United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Baker Field Office
3165 10th Street
Baker City, Oregon 97814
http://www.or.blm.gov/Vale/

IN REPLY REFER TO:
5700/1790

July 7, 2003

Dear Concerned Citizen:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Baker Field Office of the Vale District, is planning fuel reduction activities in the Burnt River area (see enclosed map). This letter is to inform you of these proposals to treat fuels within portions of the Burnt River Geographic Unit (GU). Actions considered are expected to contribute towards resolving fuel issues identified in the Burnt River GU.

This proposal is the initial phase of a larger assessment that will analyze hazardous fuels, forest and rangeland health, wildlife, and riparian concerns within the north ½ of the Burnt River GU. These preliminary fuel reduction proposals are being initiated now in order to take advantage of funding and begin the process of reducing fuels and the associated chance of catastrophic wildfire. Additional range and forest inventory and assessment work in the GU is planned for later this field season. More comprehensive issues and activities will be addressed after this assessment is completed.

We are currently gathering public input to identify issues and concerns related to the fuels reduction activities. During the summer of 2003 we will prepare an environmental analysis, with the goal of a completed document by the fall of 2003. You will be notified in a second letter when we are asking for comments for the larger proposal.

Project Area Description

The project proposal area is located on BLM administered lands located in the north ½ of the Burnt River GU described in the Baker RMP. The project area is surrounded by private lands to the north and east with the Wallowa Whitman National Forest on the west boundary. The area consists of juniper woodlands, rangelands, and scattered blocks of coniferous forest of approximately 2500 acres which are dominated by ponderosa pine on southerly aspects and mixed conifer stands of ponderosa pine, western larch, white fir, and Douglas-fir on northerly aspects.

Purpose and Need for the Action

The purpose of the project primarily is to reduce fuel loads within the coniferous forested stands that currently impose a high risk of stand replacement fire.

The area is part of the Blue Mountains and is reflective of the warm dry forest potential vegetation group, described in Chapter 2, pg. 63-75 of the Eastside Draft Environmental Impact Statement dated May 1997, where frequent low intensity fires once played an intricate role in the evolution and maintenance of these ecosystems. Recent studies (Historical Fire Regimes of four Sites in the Blue Mountains of Oregon by Agee 1996) classified these stands as a Natural Fire Regime 1 with an average Fire Return interval of every 15 years. The study suggests that the fire return interval may have been much shorter as these low severity fires may not of always scarred the trees. These frequent low-severity fires resulted in open park like settings where large woody debris was minimal and grass was dominant in the understory.

Fire recurrence in the Blue Mountains declined abruptly after the late 1800's and was concurrent with a dramatic increase in the number of sheep and cattle grazing (Irwin et. al. 1994). Modern studies and tree-ring reconstructions have shown that grazing has impacted fire regimes by reducing fine fuels (Touchan et al. 1993). Fire suppression began to increase in the 1950's which greatly contributed to the decline of fire and contributed to the dramatic increase in fuels accumulations and stocking levels over the past 50 years. Numerous fire scars are evident throughout the area and supports the theory that this area was, and continues to be, a high frequency fire area. Recent Fire history in the area includes the 1,960 acre Dark Canyon Fire (1986), 2,500 acre Coronet Fire (1986), and 10,240 acre Dooley Mountain Fire (1989) all of which were high severity, stand replacement fires.

The project area is reflective of many sites within the Pacific Northwest where overstocked stands, ladder fuels, and the buildup of ground fuels have set the stage for catastrophic stand replacement fires. Topography is rugged with slopes often exceeding 50% making access and firefighting difficult. This area is considered one of the highest fire suppression priorities on the Vale District and actions rely heavily on aerial resources making suppression a costly.

Existing condition:
Fuel Inventories of the timbered stands completed in the fall of 2002 have determined that these sites are reflective of Condition Classes 2 and 3 where several fire disturbance cycles have been missed and may require a mechanical entry prior to the application of prescribed fire. Dead fuels loadings often exceed 20 tons per acre and stocking levels are often greater than 300 stems per acre. The overstocked stands also contribute to the existing fire hazard by adding ladder fuels in the understory. Ladder fuels contribute to the transition from a ground fire to a crown fire in the canopy. These conditions make suppression efforts difficult, costly, and often result in high a severity stand replacement fire. The desired condition would be to reduce the existing ground fuel loadings and stems per acre down to acceptable levels.

Preliminary Proposed Action

A combination of mechanical and prescribed fire activities are recommended to reduce the existing fuel conditions down to desired levels. Thinning of understory trees of less than 6" in dbh would be the objective where stems exceed 300 stems per acre and ground fuel loadings are too high to allow a first

entry prescribed burn. Thinning slash would be piled mechanically or by hand. Piles would be burned during late fall or winter. After the first mechanical entry a second entry broadcast underburn would be recommended the following spring or fall to further reduce existing ground fuel loadings. In stands where stems are less than 300 stems per acre and ground fuel levels are moderate a first entry broadcast underburn would be recommended. The primary objective of the burn would be to reduce ground fuel levels down to desired condition, thin ladder fuels, and reintroduce the natural role of fire in these fire dependant ecosystems.

Your Comments and Concerns

At this time, the Burnt River Fuels Treatment Project is being examined and analyzed so as to delineate those management actions that would be most appropriate for and beneficial to all components of the Project Area ecosystems. The overall goal of the analysis is to address fire hazards in a way that will result in the improved health of these ecosystems.

Comments, including names and addresses of respondents, will be available for public review at the identified administrative office during regular business hours (8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m), Monday through Friday, except holidays, and may be published as a part of the analysis document or other related documents. Individual respondents may request confidentiality.

If you wish to withhold your name or street address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your written comment. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law.

All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

For us to consider your comments in the interdisciplinary team discussions, we will need to receive your comments by August 8, 2003. The BLM values public input into the planning process because the differing perspectives of members of the public may help in the identification of issues and concerns that we may have overlooked. I welcome your comments, suggestions, ideas and concerns regarding this proposal. Please send your written feedback to our Team Lead, Randy Eyre, at the above address. If you have any additional questions, contact Mr. Eyre by phone at (541) 473-6279.

Sincerely,

s/Penelope Dunn Woods

Penelope Dunn Woods
Field Manager
Enclosure: map