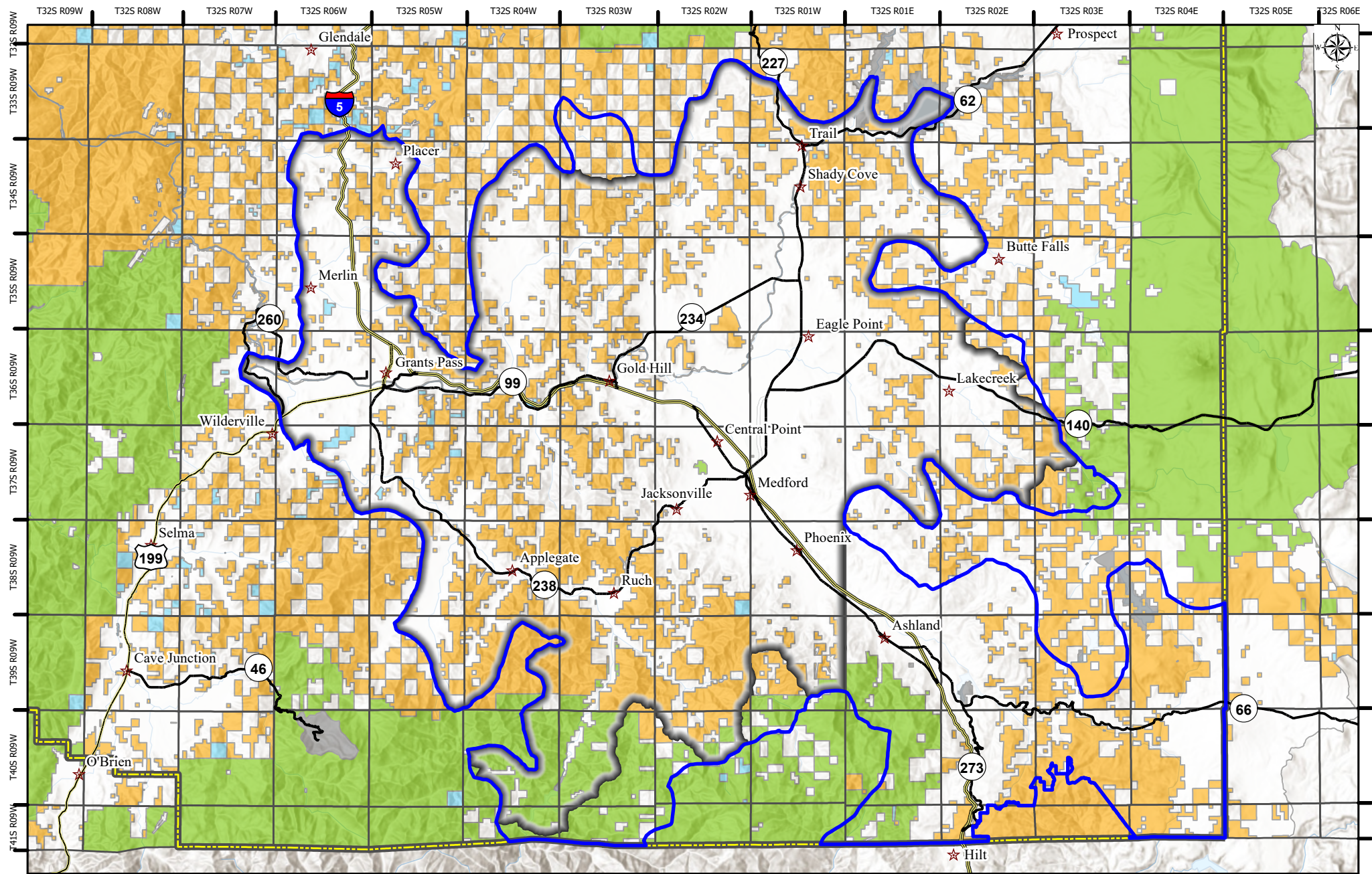
Stephens, S.L., Bernal, A.A., Collins, B.M., Finney, M.A., Lautenberger, C. and Saah, D., 2022. Mass fire behavior created by extensive tree mortality and high tree density not predicted by operational fire behavior models in the southern Sierra Nevada. *Forest Ecology and Management*, 518, p.120258.

West Wide Risk Assessment (WWRA). 2013. (Accessed 5/6/14)
http://www.odf.state.or.us/gis/data/Fire/West_Wide_Assessment/WWA_FinalReport.pdf,
<http://www.timmonsgis.com/projects/west-wide-wildfire-risk-assessment>.



