

SCOPING/INFORMATION PACKAGE
for
**The Bruneau-Owyhee Sage-grouse
Habitat Project**
Boise District Office

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to treat early encroachment of western juniper into sagebrush steppe habitat. This proposal is in conformance with the 1983 Bruneau Management Framework Plan (MFP) (USDI 1983), the 1999 Owyhee Resource Management Plan (ORMP) (USDI 1999), and management guidelines put forth in the Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho (ISAC) (Idaho Sage-grouse Advisory Committee 2006), the Sage-grouse Management Plan (Owyhee County Local Working Group 2013), the Greater sage-grouse Comprehensive Conservation Strategy (Stiver et al. 2006), and the findings from several peer-reviewed research publications. 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 June 2014. 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 greater sage-grouse (hereafter sage-grouse) is an imperiled species and on March 23, 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined sage-grouse warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, but the species was precluded from listing due to other species of higher priority. Habitat loss from juniper encroachment and the subsequent impacts to sage-grouse are identified as a threat in the 12-Month Findings for Greater Sage-grouse (U.S.F.W.S. 2010), the Idaho Sage-grouse Conservation Plan (Idaho Sage-grouse Advisory Committee 2006), and the Owyhee Local Working Group (OLWG) Sage-grouse Management Plan (2013). There are also several peer-reviewed publications that identify the threat and negative impacts to sage-grouse from juniper encroachment into sagebrush steppe habitat (Doherty et al. 2008, Miller et al. 2005, Miller et al. 2011, Wisdom and Chambers 2009).

A landscape level treatment is needed because loss of habitat to juniper encroachment is one of the major threats to sage-grouse in southwest Idaho (OLWG Sage-grouse Management Plan 2013). While many acres have been treated across the west since 2004, treatments have not been at a landscape scale and are not likely keeping pace with the current rate of juniper encroachment

(U.S.F.W.S. 2010). Early elimination of juniper from sage-grouse habitat is crucial because sage-grouse populations are negatively impacted by even low levels of juniper encroachment and treatment at an early stage is more cost effective (Baruch-Mordo et al. 2013). Where early succession juniper has started to encroach into sagebrush steppe habitat, it will eventually convert to juniper woodlands over time unless wildfire occurs or vegetation treatments are implemented. This conversion can alter community structure and ecosystem function to a point that returning to a sagebrush steppe community is highly improbable. The negative impacts from the loss of sagebrush habitat have also had negative impacts to other sagebrush-obligate species and other species closely associated with the sagebrush steppe such as mule deer (Cox et al. 2009), golden eagle (Spofford 1971), jackrabbit (Groves et al. 1997), and migratory birds (Dobkin and Sauder 2004).

The purpose of the proposed project is to maintain suitable and functional sage-grouse habitat at a landscape level to ensure the long-term viability and persistence of sage-grouse, by removing encroaching juniper within the Owyhee and Bruneau BLM management areas. Treatment areas will be those areas in the early stages of juniper encroachment that still have the shrub and herbaceous understory needed to support sage-grouse and have adequate densities of shrubs and understory to recover without further vegetation treatment.

Existing Condition

In areas not dominated, co-dominated or influenced by juniper, the plant community is predominately sagebrush steppe with scattered stands of aspen or mountain mahogany, with riparian vegetation in more mesic areas. Across the Bruneau and Owyhee Field Offices, juniper has been spreading into and degrading habitat for greater sage-grouse, a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Proposed Action

The Boise District BLM, in collaboration with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Owyhee Local Working Group, Pheasants Forever, and the Nature Conservancy, is proposing a landscape level project to protect and maintain sage-grouse habitat in southwest Idaho. The proposal is to eliminate juniper that is in the early stages of encroachment and convert habitat into otherwise suitable and functioning sage-grouse habitat. The project area would cover approximately 1,758,000 acres, all within a 10-km radius of approximately 70 occupied sage-grouse leks (Map 1). Actual acres treated within the project area would be less than the total acres, because many of the acres will not meet the criteria for treatment. The project area includes 737,635 acres of the Bruneau FO and 1,019,994 acres of the Owyhee Field Office (FO).. Included in these acres are 232,346 acres of designated wilderness. Treatments would be completed in a 10-km radius around occupied¹ sage-grouse leks. Other important seasonal habitats used by sage-grouse may need treatment as

¹ An occupied lek is defined as a lek where at least two or more male sage-grouse have attended in two or more of the previous five years (ISAC 2003, p. 5-23)

well, but it was agreed upon by the collaborators that areas around leks, where hens are more likely to nest, would be the best habitat to focus on at this time.

