United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument
669 South Highway 89 A
Kanab, UT 84741
http://www.ut.blm.gov/monument

In Reply Refer To:
DOI-BLM-UT-0300-2017-0003-EA

November 21, 2016

To All Interested Parties:

This scoping letter summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM), proposal to restore habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) (GRSG) with vegetation treatments of encroaching pinyon and Utah juniper trees into sagebrush steppe habitat. The proposed project location is approximately 20 air miles northeast of Kanab, Utah on the Skutumpah Terrace. It is located north of Johnson Canyon where the Johnson Canyon road meets the Glendale Bench/Skutumpah road and goes east into historical GRSG habitat on Timber Mountain and Red Breaks (map 1). This area contains the southernmost habitat and population of GRSG in their range.

The proposed project would be in conformance with the GSENM Management Plan, which has been amended by the Utah Greater Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan (RMP) Amendment for GRSG and their habitat needs as of September 2015 (Appendix A). Within the amendment, the habitat category within the Monument meriting the highest level of importance and protection is referred to as Priority Habitat Management Area (PHMA) of which GSENM has 5,841 acres. Another category, recognized by the recent BLM Amendment, derived with data from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), is referred to as Opportunity Habitat of which GSENM has 23,662 acres. 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 scoping letter 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 will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA). 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 GRSG is an imperiled species which currently occupies only 60% of its former range. Habitat loss from pinyon and Utah juniper encroachment and the subsequent impacts to GRSG are identified as a threat in the 12-Month Findings for Greater Sage-grouse (U.S.F.W.S. 2010). On March 23, 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined GRSG warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, but the species was precluded from listing due to other species of higher priority. The USFWS gave

the BLM a deadline of several years to amend all BLM management plans in areas that include populations of or habitat for GRSG. The amended plans were completed in September 2015 and include measures to enhance and protect GRSG and the habitats they need for survival. The USFWS has given the BLM several years to begin implementing the changes outlined in the amended plans and will relook at the need to list the GRSG to determine if implementation of the plans is having a positive effect on GRSG.

The Utah Greater Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment (September 2015) directs BLM to:
"Goal SSA-1: Maintain and/or increase GRSG abundance and distribution by conserving, enhancing or restoring the sagebrush ecosystem upon which populations depend in collaboration with other conservation partners."

A landscape level treatment is needed because the GRSG in this area are migratory and use the landscape at multiple scales. Vegetation treatments across the landscape to enhance habitat will have a greater desired affect than isolated treatments that don't take migration and habitat connectivity into account. Loss of habitat to pinyon and Utah juniper encroachment is one of the major threats to GRSG. Early elimination of pinyon and Utah juniper from GRSG habitat is crucial because GRSG populations are negatively impacted by even low levels of pinyon and Utah juniper encroachment and treatment at an early stage is more cost effective (Baruch-Mordo et al. 2013). Where early succession pinyon and juniper has started to encroach into sagebrush steppe habitat, it will eventually convert to pinyon and Utah juniper woodlands over time unless wildfire occurs or vegetation treatments are implemented. This habitat conversion can alter community structure and ecosystem function to a point that returning to a sagebrush steppe community requires a large disturbance mechanism and can be costly. 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 GRSG habitat at a landscape level to ensure the long-term viability and persistence of GRSG, by removing encroaching pinyon and Utah juniper within GRSG habitat in GSENM. Treatment areas will be those that have departed from expected vegetation and that no longer provide habitat for GRSG. Expected vegetation is determined by ecological site potential as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

There are several peer-reviewed publications that identify the threat and negative impacts to GRSG from pinyon and Utah juniper encroachment into sagebrush steppe habitat (Doherty et al. 2008, Miller et al. 2005, Miller et al. 2011, Wisdom and Chambers 2009).

Existing Condition
In areas not dominated, co-dominated or influenced by pinyon and Utah juniper, the plant community is predominately sagebrush steppe with scattered stands of oak and riparian vegetation in more mesic areas.

