SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE
for

The Paradigm* Project

Four Rivers Field Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to establish fuel breaks within the Four Rivers Field Office. This proposal is in conformance with the 1983 Kuna Management Framework Plan (MFP), the 1987 Jarbidge Resource Management Plan (RMP), and the 2008 Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (SRBOPNCA) RMP. 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 report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of November 2012. 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.

Purpose and Need for Action

The proposed action is needed because approximately 75% of the 289,435 acres within the project area have burned at least once in the last 53 years. Between Bonneville Point, an historic site, and Glenns Ferry, from the foothills south to the Union Pacific rail line, BLM fire records from 1957 to 2010 report 714 fire starts, burning approximately 214,635 acres. Of those recorded fire starts; 162 were lightning and 552 were human caused; the human caused ignitions have been concentrated along transportation corridors (Map 4).

The expected plant community is predominately Wyoming big sagebrush with perennial grasses and forbs in the interspaces. Wyoming big sagebrush takes several years to re-establish following wildfire. The normal fire return interval for this plant community is approximately 50 to 200 years. Since the early 1900s, the Intermountain West has experienced an invasion of non-native annual grasses, such as cheatgrass and medusahead wildrye which provide an abundance of fine fuel. When areas with these annual grasses burn, the density of annual plants increase exponentially and fire return intervals shorten to 10-20 years, sometimes less. The recurrence of fire prior to the re-establishment of shrubs re-starts the recovery process making shrub establishment unlikely. Important habitat for slickspot peppergrass, a plant listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and greater sage-grouse which is a candidate species for listing, occurs in the project area. Both species have experienced a substantial decline and/or loss of habitat from wildfire in the project area. Vegetation treatments subsequent to wildfires have largely been unsuccessful due to the recurrence of wildfires and drought.

**Paradigm – Merriam-Webster; (noun) An example, pattern*

The proposed action would incorporate existing transportation routes to reduce the potential size of wildfires and fire return intervals, protect existing native shrub communities and habitat for slickspot peppergrass, and greater sage-grouse. Slickspot peppergrass is listed as threatened and greater sage-grouse is a candidate for listing under the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA) as amended. In addition, the proposed action would increase public safety, reduce wildfire risk to rural communities and increase fire fighter safety by providing safe anchor points during fire suppression activities.

Existing Condition

The typical plant communities that would occur in the area based on climate, soils and aspect would be dominated by Wyoming big sagebrush with Thurber needlegrass, Sandberg bluegrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, and several perennial forbs in the understory. Cheatgrass and medusahead have become well established in the Intermountain West. When native perennial plant communities are lost, they are often replaced by invasive non-native annual grasses and forbs. The historic perennial vegetation pattern was dictated by environmental factors, creating a mosaic pattern across the landscape. As annual plants invade they fill the interspaces between perennial plants creating a continuous uniform pattern which favors the spread of wildfire, further enhancing the invasion. The loss of the native perennial plant communities which provide habitat for slickspot peppergrass, and greater sage-grouse, has been instrumental in the decline of these species. This region also contains crucial winter habitat for deer and elk and year round habitat for antelope.

Approximately 75% of the project area has been affected more than once by fire since 1957, some areas have burned several times. Much of this area has been invaded by cheatgrass and/or medusahead wildrye.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the BLM established “greenstrips” or vegetative fuel breaks following wildfires. These fuel breaks achieved mixed success; some were effective at slowing and even stopping the spread of wildfire while others did not become fully established and have become invaded by annual plants and lost functionality. The proposed project would tie into as many of the existing fuel breaks as possible to minimize disturbance.

Proposed Action

The BLM Four Rivers Field Office is proposing to create a strategic network of self-sustaining fuel breaks which would compartmentalize the project area (Maps 2 &3). The project boundaries extend from Bonneville Point, east to Glenns Ferry and south from the foothills to the Union Pacific rail line (Map 1). Human caused fire starts are concentrated around major transportation corridors, therefore the network of fuel breaks would incorporate existing transportation corridors, establishing buffers between right of ways and wildlands and creating areas to safely initiate tactical suppression operations in areas with a history of high ignitions (Map 4). These buffers would reduce the number of fire starts that become large-scale wildfires.

