

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Based on the analysis of the potential impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment and careful consideration of public comments, I have determined that Alternative B, the proposed fire/fuels management plan, will have no significant impact on the human environment. An environmental impact statement does not need to be prepared.

Support for the FONSI:

The following **Critical Elements** will not be significantly affected by applying management as analyzed for Alternative B:

Air Quality: The anticipated activity associated with Alternative B will not exceed state or federal ambient air quality standards as a result of fire and fuels management and will not significantly contribute to cumulative air quality effects. If and when wildland fire is managed to achieve resource objectives in C and D category polygons, notification standards similar to those for prescribed fire will be followed.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern: ACECs and ACEC values will not be affected by fire and fuels related activities because ACEC status will be considered for fire management actions and in site-specific implementation assessments for hazardous fuels reduction projects.

Cultural Resources: Archeological resources that are considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NHRP) will either be avoided or, in consultation with State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), a plan for mitigating the effects of the proposed actions will be formulated and implemented. In addition, sites for fuels management activities will be examined for other cultural and paleontological resources before any activity occurs. Anticipated impacts from fuels management activities will be avoided or mitigated. The proposed fire management plan will provide fire management objectives and more guidance for wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation as well as guidance for fuels reduction actions to protect cultural resources.

Environmental Justice: Alternative B will not cause disproportionately high or adverse effects on human health or environmental effects on low-income or minority populations, as provided under Environmental Justice considerations.

Farmlands (Prime or Unique): Neither the proposed management associated with wildland fire suppression nor

the proposed fuels management actions will contribute to the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of prime or unique farmland to nonagricultural uses.

Floodplain: No developments or effects of developments associated with fire/fuels management BLM will occur in floodplain.

Invasive Species: While some activities and land uses will introduce and/or spread noxious weeds, the management guidance and anticipated chemical weed treatments associated with hazardous fuels projects will mitigate or control the spread of invasive and non-native species.

Native American Religious Concerns: Alternative B will not interfere with the inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise traditional religions, including access to religious sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites established in the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978.

Threatened or Endangered Species: Significant impacts are not anticipated from the proposed fire and fuels management (Alternative B) and related actions for species listed as endangered or threatened, and species proposed for listing. Nor will significant impacts occur to the species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, fish, and plants designated as BLM sensitive species. Anticipated impacts to threatened or endangered species were analyzed in a Biological Assessment. The Biological Opinion/Concurrence Opinion from the US Fish and Wildlife Service affirmed the following determinations made in the BA:

- For Listed Species: Either No Effect or May Affect but is not likely to Adversely Affect for listed species
- For Proposed Species: Not Likely to Jeopardize the Species
- For Proposed Critical Habitat: Would not adversely modify proposed critical habitat

The Biological Opinion concluded that Alternative B is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of grizzly bears, Canada Lynx, bald eagles, gray wolves, bull trout, or the proposed critical habitat for bull trout.

Wastes, Hazardous or Solid: It is not expected that future activities and effects associated with Alternative B will conflict with either CERCLA or RCRA. Compliance with environmental laws and regulations should not result in significant impacts associated with hazardous or solid wastes.

Water Quality, Drinking or Ground: Alternative B will not affect water quality in a way to exceed standards established under the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974. Activities anticipated with Alternative B will be regulated to control non-point sources of water pollution to comply with The Clean Water Act, as amended by the Water Quality Act of 1987 (including Total Maximum Daily Load Requirements). Fuels management activities would be conducted in a way to meet state water quality standards as specified in the Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Management. Although water quality impacts will result from the use of prescribed fire and mechanical treatments to reduce hazardous fuels, these impacts would be offset by reduced impacts from wildland fires. Also, a Pesticide Use Proposal will be submitted and approved before any chemical treatments occur on site.

Wetlands/Riparian Zones: The impacts of severe wildland fire and future needs for emergency wildfire suppression will be reduced. The potentially greater risks associated with higher levels of fuels treatment will not reach significant levels because of the guidelines included in Alternative B. Actions associated with fire and fuels management related actions will be conducted to minimize the destruction, loss, or degradation of wetlands and riparian areas while preserving and enhancing their natural and beneficial values. Few wetland or riparian areas will be treated for fuels management.

Wild and Scenic Rivers: The BLM currently manages land along one designated Wild and Scenic River. During scoping and subsequent analysis, no issues were identified concerning the relationship of fire and fuels management to the Upper Missouri Wild and Scenic River designation.

