RAMSAY RIPARIAN FENCE

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA OR-025-03-057

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
28910 Hwy 20 West
Hines, Oregon 97738

MARCH 31, 2003

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

Ed Ramsay, who is a grazing permittee in the Coleman Creek Allotment, approached the Burns District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in November 2002, to explain that he is working with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency on a plan to improve a portion of the South Fork Malheur River as shown on map. Mr. Ramsay and NRCS are proposing to construct approximately 2 miles of fence of which approximately one-third mile crosses public land within the South Pasture of the Coleman Creek Allotment in the Burns District. The Coleman Creek Allotment is located approximately 40 air miles southeast of Burns, Oregon. There is approximately 520 acres of public land within the South Pasture. The permittee grazes the South Pasture from 04/01 through 09/01.

This document is an Environmental Assessment of possible effects of constructing and maintaining the Ramsey Riparian Fence.

A. Purpose and Need

The purpose of the fence is to keep livestock off the South Fork Malheur River to provide for recovery of the riparian plant communities, for up to 10 years depending on the date of recovery. The proposed fence is needed to provide a recovery period to establish riparian plant communities. Following this exclusionary period the BLM, NRCS and the permittee would cooperatively determine grazing management of the river pasture.

B. Land Use Plan Conformance Statement

The proposed action and alternatives described below are in conformance with the Three Rivers Management Plan, Issue Grazing Management (Page 2-33), and are consistent with Federal, State, Tribal, and local laws, regulations, and plans to the maximum extent possible.

CHAPTER II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE

A. Description of the Proposed Action

The proposed action is to construct approximately 2 miles of 4-strand barbed wire fence, of which one-third mile would cross public land. The fence would create a 500-acre riparian pasture. The public land portion in the riparian pasture is approximately 2.5 acres (see map).

The livestock permittee would be responsible for maintenance of the pasture fence.

Prior to final inspection all trash and excess debris would be removed from the public land and disposed of at a site approved by the contracting officer.

B. No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative the fence would not be constructed.

CHAPTER III. DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Description of the Proposed Action

The following critical elements of the human environment are not known to be present or affected by the proposed action or alternative in the EA: Areas of Critical and Environmental Concern, Adverse Energy Impacts, Air Quality, Cultural Resources, Environmental Justice, Farmlands (prime or unique), Floodplains, Hazardous Materials, American Indian Concerns and Traditional Cultural Properties, , Paleontology, Special Status Species (Flora), Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness, and Wilderness Study Areas.

The following critical elements and resources are present in the project area and are subject to analysis:

Critical Elements

1. Threatened, Endangered, Candidate and Sensitive Species

Sage-grouse, a Special Status species, are known to occur in the vicinity of the proposed project. No other Special Status terrestrial animal species are known to occur in the proposed project area.

Redband trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), a Special Status species, are known to occur in the South Fork Malheur River. No other Special Status aquatic species are known to occur in the proposed project area.

2. Migratory Birds

Good condition riparian habitat is one of the most desirable bird habitats in the proposed project area. Many species of migratory birds currently inhabit the area.

3. Noxious Weeds

There are currently no known noxious weed infestations on public land. There are noxious weed on private land medusahead rye, Scotch thistle, Russian knapweed, and perennial pepperweed.

4. Water Quality (surface/ground)

The South Fork Malheur River is not on the 303(d) list for water quality impaired streams.

5. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

The current conditions of the wetlands and riparian zones are not known because this is mostly a private pasture and no monitoring has been conducted. A field observation in the fall of 2002 was conducted on the public land portion of the South Fork Malheur River. In this portion of the riparian plant communities the upland grass species and sagebrush were encroaching into the riparian area with very little hydric riparian species present. This portion of the riparian plant community is estimated to be in poor condition currently.

Noncritical Elements

1. Range Management/Livestock

The permittees, Edward and Cathy Ramsay, graze cattle on the Coleman Creek Allotment. The allotment has 424 AUMs of active permitted use and 101 suspended AUMs for a total of 525 AUMs. Currently the permittee grazes cattle in the South Pasture from April 1 to September 1.

2. Soils

The proposed fence route occurs parallel to the private dirt road where extra road building material has been added to the soils. The rest of the soils along the proposed fence route occur on moderate slopes and have a very stoney-loam to gravelly-silty loam that are shallow to moderately deep and well-drained.

3. Vegetation

The proposed fence parallels 2 to 10 feet away from a private dirt road. Along the fence route the sparse vegetation consists of sagebrush, bunchgrasses, and various annual forbs and cheatgrass.

4. Visual Resources

The area lies within Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class IV. The objective for this class is to provide for management activities that allow for major modification of the landscape.

5. Wildlife

Species of wildlife common to the sagebrush steppe of eastern Oregon occur in the proposed project area. Some of those species are mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, coyote, deer mouse, western rattlesnake, and many other songbird and small mammal species.

6. Fisheries

Fish species, other than the redband trout, likely to be present include dace, whitefish, suckers, minnows, and smallmouth bass.

