USDI, Bureau of Land Management
Andrews Resource Area, Burns District
Hines, OR 97738

Final Decision Record/Finding of No Significant Impact for Stonehouse Prescribed Burns and Juniper Cutting Environmental Assessment EA OR-026-99-47

DECISION: Having considered a full range of alternatives and associated impacts, it is my final decision to implement the prescribed burns, juniper cuts, and associated rest portion of the Proposed Action of the Stonehouse Allotment Management Plan (AMP) and Environmental Assessment (EA OR-026-99-47). The Proposed Action is to reintroduce the natural function of fire into vegetative communities of northeastern Steens Mountain within the Stonehouse Allotment as described in the EA. Specifically, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will prescribe burn in the fall of 2001 (if climatic and plant community conditions allow) approximately 35 percent of the allotment (3,600 acres). In mountain big sagebrush-bunchgrass plant communities the burn objective is to achieve a landscape mosaic of between 40 to 55 percent of these communities actually burned. To ensure diversity of habitat and adequate cover for dependent wildlife species in wetland meadows, the burn objective is a landscape mosaic of 40 percent or less of these communities within the treatment area actually burned. There are approximately 130 acres of aspen stands which will require cutting of juniper with chain saws to enable the reintroduction of fire into the stands. The objective for prescribed burning of these stands is to burn the entire stands to stimulate maximum aspen regeneration through suckering and to kill 95 percent or greater of the western juniper within the stands. To achieve these objectives, juniper cutting will be completed 2 months or more prior to the burn. Following burning the remainder of the live juniper within these aspen stands will be cut to allow full release of the aspen clone. Temporary net galvanized fencing 8 feet in height would be constructed around these stands to prevent browsing damage by livestock, deer, elk, and antelope. These fences will be removed when median height of aspen regeneration reaches 7 feet (when the active growth point of the main stem is above the height of grazing animals). It is estimated these fences would be in place from 2 to 5 years.

The reintroduction of fire will require 3 years of rest from livestock grazing, including 1-year preburn to ensure adequate fine fuels, and 2 years following the burn to ensure plant community development.

This action is in conformance with the objectives and land use plan allocations in the 1982 Andrews Management Framework Plan (MFP) and the 1983 Andrews Grazing Management Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Proposed Action is in conformance with objectives and would help to achieve standards for rangeland health identified August 12, 1997, in Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Management for Public Land Administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the States of Oregon and Washington. The Proposed Action is also in conformance with H.R.4828 (Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000).

Rationale for Decision: I have selected the Proposed Action described above because it will accomplish the objectives outlined in the EA and as described as follows:

1. Create a mosaic of plant communities and seral stages with tree, shrub, and herbaceous components resulting in a more diverse landscape with increased structural, biological, and habitat diversity.

2. Restore aspen and remnant aspen plant communities. Reestablish these plant communities to their historical significance on the landscape.

3. Reestablish mountain big sagebrush-bunchgrass communities through the reintroduction of fire where western juniper is currently in transition to a fully developed juniper woodlands. In decadent mountain sagebrush communities increase herbaceous species (grasses and forbs) by creating a mosaic of burned and unburned communities. Approximately 40 to 55 percent of these communities would be burned on a landscape scale.

4. Improve the functionality of wetland meadows by increasing hydric herbaceous species cover.

5. Enhance and protect the integrity of watershed function, improve watershed stability, and decrease accelerating erosion by reestablishing diverse plant communities. Increase vegetation cover, litter, and reduce the amount of exposed soil.

6. Improve and/or maintain aspen, remnant aspen, mountain big sagebrush-bunchgrass, riparian, and wet meadow communities to create diverse habitat for wildlife species. Create and maintain a dynamic mosaic of seral stages that will meet the forage and cover requirements for bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer, antelope, sage grouse, neotropical birds, raptors, other mammals, amphibians, and reptiles.

7. Maintain or improve water quality toward meeting the State of Oregon water quality standards.

8. Enhance scenic quality through the reintroduction of fire by restoring aspen stands, wet meadows, and all upland plant communities creating a more diverse landscape.

The alternative to the Proposed Action that was analyzed in the EA was a No Action Alternative, which is to maintain the current situation. This was not selected because without the reintroduction of the natural function of fire in these fire-dependant plant communities ecological function is changing. These plant community changes are negatively impacting watershed functionality and the ecological processes of this landscape. The plant community changes described throughout the Environmental Consequences section of this alternative would also result in wildlife habitat decline.