Fuel breaks would not be expected to contain a wildfire, but would be designed to slow the progression of wildfire or provide the opportunity to engage in direct attack while providing for firefighter safety. Effective fuel breaks would compartmentalize the area and help to contain large wildfires across the landscape thereby reducing the risk to private property and communities, habitat for greater sage-grouse and slickspot peppergrass, and help to preserve and protect existing high value native plant communities at high risk from fire. The width of fuel breaks would vary between 50 and 300 feet on each side of a road, depending on fuel type, topography, and soils. Fuel breaks would be positioned across the landscape to maximize protection of substantial stands of sagebrush plant communities in fair to excellent condition. The final location of the fuel breaks would be determined upon completion of ground surveys for cultural, botanical, and wildlife resources, to minimize impacts.

The BLM fuel staff evaluated primary routes in the project area to determine adequacy for use during fire suppression (Green lines -Maps 2 & 3). Additional secondary routes would be considered to further divide large tracts of land based on adequacy for suppression, minimal disturbance to improve the route, impact to high risk species, and potential to protect high risk areas (Pink lines – Maps 2 & 3). The current condition of the secondary routes does not provide adequate potential for anchoring during suppression operations and would require improvements such as increased width or additional surface material to achieve the necessary criteria.

Various fuel break methods to be analyzed include, but are not limited to; vegetative, mowing, disking, and grazing. The design of the vegetative component of the fuel breaks would incorporate low stature, low biomass plants that remain green into late summer and have a clumpy growth pattern to create a discontinuous fuel load. Land treatments may include such methods as herbicide application and drill seeding to create the fuel breaks. Following implementation, scheduled monitoring would occur to evaluate success of seedings. Based on the results of the monitoring, additional treatments would be conducted to ensure a functioning fuel break becomes established. Where proposed fuel breaks cross state land administered by the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL), or private lands, land owners would be given the option of entering into cooperative agreements with the BLM to include those lands. Due to the extent of the project, it is expected that implementation would occur over the course of several years, beginning in 2013.

This proposed action is in accordance with the SRBOPNCA RMP. Stated objectives in the RMP are to protect existing stands of native shrub habitat, and reduce the size and recurrence of wildfires in the project area and increase shrub habitat through restoration (SRBOP NCA RMP 2.6). Management actions associated with these RMP objectives include the creation and maintenance of fuel breaks around areas where frequent fires threaten habitat. Although the Kuna MFP and the Jarbidge RMP do not have objectives specific to fuel breaks, the project is in conformance with objectives for habitat protection and fire suppression.

Preliminary Issues

Below are issues relating to the need for and objectives of the proposed action that were identified during internal scoping.

- Designing fuel breaks without causing significant impacts to threatened, endangered, or candidate species.
- The use of forage kochia in fuel breaks, which has been proven to be an effective tool in fuel breaks, but can invade playas and slickspots that are habitat for sensitive and threatened plant species.
- Design of a low maintenance fuel break. Fuel breaks created in the 1980s and 1990s were not maintained and some are now ineffective.
- The use of "brown strips" or disked lines to provide immediate effects.
- The use of intensive livestock grazing to control the amount of annual fuel loading across pastures and allotments would be addressed through a separate environmental analysis such as for temporary non-renewable resources.

Preliminary Alternative Development

In addition to the proposed action alternative and a no-action alternative, a reasonable range of alternatives that address the purpose and need will be considered for analysis. Alternatives currently being considered include;

- Using a mix of native plant species adapted to the area
- Using a mix of non-native plant species adapted to the area; including forage kochia
- Using a mix of non-native plant species adapted to the area; excluding forage kochia

Decision to be Made

As a result of the environmental analysis, the Four Rivers Field Manager will decide whether or not to implement a project to create fuel breaks in the area between Bonneville Point and Glenns Ferry. Due to the large scale of the project, implementation would occur incrementally over the course of several years which may result in the project being parceled into multiple decisions, pending wildlife, cultural, and botanical inventories.