BLM Medford Strategic Operations for Safety Project Area Context Map



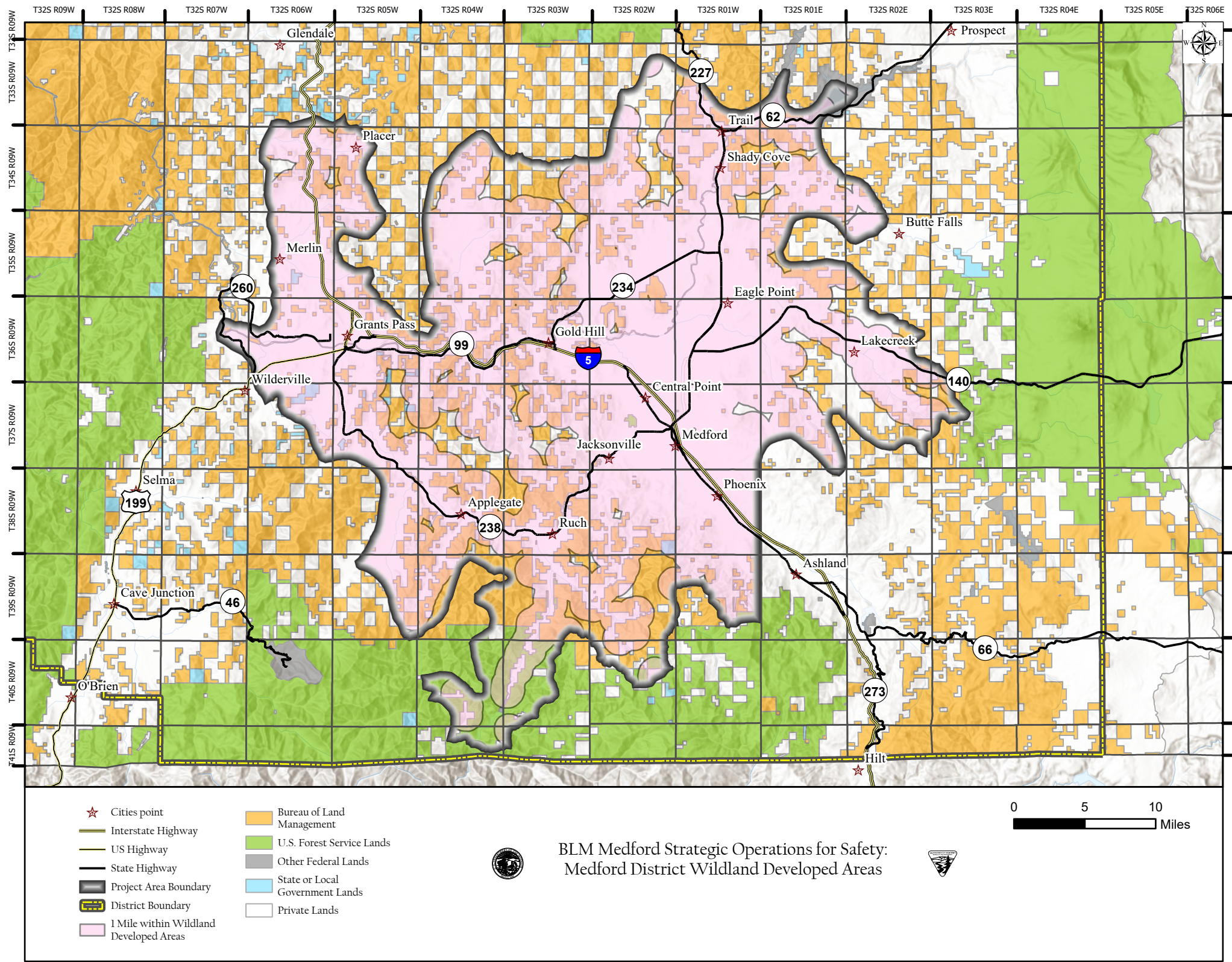


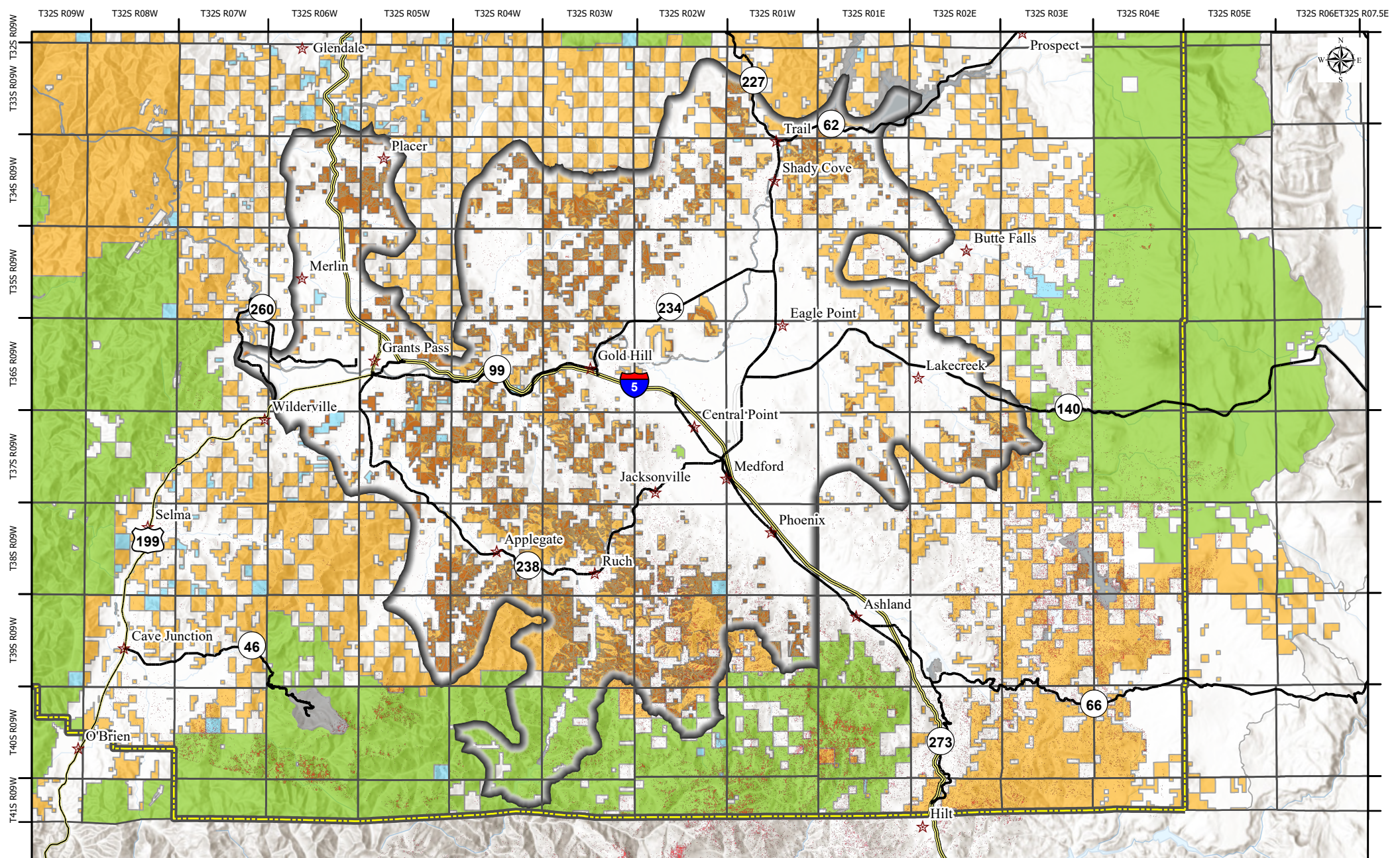
- ★ Cities point
- ▭ $\leq 35"$ Annual Precipitation Zone
- ▭ Project Area Boundary
- ▭ District Boundary
- ▭ Bureau of Land Management
- ▭ U.S. Forest Service Lands
- ▭ Other Federal Lands
- ▭ State or Local Government Lands
- ▭ Private Lands



BLM Medford Strategic Operations for Safety:
Medford District 35 inch or less Precipitation Zone







- | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ★ Cities point | District Boundary | Bureau of Land Management |
| Interstate Highway | Project Area Boundary | U.S. Forest Service Lands |
| US Highway | Medford BLM Forested Stands | Other Federal Lands |
| State Highway | Red Stage Mortality (June, 2022) | State or Local Government Lands |
| | | Private Lands |

0 5 10
Miles



BLM Medford Strategic Operations for Safety
Forested Lands and Red Stage Mortality