Proposed Action
The BLM-GSENM, is proposing a landscape level project to protect and maintain GRSG habitat within GSENM. The proposal is to eliminate encroaching pinyon and Utah juniper trees and convert habitat into otherwise suitable and functioning GRSG habitat. The proposal also entails treating decadent sagebrush stands to rejuvenate the understory and address accelerated erosion by filling in gullies and washes. The vegetation treatments would cover approximately 19,000 acres, (Map 1). The vegetation treatments

would be conducted in portions of a total project area that includes 5,841 acres PHMA, 23,662 acres of Opportunity Habitat, and several thousand acres of historical GRSG habitat on Timber Mountain and Red Breaks. After project implementation, the project area would be maintained as a sagebrush steppe habitat in perpetuity or until plan direction changes without the need for additional environmental compliance.

Preliminary Issues
Below are issues related to the proposed actions that have been identified by the BLM.

- Introduction and spread of invasive and noxious vegetation
- Impacts to raptor nests
- Impacts to biological soil crust
- Disturbance to wintering GRSG during project implementation
- Disturbance to migratory birds
- Possible impairment of lands that contain wilderness character
- Impacts to visual resources
- Impacts to the livestock operator
- Impacts to Monument objects as identified in Presidential Proclamation 6920
- Impacts to cultural sites or artifacts

Preliminary Alternative Development
A reasonable range of alternatives that address the purpose and need will be considered for analysis. Management actions and alternatives currently being considered include;

- Hand-thinning (with chainsaw) of early stage encroachment of pinyon and Utah juniper into sagebrush steppe. This method applies to the initial project and to maintenance of the project over time.
- Mastication or shredding of encroaching pinyon and Utah juniper with heavy equipment
- Harrow or chain in dense sagebrush or in areas with extensive dead tree litter from past projects
- Use of heavy equipment to push trees and other natural debris into gullies within the project area to capture sediment
- Use of the herbicide active ingredient Tebuthiuron to maintain desired sagebrush steppe conditions
- No Action Alternative

Decision to be Made
As a result of the environmental analysis, the GSENM Manager will decide whether or not to implement a project to restore GRSG habitat using a variety of methods across approximately 19,000 acres. Due to the large scale of the project, implementation would occur incrementally over the course of several years as funding opportunities allow.

Public Input Needed
We would like to hear from you regarding any issues or concerns you feel we should consider in development of the project and associated EA. If you are interested in providing us with information, potential issues, or alternatives, please write to Amber Hughes, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, P.O. Box 225 Escalante, UT 84726 on or before December 22, 2016.
This project and supporting documents is available on the intranet from the BLM's national register for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA): https://eplanning.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/nepa/nepa_register.do Select "NEPA" for Type of Project and then select the "Text Search" tab. Comments may also be submitted by email at blm_ut_gs_comments@blm.gov (please

include “Skutumpah Terrace Sage-Grouse Habitat Restoration” in the subject line). You may also fax your comments to 435-826-5650. Those who submit comments will be added to the project mailing list. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal 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. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Matthew Betenson, FOR Cindy

Cynthia Staszak
Monument Manager
Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument

Enclosures
Appendix A
Map 1

Appendix A

Goals, Objectives and Management Actions (MA) in the Utah Greater Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment (September 2015)

Goal SSA-1: Maintain and/or increase GRSG abundance and distribution by conserving, enhancing or restoring the sagebrush ecosystem upon which populations depend in collaboration with other conservation partners.

Objective SSA-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.

Objective SSA-4: Within PHMA, increase the amount and functionality of seasonal habitats by: Reducing conifer (e.g., pinyon/juniper) from areas that are most likely to support GRSG at a rate that is at least equal to the rate of encroachment.

