



U.S. Department of the Interior

# BLM

## Bureau of Land Management

# Vegetation EIS Update

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### BLM Vegetation EIS Efforts Focus on Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessments

The BLM is preparing a national programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS) to update and replace analyses contained in four existing EISs completed by the agency from 1986-1992 for 13 western states, and to analyze vegetation treatments in four additional western states and Alaska.

Under the Proposed Action, up to 6 million acres would be treated annually using a variety of methods, including prescribed fire, herbicides and biological control agents, and mechanical and manual extraction.

As part of the EIS, the BLM also intends to evaluate the potential risks to humans, fish, and wildlife from several new herbicides that were not evaluated in the previous EISs, but that the BLM would now like to use to treat vegetation. As part of this EIS, the BLM will also develop protocols enabling the BLM to evaluate the risks from using other chemicals that may become available in the future.

This EIS will provide a comprehensive programmatic National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document that can be used by BLM staffs at the field level for local land-use planning. This second *Vegetation EIS Update* newsletter summarizes important activities that have occurred since June 2002.

### Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessments

This Vegetation EIS addresses the potential risks to humans, fish, and animals from the use of herbicides. Unless new information is available to indicate the need for additional studies, herbicides approved for use in the earlier EISs will not be evaluated in this EIS. However, the BLM does propose the use of four new herbicides—Diquat (trade name of Reward), Fluridone (Sonar), Imazapic (Plateau), and Diflufenzopyr (Distinct)—and is conducting human health and ecological risk assessments to determine the risks to humans, fish, and wildlife from the use of these herbicides. In addition, the BLM is conducting a risk assessment for the use of Sulfmeturon methyl (Oust). Oust was evaluated in the earlier EISs, but the BLM has decided that new information justifies re-analyzing this herbicide.

Last spring, a risk assessment team comprised of scientists from the BLM, US Fish & Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and a consulting firm began developing methodologies to ensure that the risk assessments reflect the current state of knowledge. This team has conducted weekly conference calls, and met in Boise and Denver to develop protocols to be followed when conducting risk assessments. Much of the team's time has been spent identifying aspects of the human and natural environment that must be considered when evaluating the effects of herbicides. For example, the human health risk assessment must not only consider the effects of herbicides on people who apply herbicides, but also on users of public lands, including hikers, ranchers, and Native Americans who use vegetation

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from public lands to make baskets and who harvest plants for food and ceremonial purposes.

The ecological risk assessment will evaluate the direct effects of herbicides on plants and animals, such as the harmful effects that may occur if a plant or animal is sprayed with a herbicide. It will also look at indirect effects, such as those that may occur when plants, fish, and wildlife are exposed to chemicals that have been carried away from the spray area in stormwater runoff or with blowing dust. Much of the team's effort has focused on determining how the ecological risk assessment can best assess the potential impacts to threatened and endangered species, especially salmon.

The draft protocols prepared by the BLM were submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the US Fish & Wildlife Service in late October 2002 for comment. The agencies are reviewing these protocols and are preparing their comments for the BLM on how the protocols may be improved. The BLM, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service plan to meet again this winter to discuss these comments and to finalize the protocols. The risk assessments will begin after the protocols are final, and it is anticipated that completion of the draft assessments will take about four months. This process will include developing complex spreadsheets and models, reviewing the scientific literature, analyzing data, and preparing summary reports for agency and public review.

## Treatment Acreage Determinations

During fall 2001, the BLM asked field offices to provide information on the number of acres likely to be treated during the next 10 years, and the types of treatments they would use. This information, which was provided to the public at scoping meetings in late 2001, indicated that more acres would be treated in Oregon, Idaho, and Nevada than other states.

However, after further review, the BLM decided more detailed information was needed to adequately identify where vegetation treatments would occur, and to assess impacts to the environment from these treatments. The BLM canvassed field offices to obtain detailed information on proposed treatment activities, including information on vegetation types to be treated and the locations of treatments. The BLM is working with several field offices to ensure the information in the EIS on proposed vegetation treatments will be as accurate as possible.

