

STOCKADE BUTTE TEMPORARY ELECTRIC FENCE
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA NO. OR-030-99-020

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

The McEwen Allotment (#0603) is located approximately 25 miles south of Juntura, Oregon. The exact location of the proposed project is within the Stockade Mountain Pasture of McEwen Allotment (see Map). Bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), bottlebrush squirreltail (*Sitanion hystrix*), Sandberg's bluegrass (*Poa sandbergii*), cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata ssp. wyomingensis*), low sagebrush (*Artemisia arbuscula*), and Western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) dominate the proposed project site. A small series of butte formations rise up to 5,780 feet in elevation to the west. A perennial stream and two track road separate the butte series from a low rise to the east. Soils are mostly shallow with areas dominated by large boulder fields. The diverse terrain supports several wildlife species including elk, deer, pronghorn, and sage grouse which attracts hunters and campers during the summer and fall seasons.

A wildfire started on Stockade Butte on July 29, 1998 south of the two track road (Township 26 south, Range 38 east, Section 34). The entire butte, excluding an island of Western juniper approximately 80 acres in size, burned (see Yearly Narrative of the McEwen Allotment file for more information). The entire burn area is on public land.

B. Purpose and Need of Proposed Project

The purpose of the temporary electric fence is to exclude cattle use from the burned area for at least two growing seasons or until the area has recovered sufficiently to allow grazing. The vegetation within the burn area needs sufficient rest to aid in adequate post-disturbance recovery.

C. Consistency with Land Use Plans

Actions considered in this environmental assessment (EA) are consistent with decisions in the Southern Malheur Management Framework Plan and the accompanying Record of Decision.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to build approximately 5.5 miles of temporary electric fence (see MAP) adjacent to the two-track road on the north and east boundary of Stockade Butte burn area. The two-track road was used as a fire break during suppression activities.

During the 1999 season when the proposed project would be built, cattle will be pushed into the

pasture several miles from the north. It is expected that the post-wildfire growth will attract use. The burned area which is recovering through the natural regeneration process requires intensive management. A policy for required livestock grazing management practices following wildfire was identified in the BLM Manual Handbook H-1743-1 Emergency Fire Rehabilitation. The handbook specifies the affected area “must be closed to grazing for at least two growing season.” The growing season was defined as beginning in early April and extending through seed shatter of all key grasses. Livestock grazing may be authorized at any other time during the two-year recovery period as long as resource values are fully protected and actions are consistent with land use plans and management.

The permittee would be responsible for all fence maintenance. Maintenance responsibilities would include lowering of the single aircraft wire while cattle are not present in the area.

The fence would meet standard design features (see Attachment A) of an electric, one strand wire-type fence. Materials would be supplied by BLM. The operator would construct the temporary electric fence. BLM would remove the fence once the decision has been made that the burn area has recovered adequately. Disturbance to the surrounding area would be limited to the extent necessary to construct the fence. The construction site would be cleared of all residual materials when completed.

B. Determent Alternative

The fence would not be constructed and a rider would work to exclude cattle from the burn area during the scheduled period of use in the pasture.

C. Livestock Exclusion Alternative

Livestock would be excluded from using the entire pasture for a minimum of two growing seasons or until adequate recovery of the burn area has been achieved. Stocking rates and growing schedules would be modified in order to compensate for loss of AUMs.

D. No Action Alternative

Within this no action alternative the cattle would not be excluded from the burn area.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

ACEC/RNA- The proposed action lies outside of the existing Stockade Mountain Area of Critical Environmental Concerns/Research Natural Areas ACEC/RNA of 653 acres. The Stockade Mountain ACEC/RNA was designated in the Northern Malheur Management Framework Plan to protect a representative big sagebrush/ bluebunch wheatgrass vegetative community with a scattering overstory of Western juniper. The Draft Southeast Oregon Resource Management Plan (SEORMP) has proposed an increase in the size of the Stockade Mountain ACEC/RNA to 1,118 acres in the preferred alternative (Alternative C, p.3-116, 131) (see Map). The proposed project site would not be within the proposed Stockade Mountain ACEC/RNA (see

Map).

Vegetation- Bluebunch wheatgrass, bottlebrush squirreltail, Sandberg's bluegrass, Wyoming big sagebrush, low sagebrush, Western juniper, and cheatgrass are within the proposed project site. The trend for the Stockade pasture is static to upward. Cheatgrass has not taken a major ecological role in the area, but juniper encroachment has increased.