The BLM has successfully completed prescribed burns in similar ecological sites on Steens Mountain and attained the landscape objectives described for this Proposed Action.
Cultural inventories have been completed and it has been determined the proposed prescribed burns and juniper cuts will have no impact on these resources. A Threatened and Endangered and Special Status plant species survey will be completed before implementation. Rangeland monitoring of preburn plant community attributes has been initiated. Rangeland monitoring will measure plant community changes resulting from prescribed burns. Use supervision monitoring will ensure the 3 years of rest from livestock use is provided.

To the best of my knowledge all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm has been adopted. This Decision will be effective on April 6, 2001.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the analysis of the potential environmental impacts contained in the EA and all other available information, I have determined that the proposal and alternatives analyzed do not constitute a major Federal action that would adversely impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, I have determined a Finding of No Significant Impact and that an EIS is unnecessary and will not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Beneficial, adverse, direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts discussed in the EA have been disclosed. Analysis indicated no significant impacts on society as a whole, the affected region, the affected interests, or the locality. The physical and biological effects are limited to the Burns District, Andrews Resource Area and adjacent land. See the attached EA, Pages 14-30.

2. Public health and safety would not be adversely impacted. There are no known or anticipated concerns with project waste or hazardous materials. See the attached EA, Page 9.

3. There would be no adverse impacts to prime or unique farmlands, known paleontological resources on public land within the area, wetlands, floodplains, areas with unique characteristics, ecologically critical areas or designated Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. Floodplains, wetlands, riparian habitat, and water quality would be protected and enhanced. See the attached EA, Pages 9 and 14-30.

4. Air quality would be affected during the actual burn; however, as explained in the EA, Parts Per Million (PPM) of particulate matter would be under acceptable levels. This, added to the fact that prevailing wind patterns are away from population centers, would mean there would be little to no detrimental impacts.

5. There are no highly controversial effects on the environment.

6. There are no effects that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk. Sufficient information on risk is available based on information in the EA and other past actions of a similar nature. See attached EA, Pages 14-30.

7. This alternative does not set a precedent for other projects that may be implemented in the future to meet the goals and objectives of adopted Federal, State or local natural resource-related plans, policies or programs. It does not preclude consideration or adoption of various alternatives in the future RMP and the Steens Mountain management plan.

8. No cumulative impacts related to other actions that would have a significant adverse impact were identified or are anticipated. See the attached EA, Pages 20, 29, and 30.

9. Based on previous and ongoing cultural surveys, and through mitigation or mitigation by avoidance, no adverse impacts to cultural resources were identified or anticipated. There are no known American Indian religious concerns or persons or groups who might be disproportionately and adversely affected as anticipated by the Environmental Justice policy. See attached EA, Pages 5, 9, 14, and 20. Also, the staff report by Brian McCabe, Archaeologist, was reviewed

10. No adverse impacts were identified to any threatened or endangered species or their habitat that was determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act. See attached EA and attached responses to comments from interested publics, Responses 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 21.

11. The natural function of fire would be reintroduced to create a mosaic of plant communities and seral stages resulting in a more diverse landscape, increasing structural, biological, habitat diversity and restoring functionality of the ecological processes. See attached EA, Pages 21-30.

12. The Proposed Action would enhance and protect the integrity of watershed function, improve watershed stability, decreasing the amount of bare ground and increasing vegetative cover and litter. See attached EA, Pages 26-30.

13. The health and functionality of wet meadows would be restored. See the attached EA, Pages 23 and 28-30.

14. Aspen and remnant aspen plant communities would be restored and reestablished to their historical significance on the landscape. See attached EA, Page 27.

15. The natural function of fire will improve the ecological values and enhance naturalness within the Wilderness Study Areas. See attached EA, Page 24.

16. This Proposed Action is in compliance with relevant Federal, State, and local laws, regulations, and requirements for the protection of the environment.

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and Form 1842-1. If an appeal is submitted, your notice of appeal must be filed in the Burns District Office, HC 74-12533 Hwy 20 West, Hines, Oregon 97738 by April 6, 2001. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.

If you wish to file a petition, pursuant to regulation 43 CFR 4.21, for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, the petition for stay must accompany your notice of appeal. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate office of the solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

1. The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied,

2. The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits,

3. The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and

4. Whether or not the public interest favors granting the stay.

Miles R. Brown	February 27, 2001
Andrews Resource Area Field Manager	Date