CHAPTER IV: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Description of the Proposed Action

Critical Elements

1. Threatened, Endangered, Candidate and Sensitive Species

Late brood-rearing habitat for sage-grouse would be improved with increased hydric species, and expansion of the riparian community, which increases riparian cover along the stream. This would improve riparian habitat for this species.

2. Migratory Birds

The riparian habitat should improve providing increased hydric species, with expanded riparian habitat which increases riparian cover within the project area. The number of migratory bird species may increased due to the increase diversity of habitat.

3. Noxious Weeds

The native riparian vegetation is expected to increase in overall diversity of species which would help to decrease the potential spread of noxious weeds.

4. Water Quality (surface/ground)

Water quality may improve within the project area but due to the relatively small size of the project the overall water quality on the South Fork Malheur River may or may not improve.

5. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

Construction of the proposed fence project would remove livestock grazing on the river for an extended period of time. This would allow for herbaceous riparian plants and riparian woody species to expand. The riparian conditions are expected to improve within the project area but at a very slow rate. This would be due to the noxious weeds within the project area and upstream.

Noncritical Elements

1. Range Management/Livestock

There would be no increase or decrease in active permitted AUMs as the public land portion of the riparian pasture would be approximately 2.5 acres.

2. Soils

There would be little impact to soils along the road or on the steeper slopes. The soils have a gravelly surface which minimizes soil erosion. Since cattle tend not to congregate on steep slopes, there should be little impact by fencing them out. By eliminating livestock use in the riparian area for up to ten years there would be no opportunity for soil compaction from livestock use within the exclosure.

3. Vegetation

The proposed fence line is along a dirt road which is already a disturbed area. Therefore it is anticipated that there would be little change in the vegetation condition; however over time a trail along the fence line would be created by livestock. The riparian vegetation along the river would be expected to improve at a slow rate due to the noxious weeds infestation along the South Fork Malheur River. Over time desired hydric riparian species would occupy the riparian area. The upland vegetation would also be expected to improve.

4. Visual Resources

The fence would be a linear feature appearing on the landscape, but this would be within the VRM Class IV objective. Improvement in riparian and upland plant communities would be expected from fencing and exclusion of livestock which would improve visual resources.

5. Wildlife

Habitat for wildlife species would improve with expected increase in hydric species and the expansion of the riparian community, with the associated increases in cover, forage and diversity of habitat.

6. Fisheries

The habitat may improve with increased riparian vegetation, especially woody vegetation which may provide shading of the stream, along with the creation of undercut banks. All of which may provide cooler summer water temperatures and able to better dissipate the energy of the spring runoffs.

B. No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative the fence would not be constructed across BLM land.

1. Threatened, Endangered, Candidate and Sensitive Species

Late brood-rearing habitat for sage-grouse would not be improved because the riparian community within the project area would not be allowed to expand.

2. Migratory Birds

The number of migratory bird species may not increase due to the riparian community not improving.

3. Noxious Weeds

Under the no action there would be no change in livestock grazing which has resulted in poor condition riparian plant communities. These plant communities are highly susceptible to noxious weed invasion.

4. Water Quality (surface/ground)

Water quality would remain the same within the project area.

5. Wetlands and Riparian Zones

If the no action alternative is selected the current livestock management would occur along the river and therefore the riparian conditions would not be expected to improve within the project area.

Noncritical Elements

1. Range Management/Livestock

There would be no increase or decrease in active permitted AUMs due to the public land portion of the riparian pasture would be approximately 2.5 acres.

2. Soils

Livestock management would be unchanged in the riparian area causing stream bank trampling and erosion of the soil.

3. Vegetation

It is anticipated that there would be little change in the vegetation condition. Over time desired hydric riparian species would not occupy the riparian area.

4. Visual Resources

Under the no action there would be no change to visual resources.

5. Wildlife

Habitat for wildlife species would remain the same with no expected improvement.

7. Fisheries

The habitat would not improve as there would be no expected increase in riparian vegetation.

None of the beneficial impacts listed above would be realized under the No Action Alternative. The permittee would continue to graze livestock during the summer, therefore allowing the conditions along the South Fork Malheur River in the South Pasture to remain poor.

C. Cumulative Impacts

There are approximately 18 miles of fence within the Coleman Creek Allotment. The additional 2 miles of fence which would result in cumulative impacts to the above critical and noncritical elements are considered to be minimal. Overall, the direct impact of improving the riparian condition in the South Pasture of Coleman Creek Allotment is considered to be greater than not constructing the fence.

CHAPTER V: CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. List of Preparers

Jim Buchanan, Supervisor Natural Resource Specialist
Gary Foulkes, District Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Terri Geisler, Minerals Specialist
Eric Haakenson, Lead Preparer, Livestock/Range Management, Vegetation
Fred McDonald, Recreational Specialist
Skip Renchler, Reality Specialist
Lesley Richman, Weed Coordinator
Jeff Rose, Fire Ecologist
Fred Taylor, Wildlife Biologist
Nora Taylor, Lead Rangeland Management Specialist, District Botanist
Scott Thomas, Archaeologist
Michael Weston, Watershed Specialist

B. Persons, Groups or Agencies Consulted

Ed Ramsay, Permittee