## Development of Other Alternatives

Under NEPA, the BLM is required to look at a reasonable range of alternatives, including the proposed action and no action (maintain status quo) alternatives. During the scoping phase of the EIS development, the BLM received several alternative proposals, ranging from prohibiting certain activities on BLM lands, to eliminating the use of prescribed fire or herbicides, to increasing the number of acres treated, to taking an ecosystem-based approach to land management.

Since last summer, the BLM has held several meetings in Washington, D.C. with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to develop alternatives that meet the intent of NEPA and respond to concerns addressed by the public during scoping.



*Prescribed fire in New Mexico.*

The CEQ is responsible for assisting federal agencies with NEPA compliance. The BLM intends to develop alternatives that offer different approaches to treating vegetation, while meeting its primary objectives of improving the quality of the land and providing benefits to land users.

## Special Studies

As part of the EIS, the BLM is preparing several reports that address specific concerns related to vegetation management. As part of the compliance process for the Endangered Species Act, the BLM is preparing a biological assessment that will address the impacts of vegetation treatments to more than 300 plant, wildlife, and fish species listed as threatened or endangered, or proposed for listing by the US Fish & Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service.

In addition, the biological assessment will outline the procedures the BLM must follow at national and local levels to ensure that vegetation treatment actions taken by the BLM are not likely to harm critical habitat or jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species. These procedures would include measures identified during the ecological risk assessment to protect species from the potential harmful effects of herbicides.

The BLM is also preparing reports that review Native American and Alaska Native uses of resources found on public lands, and the effects of fire on cultural and geologic resources. Native American and Alaska Native groups use plants for a wide variety of purposes, including food, shelter, medicine, tools, art, and ceremonies. These uses must be carefully considered by the BLM when managing vegetation on public lands. Use of prescribed fire must be carefully evaluated and monitored to ensure it does not damage historic or cultural resources of importance to these groups. The BLM contacted Native American and Alaska Native groups to solicit their input on issues of concern, and to identify which vegetation treatment practices may be detrimental to plants, fish, and animals they use.

## Next Steps

The development of the risk assessment protocol has been a long and challenging process, but it should result in a better assessment and ensure that humans, plants, fish, and wildlife are not harmed by the use of herbicides on public lands. However, the process of developing the protocol has delayed the completion of the draft EIS by about 12 months.

The risk assessment should be completed in early spring 2003. Between now and then, the BLM will refine the treatment acreage assessments, complete the alternatives to be evaluated in the EIS, and finish much of the analysis of the environmental impacts from the proposed action and other alternatives. The BLM will also analyze the effects of smoke from both prescribed burns and wildfires on air quality, and complete the draft biological assessment.

Once the risk assessment is final, this information will be incorporated into the draft EIS, which will then be completed and made available to the public. The Draft EIS is now scheduled for completion in mid-2003, although the timing of release of the Draft EIS is still contingent on the air quality and risk assessments and the status of consultation with the US Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

## For More Information

If you would like to receive more information, or be placed on the mailing list, contact Brian Amme, Project Manager, BLM, P.O. Box 12000, Reno, NV 89520-0006.

He can also be reached by telephone at (775) 861-6645, by fax at (775) 861-6712, or by email at [brian\\_amme@blm.gov](mailto:brian_amme@blm.gov).

Informational updates, including the scoping summary report, will be posted on the BLM website at <http://www.blm.gov/weeds/vegeis> as they become available.

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# Vegetation EIS Update

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The BLM, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior,  
administers 262 million acres of federal public lands  
located primarily in 12 Western states, including Alaska.

The agency also administers 700 million acres  
of onshore minerals located throughout the nation.

The BLM manages public lands and their vast array of resources  
to benefit both current and future generations.

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