The proposed treatments were developed based on current distribution of sage-grouse and areas of juniper encroachment. No other factors other than occupied sage-grouse leks were used in determining the project area. Treatments would be completed in areas that, without the presence of juniper, would otherwise be suitable sage-grouse habitat. Treatment areas would have adequate densities of shrubs and understory to recover without further vegetation treatment and would provide immediate benefits to sage-grouse.

In most areas, treatments would consist of cutting juniper using chainsaws or masticators and leaving the material on site. Large trees would be lopped and scattered when their felled height was 4' or greater. Jackpot burning would be used in areas where lopping and scattering is not feasible and where other hazards would be presented by leaving the cut trees in place. The decision to jackpot burn in a given area would be made in coordination with IDFG or NRCS and not solely by BLM. For example, felled juniper may become a hazard to the public and firefighters within 100' of roads. To mitigate this hazard, fuels would be lopped and scattered, masticated, made available for firewood, or jackpot burned when the ground was frozen or covered in snow. No broadcast prescribed fire is proposed, no old growth juniper would be cut, and no increase in permitted livestock use or AUMs would result from this project.

Treatment in wilderness may differ and would be based on the goal to preserve wilderness character and values rather than resource values alone. Manipulation of vegetation through any one or a combination of prescribed fire, chemical application, mechanical treatment, or introduced biological agents may be permitted in wilderness areas wherever it meets this goal. While these activities may have short- or long-term effects on vegetative species or communities, the ultimate goal is to facilitate improvement in ecological condition, and thus, the natural quality and character of the affected wilderness. Any action taken within wilderness must first go through a minimum requirements analysis (MRA) that will specify the minimum tool allowable. This NEPA analysis will include that MRA and implement the project activities within wilderness according to the results.

The objectives of the project are to:

1. Protect and maintain suitable sage-grouse habitat across BLM managed lands in southwest Idaho to increase or maintain populations at levels where there is no need for listing under the ESA of 1973 as amended (ORMP Special Status Species (SPSS), ORMP, SPSS Management Action 9, Bruneau Management Framework Plan (BMFP) Wildlife).
2. Protect and maintain the quality and function of riparian habitat (within 10 km of an occupied lek) important for sage-grouse.
3. Maintain connectivity of suitable sage-grouse habitat across the landscape.

Achievement of the objectives would subsequently provide important benefits for other species and resources including sagebrush obligate species and other species closely associated with the

sagebrush steppe, maintain the function of watersheds, reduce erosion, and benefit aquatic organisms such as redband trout.

Preliminary Issues

Below are issues relating to the need for and objectives of the proposed action that were identified by the BLM and cooperators.

- Juniper slash near roads posing a threat to the public and firefighters during a wildfire.
- Introduction and spread of invasive and noxious vegetation.
- Impacts to raptor nests
- Removal of old growth juniper
- Disturbance to lekking, nesting or wintering sage-grouse during project implementation
- Disturbance to migratory birds.
- Juniper management within wilderness areas must preserve wilderness characteristics.

Preliminary Alternative Development

A reasonable range of alternatives that address the purpose and need will be considered for analysis. Alternatives currently being considered include;

- Cutting and slashing of early stage encroachment of juniper into sagebrush steppe with jackpot burning.
- Cutting and slashing of early stage encroachment of juniper into sagebrush steppe with no jackpot burning.
- No Action Alternative

Decision to be Made

As a result of the environmental analysis, the Boise District Manager, in coordination with the associated Field Office Managers, will decide whether or not to implement a project to treat juniper where it is encroaching into sagebrush habitat within 10 km of occupied sage-grouse leks across approximately 1,759,000 acres. Due to the large scale of the project, implementation would occur incrementally over the course of several years as funding opportunities allow. However, by treating areas in the early stages of encroachment, the work would progress at a much faster pace compared to treating juniper stands that are already well established.

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 February 14, 2014, 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. Electronic comments can be sent, with the title of this project in the subject line, to:

blm_id_bruneauowyheesagegrouse@blm.gov.

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.