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by **November 14, 2011** and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA. Comments sent electronically should be sent to

kkershaw@blm.gov with 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.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is; Kathi Kershaw, Boise District Fuels Botanist/Ecologist, 3948 Development Ave Boise, ID 83709; 208-384-3359.

MAPS

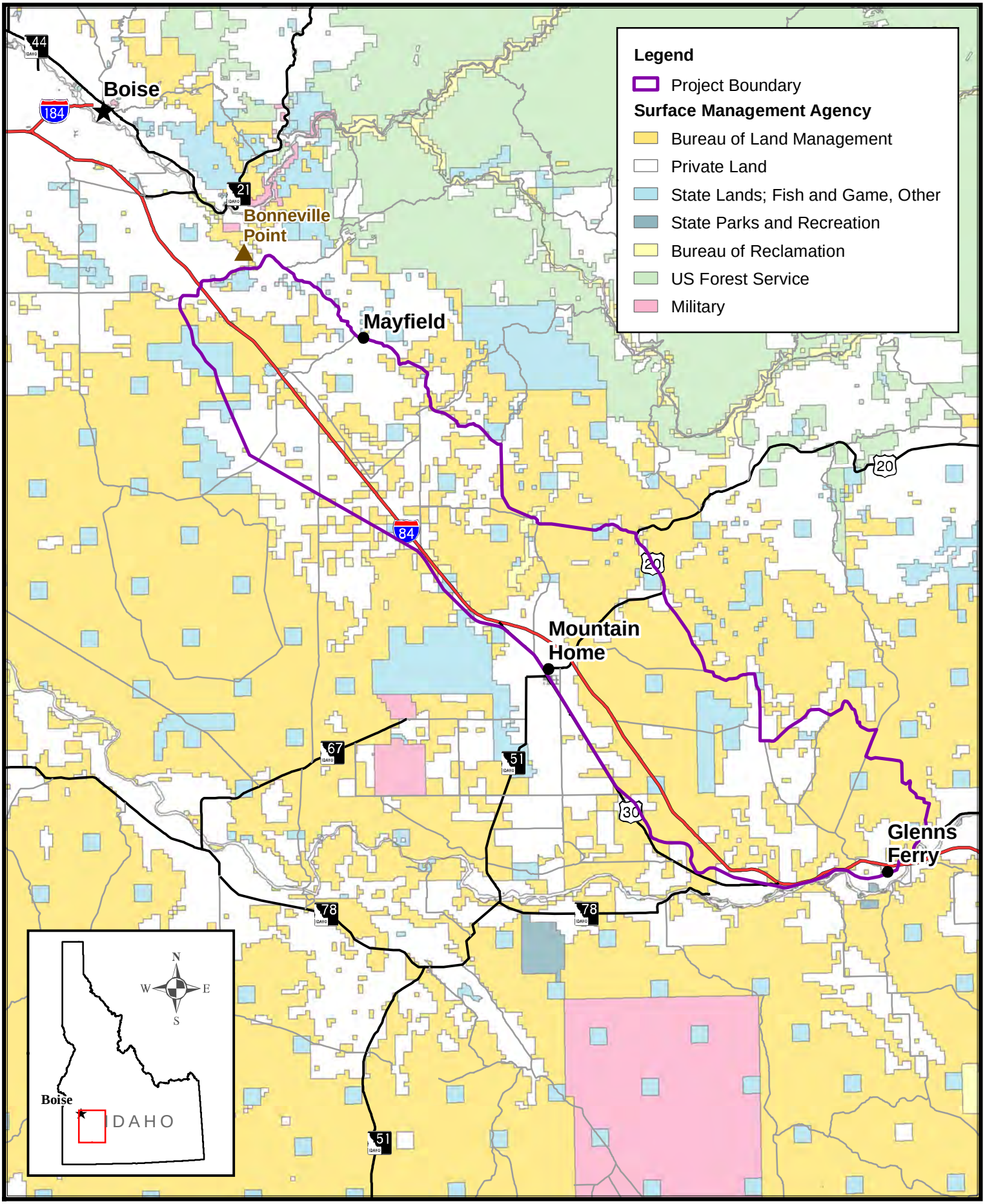
Map 1: Paradigm Vicinity

Map 2: Paradigm - North

Map 3: Paradigm - South

Map 4: Paradigm - Fire Ignition History

Map #1 - Paradigm Vicinity Map



The sources of the data are from Idaho-BLM Corporate Data, and the USGS.
10/7/2011