Livestock Grazing- The burn area contains approximately 1,860 acres (all public). Livestock would be excluded from approximately 5,590 public acres (or 3.2% of the Stockade Mountain Pasture) with the development of the proposed temporary electric fence. The preference in the allotment has been authorized to a single operator. Grazing occurs after seed ripe in the Stockade pasture every year. Livestock grazing within the proposed project site has been light in the past.

Recreation and Visual Resources- The proposed project is located in an area designated as a Visual Resource Management Class IV. Hunters use the area during elk, deer, pronghorn and sage grouse season. Widespread undeveloped camp sites are common where roads access Western juniper stands.

Wildlife- The area supports local elk, deer, pronghorn, and sage grouse populations. The vast majority of the riparian wildlife habitat runs through private holdings.

Cultural Resources- Cultural resource inventories have been limited in this area. Both prehistoric and historic sites are known to exist within the area surrounding Stockade Buttes.

T & E Species- Special status plant species are not present within the proposed project site. The ferruginous hawk, loggerhead shrike and sage grouse are special status animal species reported within the area. Threatened and endangered plant and animal species do not occur within the area.

Other Mandatory Elements-

<u>Critical Elements of the Human Environment</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Air Quality		X
Farmlands, Prime & Unique		X
Floodplains		X
Native American Religious Concerns		X
Wastes, Hazardous/Solid		X
Wetlands/Riparian Zones		X
Wild & Scenic Rivers		X
Wilderness		X

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Proposed Action

ACEC/RNA- The proposed project would not impact important and relevant values of the potential addition to the existing ACEC/RNA.

Vegetation- The impact of excluding livestock from the burn area is expected to increase the success of key species recovery following fire. Exclusion will allow recovery of vigor and health of existing vegetation.

Livestock Grazing- Minimal impacts are expected for the livestock. The proposed action would not result in a reduction in authorized grazing use. The current public grazing capacity for the McEwen Allotment is 7,527 AUMs or 7.9 acres per AUM (59,575 public acres / 7,527 AUMs) . The active AUMs for the allotment are 6,011 AUMs. Approximately 3.2% or 5,590 public acres of the Stockade Mountain Pasture would be excluded from livestock grazing with the development of the proposed electric fence. The current public grazing capacity for the Stockade pasture is 2,283 AUMs (18,036 public acres / 7.9 acres per AUM). In other words, 708 AUMs of the current public grazing capacity would be excluded from livestock use within the Stockade Mountain Pasture. A remaining 1,575 AUMs of public grazing capacity in the Stockade Mountain Pasture would be adequate to support the current operators preference (6,011 AUMS).

The current grazing system would not be modified due to this fire and would be monitored as outlined in the AMP. Maximum allowable utilization levels would not exceed 50 percent. Additional use may be limited beyond July 2000 should monitoring data indicate health and vigor of herbaceous species have not been restored. Livestock management responsibilities of operators in both allotments would be increased during the grazing seasons of 1999 and 2000 to ensure temporary fences are functional and livestock are managed so as not to impair recovery of health to public land vegetation resources.

Recreation and Visual Resources- The temporary electric fence construction would be within the limits of VRM Class IV which state “The objective of Class IV is to provide for management activities that require major modification of the landscape” (SEORMP, p. 333). The temporary electric fence construction would not impact recreationists or access routes.

Wildlife- Impacts to wildlife would be minimal. Mitigation measures for wildlife ingress and egress in the burned area has been identified with the type of fence proposed for construction (see attachment A).

Cultural- Class I file search shows that no cultural resources have been located within one mile of this proposed project location. If cultural resources are located during construction, the fence alignment would be moved to avoid impacts.

T & E Species- Impacts to existing special status species are not anticipated.

B. Determent Alternative

ACEC/RNA- Impacts to ACEC/RNA areas within Stockade Mountain Pasture are not expected with this alternative.

Vegetation- The impacts to vegetation expected with this alternative include the retarding of the rate of recovery. It is not feasible for the operator to continually be present in the area during the 3^{1/2} month season of use.

Livestock Grazing- Significant financial and workload impacts for the operator are expected with this alternative.

Wildlife- The presence of riders on a long term basis may impact elk, pronghorn, deer and sage grouse by acting as an additional disturbance to their movement patterns.

Recreation and Visual Resources- The presence of riders may impact hunting and camping parties by disturbing their outdoor experience. Impacts to visual resources are not anticipated.

Cultural- The presence of a rider(s) are not expected to have any impacts to cultural resources.

T & E Species- Impacts to the existing special status species are not expected with the deterrent alternative.

C. Livestock Exclusion Alternative

ACEC/RNA- Impacts to ACEC/RNA resource values are not expected under this alternative.