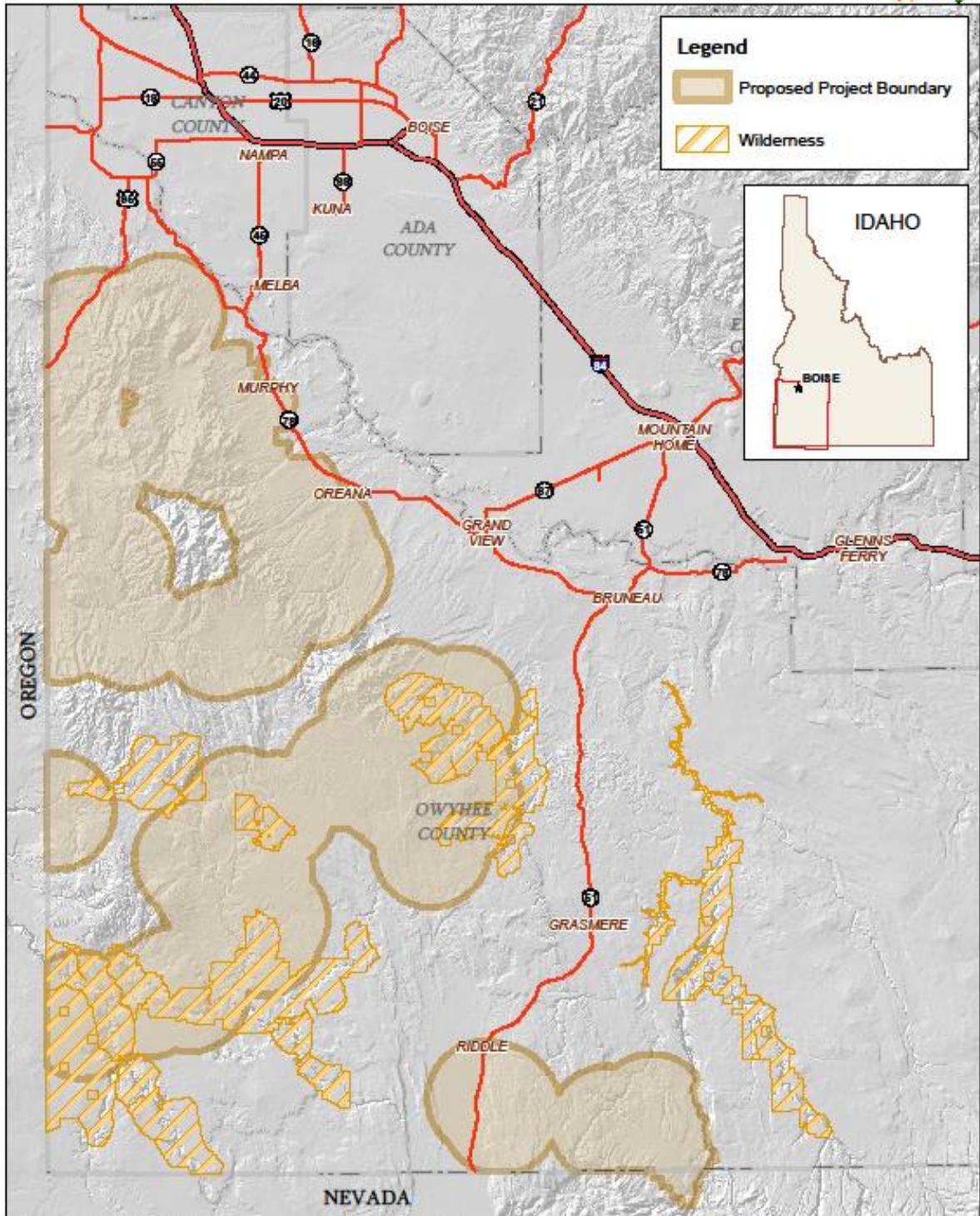
Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personally identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold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

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is; Mike McGee, Boise District Fuels Wildlife Biologist, 3948 Development Ave Boise, ID 83705; 208-384-3464.

MAPS

Map 1: Project Vicinity based on 10-km buffer around occupied sage-grouse leks.

Map #1 - Project Area Overview

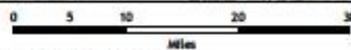


Legend

- Proposed Project Boundary
- Wilderness



The sources of the data are from Idaho BLM Corporate Data, and the USGS.



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