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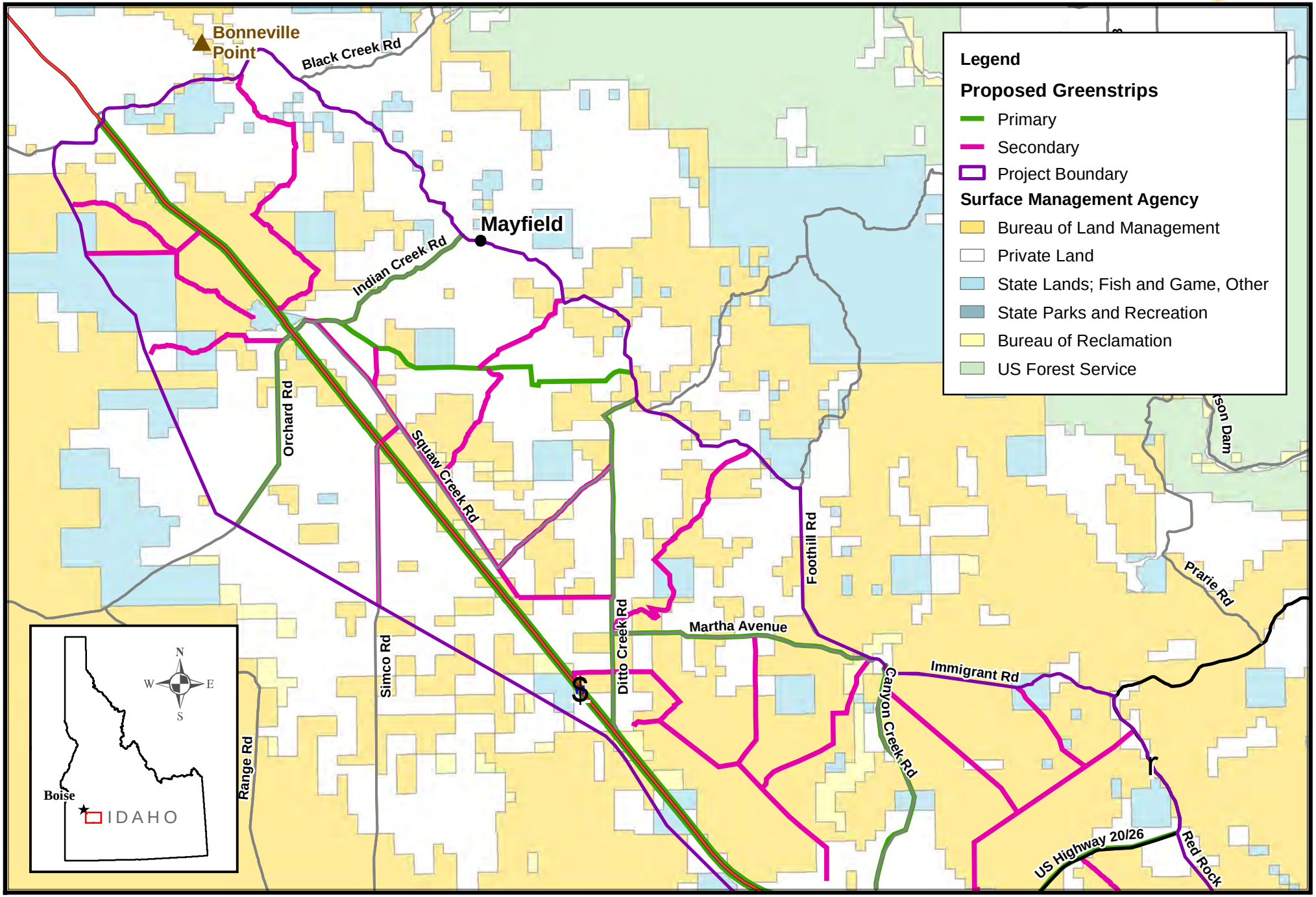
Map #2 - Paradigm Project/Travel Map - North