Vegetation- Impacts to vegetation within the Stockade Mountain Pasture are not anticipated with the livestock exclusion alternative. Short term impacts are anticipated with heavier than normal livestock utilizations in the remaining pastures. An increase in stocking rates are expected to have short term and possibly long term negative impacts on vegetative resources in these other pastures.

Livestock Grazing- Impacts to livestock grazing are expected to be significant with this alternative. The livestock operators would be required to take a drastic cut in AUMs if they were excluded from using the Stockade Mountain Pasture. The Stockade Mountain Pasture accounts for 30 percent, or 1,803 AUMs, of the authorized 6,011 AUMs for the entire McEwen Allotment. In order to regain the loss of these AUMs the stocking numbers could be increased per pasture to better match calculated carrying capacities (Periods of use for these remaining pastures would remain as scheduled). At the present time, stocking numbers are well below the calculated carrying capacities.

The other option of regaining the AUM loss would be a significant modification of the grazing schedule for a minimum of two years. The remaining pastures would be grazed for longer periods of time to compensate for the 3 ½ month loss, but with less stocking numbers.

Wildlife- Impacts to wildlife resources are not expected in the Stockade Mountain Pasture with this alternative. However, wildlife resources are expected to endure some impacts to habitat conditions if livestock numbers are increased per remaining pasture. Impacts to wildlife could also be expected if livestock periods of use are increased as well.

Recreation and Visual Resources- Impacts to recreation and visual resources are expected to be much like that of wildlife impacts under the exclusion alternative. Impacts are not anticipated within the Stockade Mountain pasture. Impacts to the remaining pastures are anticipated.

Cultural- Impacts to cultural resources are not anticipated with the exclusion alternative.

T & E Species- Impacts to existing special status species in the area are not anticipated.

D. No Action Alternative

ACEC/RNA- Impacts to ACEC/RNA resource values are not expected under the no action alternative.

Vegetation- Impacts to vegetation are anticipated with the no action alternative. Impediment of vegetative recovery is anticipated without the exclusion of livestock from the burned area. Negative impacts are expected to include the possible invasion of noxious weed species.

Livestock Grazing- Short term impacts to the livestock operation are not expected with the no action alternative. The no action alternative would be expected to have some long term negative impacts to the livestock operation if the recovery of the vegetation is not allowed. The grazing capacity could decline with this alternative.

Wildlife- Short term and long term impacts to wildlife are anticipated to be similar to that of livestock grazing impacts.

Recreation and Visual Resources- Short term impacts to recreation and visual resource values are anticipated to be minimal with the no action alternative. Long term impacts could be significant if noxious weed species gained a foothold on the area due to insufficient recovery of the vegetation communities.

Cultural- Impacts to cultural values are expected to be minimal with the no action alternative.

T & E Species- Impacts to existing special status species, especially sage grouse, could be significant with inadequate recovery of the burned area.

V. PERSONS, ORGANIZATIONS CONSULTED

An environmental assessment (EA) notice will be published in the local paper for 15 days. Comments would be considered prior to making the decision as to what action would be employed. Oregon Natural Resource Council (ONRC) and Blue Mountain Native Forest Alliance were notified of the proposed action and sent copies of the Stockade Butte Electric Fence Environmental Assessment (OR-030-99-020). The permittee, McEwen Ranch L.L.C., was consulted for their input on the development of the alternatives. There are no interested public for the project area.

Malheur Field Office Staff

Project Lead:

Connie Jensen Rangeland Management Specialist

Reviewers:

Jean Findley	Botanist
Al Bammann	Wildlife Specialist
Diane Pritchard	Cultural Resources Specialist
Cynthia Tait	Fisheries Biologist
Bob Alward	Recreation Planner
Jon Freeman	Realty Specialist
Bill Holsheimer	Geologist
Shaney Rockefeller	Soil Scientist
Ron Rembowski	Rangeland Management Specialist
Steve Christensen	Rangeland Management Specialist
Randy Eyre	Rangeland Management Specialist/PE Coordinator

VII. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

On the basis of the information contained in the environmental assessment (EA) and all other information available, it is my determination that the proposed action is in conformance with the Southern Malheur MFP and Decision Record for the area, and does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

S/Roy Masinton
Malheur Field Office Manager

10/07/99
Date

VIII. DECISION RECORD

On the basis of the information provided in this EA (OR-030-99-020) and all other information available, it is my decision to implement the proposed action as described.

S/Roy Masinton
Malheur Field Office Manager

10/7/99
Date