

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

EA Number: 056-01-016
Project: Sontag Fence
Project Number: 73-7213
Prineville District
Bureau of Land Management

I. Purpose and Need

The grazing permittee for the Houghton Allotment (#5234) has offered to construct a division fence within the Sontag Pasture of this allotment. A map showing the location of this project is located in Appendix A.

The purposes of this project would be to:

- Contribute toward accelerated improvement of one section of Bear Creek and of the adjacent uplands
- Improve livestock nutrition and forage production

The project would be responsive toward meeting the following needs:

- Meeting Brothers/LaPine Resource Management Plan (RMP) goals improving ecological/watershed and sage grouse habitat conditions; and increasing livestock forage availability (RMP, p.78)
- Accomplishment of the 7 miles of fence construction prescribed by the RMP (RMP, p. 81)
- Meeting desired rangeland health and functioning goals specified in the “Standards for Rangeland health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing management for Public Lands Administered by the Bureau of Land Management in the States of Oregon and Washington” (hereinafter referred to as the “S &G’s”)

The proposed project would be consistent with both the RMP and the S&G’s. Both of these documents are available for review at the Prineville District, BLM office located at 3050 NE Third Street, Prineville, Oregon.

II. Proposed Action

The proposed action is described under Alternative C (para IV) below.

III. Description of the Existing Environment

The project corridor includes upland shrub/bunchgrass sites, often with post-settlement juniper occupation. Monitoring in this area in 1997 revealed that in sites not dominated by juniper, understory

vegetation was apparently not yet at potential, but was apparently in an improving trend. In juniper sites, inferior vegetation conditions were apparent, as were downward trends.

The area is visited by a broad range of wildlife species. Habitats of primary concern include the following:

- Crucial Deer Winter Range (RMP, p. 95)
- Designated, Federally-listed species habitats (for Northern Bald Eagle, Canada Lynx, and Western Sage Grouse)

The Bear Creek (County) Road is frequented throughout the year by public land visitors. The project area is not visible from this road. There are currently no roads in proposed project corridor.

A number of noxious weed species (primarily knapweed) are present in the Bear Creek watershed, but are currently absent from the proposed project corridor.

The Sontag Pasture is normally grazed by livestock under a short-duration system (two to three week period) in early to mid-spring. The primary rationale behind this system is to provide for full regrowth of upland and riparian plants in the Bear Creek corridor prior to summer's end, so that full plant biomass is available to capture water and sediments from thunderstorm and other runoff events.

IV. Alternatives

A. Denial of Offer, No Actions

The permittee would not be granted authorization to install these improvements, nor would the BLM initiate any structural development.

B. Denial of Offer, Frequent Riding and Herding

The proposed fence would not be constructed. This alternative would involve frequent riding and livestock moving during the period that stock were present within the pasture. The purpose of this effort would be to encourage livestock to use areas where forage utilization is low or absent.

C. Fence Construction (Proposed Action)

This would lead to the construction of 1.2 miles of fence - which would subdivide the Sontag Pasture into two separate (North and South) management units. Post-settlement (but not old growth) juniper trees that interfered with fence installation would be hand felled for an average width of about 10 feet along the corridor route. The fence would be constructed within this corridor, and be of a 3-wire, barbless wire design, except in predicted high-livestock pressure areas, where 4-strand and/or barbed wire would be used. Gates would be installed as required to facilitate livestock movement. "Please Close the Gate" signs would be installed at all gate sites.

V. Environmental Impacts

Alternative C would lead to disturbance of the top two inches of the soil surface in fence construction areas. No new soil disturbance would result from the other alternatives.

Alternative C would lead to post-settlement juniper being removed within the fence line corridor. Although such removal would not be visible from the Bear Creek County Road, local visual attributes would be altered. Such juniper removal would improve understory vegetation and total soil cover along this corridor. No such effects would result from the other alternatives.

Livestock distribution and associated grazing patterns would be improved most under Alternative C. This alternative best captures opportunities for shorter-duration (10-14 day), more intensive grazing. Such kinds of grazing would accelerate wildlife/livestock forage quality/quantity improvement, as well as further contribute toward the meeting of project, RMP, and S & G soil/vegetation-related goals and objectives. Alternative A or B implementation would provide for improvement in non-juniper dominated stands at current rates.

Short-term implementation monetary costs would be least under Alternative A, followed by B, then C. Long-term management costs would be most under Alternative B, followed by C, then A.

Alternative C fences would form a possible barrier to wildlife movement. Though no reports of wildlife death or injury (from existing division fence encounters) reports have been received for this area, the proposed fence would present these risks. These risks would not accrue from Alternative A or B implementation.

As shown in Appendix B, Alternative C implementation would not effect the Northern Bald Eagle; might effect but would not likely effect Canada lynx; and might impact Western Sage Grouse individuals or habitat.

Because of soil/vegetation disturbance associated with Alternative C, it would increase (above current levels) the risks for noxious weed introduction and/or spread. Alternative B risks would be slightly less. No increased risks for this would result from Alternative A implementation.

No effects to the following would be expected: Air quality; Areas of Critical Environmental Concern; cultural resources, prime/unique farmlands; floodplains, paleontological resources; environmental justice; Native American religious concerns; Threatened or Endangered plants; generation of solid/hazardous wastes; water quality; Wild and Scenic Rivers; or Wilderness/Wilderness Study Areas.