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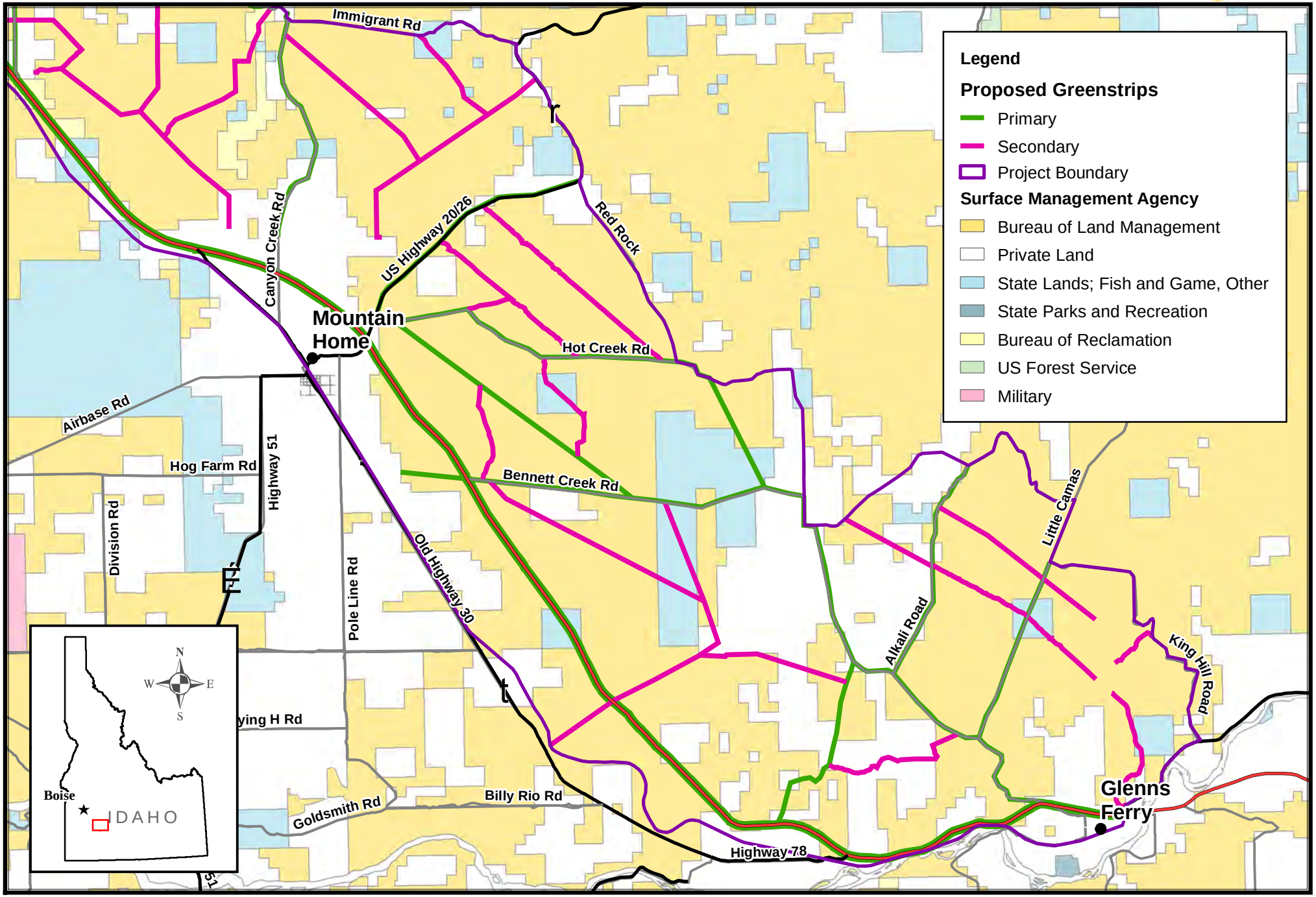
Map #3 - Paradigm Project/Travel Map - South



