

Record of Decision

Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy

December 2008



Eagle Lake Field Office



BLM/CA/ES-2009-005+1793

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Eagle Lake Field Office – Bureau of Land Management

Field Manager's Approval

Having considered a full range of alternatives, associated effects and public input, I approve the attached Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy for implementation in the Eagle Lake Field Office area of jurisdiction.

The Strategy offers the best opportunity to restore sage steppe ecosystems that have become dominated by western juniper. The strategy also addresses all relevant issues raised during the planning process.

The Strategy has been determined to be in conformance with the Eagle Lake Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision approved on April 17, 2008.



Dayne Barron
Field Manager

12/15/2008

Date

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Eagle Lake Field Office includes approximately 1,022,767 acres of BLM-managed surface acres in northeastern California and northwestern Nevada. The geographic area includes BLM-administered lands within the counties of Lassen, Plumas, Sierra (California) and Washoe (Nevada). The BLM's mission is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The Eagle Lake Field Office includes approximately 825,000 acres of sage steppe ecosystem, which is important habitat for numerous wildlife species, as well as providing recreation such as hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing, and resource use opportunities including livestock grazing and firewood gathering.

One of the most significant factors affecting the health, diversity and productivity of public lands in the region is the rapid expansion and encroachment of western juniper into the sagebrush steppe ecosystem. Western juniper has significantly increased in density and distribution since the late 1800's and if left unchecked can have significant impacts on soil resources, plant community structure and composition, water and nutrient cycles, and wildlife habitat.

In order to address this ecosystem management issue across jurisdictional boundaries, the BLM joined forces with the United States Forest Service (USFS) and county governments to develop a comprehensive vegetation management strategy across a planning area that encompasses 6.5 million acres of public and private land. The strategy broadly identifies restoration methods and provides guidelines for implementing site specific treatments over a 50-year timeframe.

The Modoc National Forest is issuing a companion Record of Decision (ROD) and both agencies will work closely with county governments to implement the strategy in a cooperative and coordinated manner. The 2008 Eagle Lake Resource Management Plan Record of Decision (RMP/ROD) anticipated the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy (RMP/ROD pg. 5) (hereinafter referred to as "Strategy"); therefore, adoption of the Strategy will not necessitate an RMP amendment.

Decision

Based upon my review of the FEIS and project record, it is my decision to adopt Alternative J, the Preferred Alternative, of the *Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) for implementation within the Eagle Lake Field Office.

I believe implementation of Alternative J, the Preferred Alternative, including its six Design Standards, its emphasis on mechanical treatments, its rate of treatment, and its collaborative planning, monitoring and adjustment approach, will allow the BLM, USFS and, cooperators to achieve substantial restoration of the sage steppe ecosystem, while acknowledging and responding to uncertainty.

The Preferred Alternative will emphasize restoration of threatened, endangered and sensitive species habitat, watershed enhancement, restoration of ecosystem function, as well as opportunities for the prioritization of treatment areas across jurisdictional boundaries which will optimize efficiency and maximize benefits.

The Preferred Alternative emphasizes the use of mechanical treatments to lessen environmental risks associated with prescribed and wildland fire use, including the spread of non-native invasive species, uncertain results, short-term impacts to sagebrush obligate species, disruption of Native American cultural resources and activities, and reduction in air quality.

The Preferred Alternative is programmatic in nature, so it does not prescribe the site-specific location of treatments, the year a specific location will be treated, or whether the treatments will occur in a particular year or decade. Proposed restoration treatments will require a site-specific environmental analysis and decision. The selection of these treatment locations will be coordinated with county governments and other organizations and individuals.

Summary of the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy

The Strategy relies heavily on a Monitoring and Adjustment approach (FEIS p. 49) to validate treatment rates and treatment methods employed. It is expected that initially a treatment mixture of approximately 56% prescribed fire and wildland fire use, 41% mechanical treatment and 3% hand treatment would be utilized over the planning area. Treatment rates on Forest Service and BLM land would be dependent on monitoring feedback but would be expected to be 14,000 to 21,000 acres per year for the first two decades. Beyond the second decade, treatment rates would be expected to increase to 34,000 acres per year.

Adjustments would be made to the restoration methods and rates of treatment based on monitoring results. Future restoration projects would reflect those adjustments. It is expected that this approach will create greater certainty regarding the results over time. The estimated timeline for full implementation of the project is 50 years.