VI. Mitigation Measures

Minimal fence line clearing of trees would be done by hand; no heavy equipment would be used. No trees (except post-settlement western juniper) would be felled. No shrubs would be removed from the fence line. Green fence posts would be used to blend the fence in with the local landscape. The tops of fence posts would be no greater than 4 feet in height. Bottom fence wires would be set at 18" above ground level, and top wires at 39" to minimize obstacles to big game movement. No new roads or

vehicle trails would be constructed here.

No mechanized fence building operations would be permitted during the crucial deer winter range period (December 15-April 15).

Vehicles planned for project use would be checked for noxious weed material, and any such material removed prior to entering the area. Areas disturbed by project activities would be monitored for noxious weeds. If any such weeds were found, they would be reported to the cognizant BLM weed specialist, and placed on a schedule for control work.

No land- or vegetation-disturbing activities would begin until necessary clearances were developed by BLM heritage resource and botanical staffs.

If any new heritage resources were unearthed during the course of this project, work would be halted until such time as project resumption was approved by the cognizant BLM Heritage Resource Specialist.

VII. Residual Impacts

None of the alternatives would have any direct, indirect or cumulative impacts on the environment after application of the above stated mitigation measures.

VIII. Coordination and Consultation

A. People and Agencies Consulted

Coordination was performed with the grazing permittee for the Haughton Allotment.

B. Preparers

This document was prepared by the Rangeland Management Specialist assigned to this allotment. During the development of this EA, he consulted with Visuals, Recreation, Wilderness, Soil/Watershed, Archaeology, Wildlife, Forestry, Noxious Weed, and Rangeland Management and other specialists employed at the Prineville District of the Bureau of Land Management.

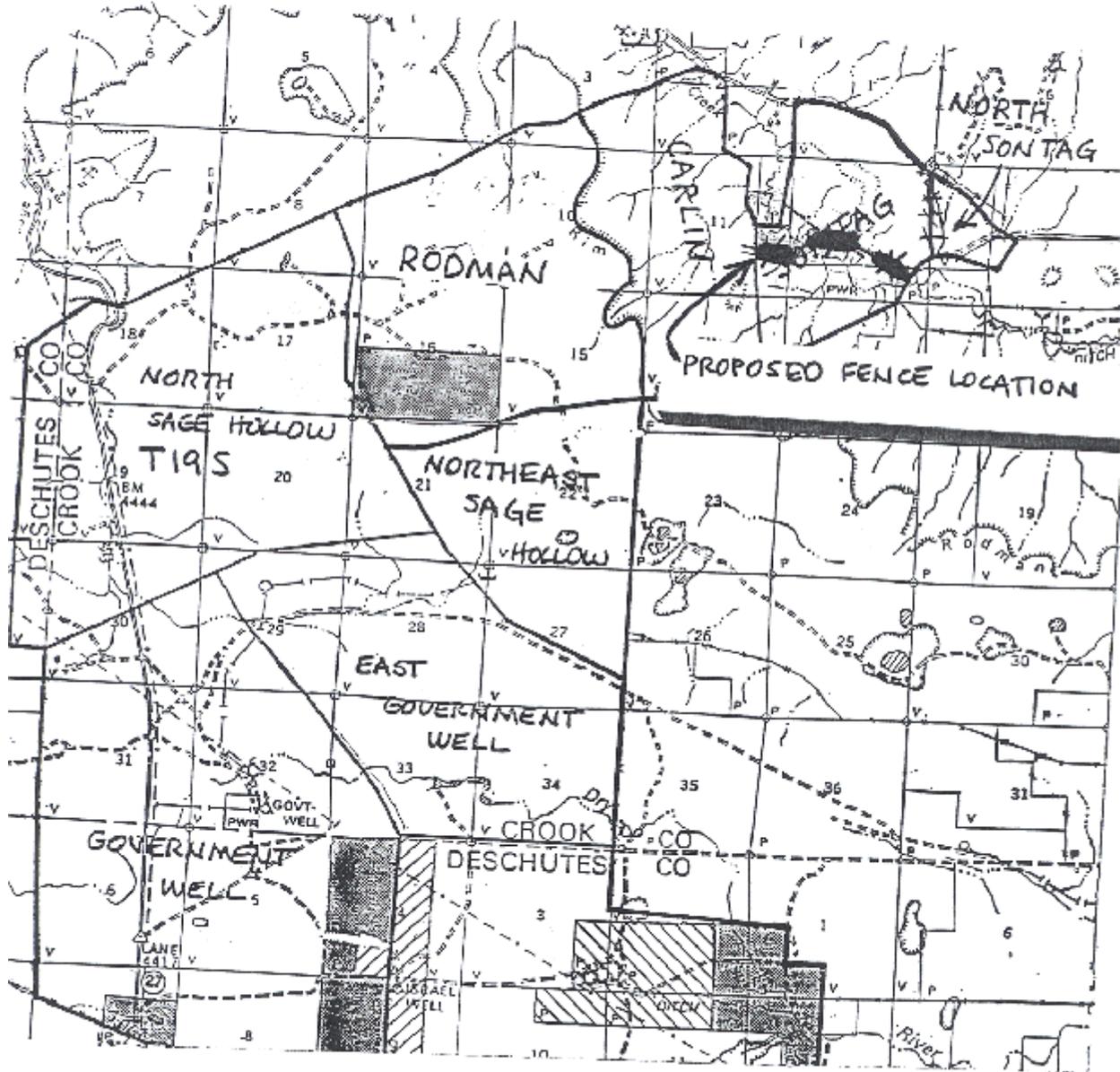
/s/ Danny L. Tippy
Environmental Coordinator

01/16/01
Date

Appendix A: Project Area Map

SONTAG FENCE
(PROPOSED)

--- PROPOSED FENCE LOCATION



R17E

APPENDIX A