Conducting vegetation treatments based on the following 10-year (decadal) acreage objectives:

Population Areas	Mechanical Treatment
Bald Hills; Panguitch	43,900

Outside PHMA (in adjacent opportunity areas) improve and restore historical GRSG habitat to support GRSG populations and to maintain or enhance connectivity. Statewide, complete a decadal average of 170,200 acres of mechanical treatments and 33,000 acres of annual grass treatments.

MA-SSS-4: In PHMA and in adjacent opportunity areas, maintain, improve and restore GRSG habitat to support GRSG populations and to maintain or enhance connectivity. Vegetation treatments will be applied to meet GRSG habitat objectives and provide additional GRSG habitat.

Objective VEG-1: In PHMA, the desired condition is to maintain all lands ecologically capable of producing sagebrush (but no less than 70 percent) with a minimum of 15 percent sagebrush cover or as consistent with specific ecological site conditions.

MA-VEG-1: In PHMA, where necessary to meet GRSG habitat objectives, treat areas to maintain and expand healthy GRSG habitat (e.g., conifer encroachment areas and annual grasslands).

MA-VEG-9: In PHMA, diversify the perennial grass and forb components through additional seeding in areas where historical seedings (e.g., crested wheatgrass) have been recolonized by sagebrush.

Literature Cited

Baruch-Mordo, S., J. S. Evans, J. P. Severson, D. E. Naugle, J. D. Maestas, J. M. Kiesecker, M. J. Falkowski, C. A. Hagen, and K. P. Reese. 2013. Saving sage-grouse from the trees: A proactive solution to reducing a key threat to a candidate species. Biological Conservation 167, Pp. 233-241.

Cox, M., D. W. Lutz, T. Wasley, M. Fleming, B. B. Compton, T. Keegan, D. Stroud, S. Kilpatrick, K. Gray, J. Carlson, L. Carpenter, K. Urquhart, B. Johnson, and C. McLaughlin. 2009. Habitat Guidelines for Mule Deer: Intermountain West Ecoregion. Mule Deer Working Group, Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Dobkin, D. S., and J. D. Sauder. 2004. Shrubsteppe landscapes in jeopardy. Distributions, abundances, and the uncertain future of birds and small mammals in the Intermountain West. High Desert Ecological Research Institute, Bend, OR.

Doherty, K.E., D.E. Naugle, B.L. Walker, and J.M. Graham. 2008. Greater sage-grouse winter habitat selection and energy development. Journal of Wildlife Management 72:187-195.

Groves, C. R., B. Butterfield, A. Lippincott, B. Csuti, and J. M. Scott. 1997. Atlas of Idaho's wildlife; integrating Gap Analysis and Natural Heritage Information. Idaho Dept. Fish and Game, Non-game and Endangered Wildlife Program, Boise, ID. p. 372

Miller, R. F., J. D. Bates, T. J. Svejcar, F. B. Pierson, L. E. Eddleman. 2005. Biology, ecology, and management of western juniper. Oregon State University Agricultural Experiment Station Technical Bulletin 152, Corvallis, OR.

Miller, R.F., S.T. Knick, and D.A. Pyke, C.W. Meinke, S.E. Hanser, M.J. Wisdom and A.L. Hild. 2011. Characteristics of sagebrush habitats and limitations to long-term conservation. Pages 145-184 in S.T. Knick and J.W. Connelly, editors, Greater Sage-grouse Ecology and Conservation of a Landscape Species and Its Habitats. Cooper Ornithological Society, Studies in Avian Biology No. 38. Univ. California Press, Berkeley.

Spofford, Walter R. 1971. The golden eagle--rediscovered. Conservationist. 26(1): 6-8.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Twelve-month Findings for Petitions to List the Greater Sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) as Threatened or Endangered. Federal Register Notice Vol. 75, No. 55. March 23, 2010.

Wisdom, M.J., C.W. Meinke, S.T. Knick, and M.A. Schroeder. in press. Factors associated with extirpation of sage-grouse. Studies in Avian Biology. 59 Pp.