Wilderness: Wilderness and Wilderness Study Area (WSA) policy requires that special consideration and restrictions will be applied in wildland fire suppression, rehabilitation, prescribed fire, and other hazardous fuel reduction efforts so as not to impair the characteristics for which they received designation.

Significant impacts are not anticipated for the **additional resources** that were not discussed above as critical elements. Specifically:

Fire and fuels management related activities associated with Alternative B will be applied to only about 2 percent of BLM-administered grasslands, 3 percent of BLM-administered shrublands, and 37 percent of BLM-administered forestlands. These activities will not cause a significant adverse impact to the ecological health of the vegetation. Generally, the vegetation communities that are treated will convert to an earlier successional stage, stimulating new growth. In the long term, total productivity will improve, especially in treated forestlands. At the same time, fire severity on treated areas will decrease, as will the

risk of catastrophic stand replacement wildland fire. Associated impacts caused by wildland fire suppression activities will also decrease.

Chemical weed treatments will be applied if other fuels treatments are expected to stimulate noxious weed growth or create new infestations.

Use of chemical weed treatments will be consistent with label directions for chemical use, BLM Manual 9011, BLM Handbook H9011-1 Chemical Pest Control Guidance, the Riparian Protection Zone guidance (under Alternative B, See section 2.5.3.1), and guidelines outlined in *Partners Against Weeds: An Action Plan for the Bureau of Land Management* (1996) to avoid significant impacts.

Increased soil loss, sedimentation, and turbidity in the water as the result of prescribed fire and other fuels treatments will be minimized by complying with existing environmental protection requirements, conservation and species protection requirements, agreements, strategies, standard operating procedures, manual and handbook guidance, and other protection measures including proposed additional guidance for fire and fuels management. There will also be less soil loss, sedimentation, and turbidity from wildland fire on areas that are treated than if there is a stand replacement fire because they are not treated. Impacts to soils and water quality will also be reduced because the area burned from wildland fire and the intensity and severity of these wild fires will be less. Treatments anticipated with Alternative B will help achieve land health standards (soil stability and watershed function) on more areas.

Alternative B will involve the selective introduction of fire and fuels management to certain wildlife habitats. Application will be managed to avoid times and sites where prescribed fire and other treatments are not desired. These treatments will reduce the likelihood of adverse effects from wildland fire. The cumulative effects of the proposed action will have less impact to wildlife habitat and wildlife populations than the effects of the large, catastrophic, stand-replacement wildfires that result in drastic changes in ecological condition from late seral climax vegetation to an early seral stage.

Recreation and visual impacts of wildland fires will be reduced. The likelihood of protecting high quality recreation areas will also be enhanced. By reducing the long-term potential for stand-replacement wildland fire, the potential for severe impacts to visual resources and recreation opportunities will also be reduced.

Alternative B will provide greater protection to human health and safety by broadening the range of allowable methods that can be used to reduce the potential for severe wildland fires on BLM lands near the wildland urban interface, including several communities and developments

that have been identified by the BLM as priority areas. Applying the management analyzed with Alternative B will allow the BLM to reduce the potential for loss of life and property; reduce the risk and resource damage associated with wildland fire suppression; and reduce the negative health effects caused by the smoke from catastrophic wildland fires. Although Alternative B will result in the use of more prescribed burning, the timing and size of these fires will be controlled to operate within acceptable limits imposed by air quality standards.

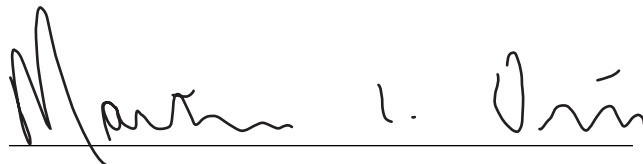
Alternative B is consistent with the preferences voiced by the public for active fire and fuels management. The effects will be preferable because fuels treatments will be mitigated, designed, or planned to minimize health and safety concerns, visual impacts, and other quality of life issues.

This analysis did not identify effects to the human environment that are considered highly controversial, highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The actions associated with the proposed fire and fuels management will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a discussion in principle about a future consideration. Nor will they violate federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Based on the analysis of individual and cumulative management actions and anticipated activities, I have determined that Alternative B (the proposed action) does not constitute a significant environmental impact.

Signed:



Martin C. Ott
State Director for Montana/Dakotas
Bureau of Land Management

7/14/03

Date