Monitoring and Adjustment or Adaptive Management is the key design standard in the Strategy. The accumulation of understanding and subsequent adaptation of management strategies depends on incorporating monitoring and assessment results into the decision making process. The BLM and USFS will work collaboratively with the scientific community and stakeholders in an interdisciplinary assessment of what is known and what is being learned about the sage steppe ecosystem.

Monitoring will be completed at both a site specific and programmatic level and will be summarized in an annual report available for review. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) will be established for the purpose of reviewing all monitoring information to determine if treatments or other management actions should be adjusted at the programmatic or site specific levels to better meet restoration objectives (FEIS p. 51).

The TAC will conduct an annual meeting of interested publics and other stakeholders to discuss findings and recommendations. After receiving input from the public, recommendations for programmatic and site specific levels of management will be finalized and forwarded to resource specialists and decision makers to consider when initiating future treatment projects. Design standards have also been developed to guide site specific implementation of the Strategy (FEIS p. 47). Resources and resource uses addressed in the design standards include:

- Cultural Resources
- Firewood Gathering
- Livestock Grazing
- Old Growth Juniper
- Roads

The BLM and USFS reached a determination of “No Effect” on federal candidate and listed species within the planning area resulting from selection of the Strategy. This determination was submitted for review to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on July 9, 2008 in the form of a Technical Assistance Request. Appropriate project level consultation will be initiated with FWS as site specific projects are being developed where those projects may affect candidate or listed species.

Alternatives Considered

Six alternatives were considered in the FEIS:

1. Alternative A “**Current Management**” was developed from existing planning decisions, policies and guidance. It estimates a rate of restoration treatment at 5,000 acres per year.

I did not select Alternative A because it would not meet the Purpose and Need for sage steppe restoration and would result in further degradation of the sage steppe ecosystem over the 50-year planning horizon. Under this alternative the encroachment of juniper would outpace initial treatment of lands already degraded and lands under threat.

2. Alternative B “**Proposed Action**” would treat 30,000 acres per year. Treatment would be 78% fire and 19% mechanical. Over a 40 year period, 1.2 million acres would be treated.

I did not select Alternative B because of its heavy reliance on fire treatments and corresponding environmental, wildlife, and social risks. Furthermore, its start-up rate of 30,000 acres per year would not provide as much certainty in restoration results over time as would Alternative J.

3. Alternative C “**Start Slower, Gain Experience**” proposed a treatment mix similar to Alternative B, but would initially proceed more cautiously, treating 15,000 to 19,000 acres per year for the first two decades then increasing to 30,000 acres per year for the next three decades.

I did not select Alternative C due to its heavy reliance on fire treatments and corresponding environmental, wildlife, and social risks.

4. Alternative D **“Emphasize Mechanical Treatment”** proposed a greater emphasis on mechanical treatment. Fire use would be reduced from 78% to 56% of treated acreage and mechanical treatment acreage would increase from 19% to 41% as compared to Alternative B. Treatment rates would be 28,000 acres per year for the first two decades and then increase to 34,000 acres per year for the next two decades.

I did not select Alternative D because it would not provide as much certainty in restoration results over time as Alternative J and would not allow for treatment adjustments based on initial monitoring and experience gained.

5. Alternative E **“Go Faster”** would increase the rate of treatment to 37,000 acres per year for the first two decades and then increasing the treatment rate to 42,000 acres per year in the third decade. The treatment mix would be 56% fire and 41% mechanical.

I did not select Alternative E because it increases the amount of risk associated with uncertain treatment results over time and would not allow for treatment adjustments based on initial monitoring and experience gained.

Alternatives C, D, and E were developed in response to significant issues raised by the public.

6. Alternative J, the Preferred Alternative, combines elements of Alternatives C and D and was developed and assessed in the FEIS. It is my judgment that the sage steppe ecosystem is best restored through starting at the restoration rate prescribed in Alternative J. This alternative will implement a Monitoring and Adjustment approach so that the first two decades of treatment results can inform treatment prescriptions for the remaining three decades.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

Federal regulations (40 CFR 1505.2(b)) require that an agency identify the “environmentally preferable” alternative(s) in the Record of Decision (ROD) for an EIS. The environmentally preferable alternative is the alternative that would result in the greatest beneficial impacts to the identified aspects of the environment. Compared to the other alternatives analyzed in the FEIS, Alternative J, the Preferred Alternative, best meets the national environmental goals identified above.