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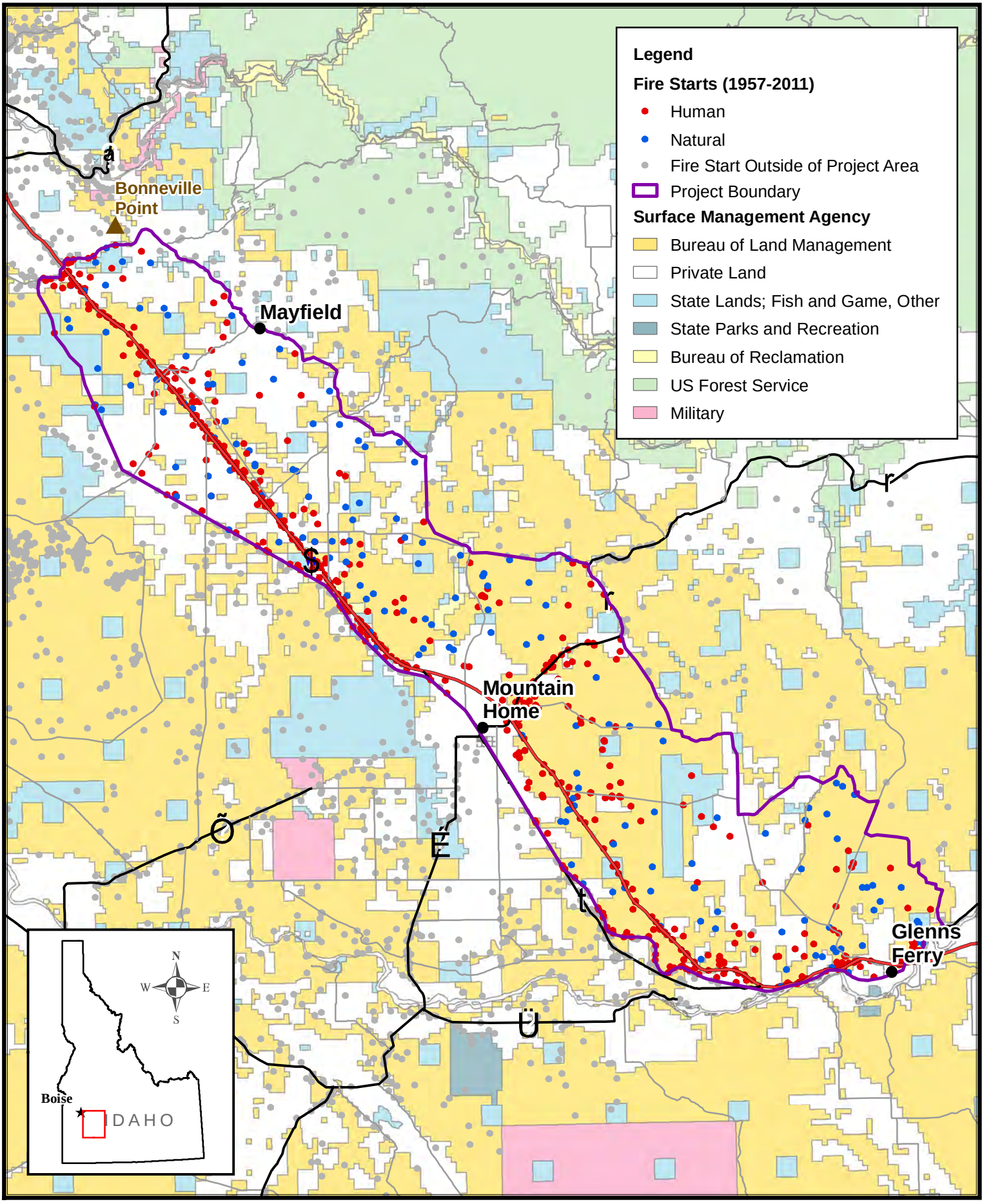
Map #4 - Paradigm Fire Ignition History (1957-2011)



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