Alternative A or current management does not address sagebrush steppe restoration in a comprehensive manner. As a result, ecosystem health will continue to deteriorate. The other alternatives all address the juniper encroachment problem, but only Alternative J combines a greater emphasis on mechanical treatment with a slower, more deliberate implementation process initially to insure improved land health over the long term.

The Preferred Alternative would result in overall minor to moderate adverse impacts to resources; however, these impacts would be minimized on a site specific basis through adoption of the design standards. The Preferred Alternative would also result in moderate to major beneficial impacts to native vegetation communities and wildlife habitat.

Management Considerations/Decision Rationale

The Strategy conforms to the RMP/ROD, approved on April 17, 2008 because it is specifically provided for and is clearly consistent with the RMP objectives and decisions (RMP/ROD p. 7, 10, and 13).

The Strategy was developed with input from Tribal, State and County governments, other federal agencies, the Northeast California Resource Advisory Council, interested organizations, and the public. The BLM considers the Strategy the best approach for meeting the purpose and need for this project: adopting an approach for juniper management to restore the sage steppe ecosystem and associated vegetative communities.

Public Involvement

Public meetings and discussions on development of a potential Strategy were initiated in the region in 2001. The formal scoping process for this effort began with the publishing of the Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS in the Federal Register on July 18, 2005. A Public Scoping Notice was distributed following the NOI and a public notice was published in the *Modoc Record* on July 28, 2005.

The scoping comment period ended on September 9, 2005. The formal scoping process generated 23 letters from a variety of groups and individuals. Those 23 letters contained 284 individual comments and helped to frame the issues to be addressed in the Draft EIS (DEIS).

Thirteen Strategy issues were identified as a result of scoping. These included: proposed action restoration rate, permanent roads, uncertain results, impacts of livestock grazing, impacts to the livestock industry, noxious weeds, old growth juniper, juniper as wildlife habitat, impacts to sage obligate species, soil productivity and surface hydrology, Native American cultural resources and activities, prescribed fire and wildland fire use, and local economics. These issues are addressed in detail in the Scoping Report and FEIS.

The Notice of Availability of the DEIS was published in the Federal Register on August 31, 2007, and published in the *Modoc Record* on August 30, 2007. During the comment period nine public meetings, presentations and field trips were offered throughout the Analysis Area. A total of 40 people attended the public meetings. In addition several people attended the two field trips.

The DEIS public comment period ended on October 15th, 2007. During that 45-day comment period 23 comment letters were received. These comment letters were analyzed using the same method that was used on the scoping comments.

Based upon public comments on the DEIS, an additional alternative (Alternative J) was added to the Final EIS. This new alternative was identified by the agencies as the Preferred Alternative. The Notice of Availability of the Final EIS was published in the Federal Register on May 9, 2008, and published in the *Modoc Record* on May 8, 2008.

Six federally recognized Tribes have cultural interests in the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Analysis Area. They are the Alturas Rancheria, the Cedarville Rancheria, the Ft. Bidwell Paiute Tribe, the Klamath Tribes, the Pit River Tribe, and the Susanville Rancheria. Extensive consultation was held with each of the Tribes regarding the Strategy. The Pit River Tribe served as a cooperating agency throughout the EIS process.

Administrative Remedies

Administrative remedies may be available to those who believe they will be adversely affected by this decision. Appeals may be made to the Office of Hearings and Appeals, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Interior, Board of Land Appeals (Board), 801 N. Quincy Street, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22203, in accordance with the regulations in 43 CFR Part 4. Notices of appeal must be filed in this office within 30 days after publication of this decision. If a notice of appeal does not include a statement of reasons, such statement must be filed with this office and the Board within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed. The notice of appeal and any statement of reasons, written arguments, or briefs must also be served upon the Regional Solicitor, Pacific Southwest Region, U.S. Department of Interior, 2800 Cottage Way, E-1712, Sacramento, CA 95825. The effective date of this decision (and the date initiating the appeal period) will be the date the notice of availability is published in the Federal Register.