

WRIGHTS POINT REPEATER SITE AND  
COMMUNICATION SITE  
MANAGEMENT PLAN

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

EA OR-025-01-04

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
BURNS DISTRICT OFFICE  
THREE RIVERS RESOURCE AREA  
28910 HWY 20 WEST  
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

The Three Rivers Resource Area of the Burns District, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes to develop a radio system repeater site (repeater site) and implement a communication site management plan (com-site plan) on Wrights Point. Wrights Point is located approximately 10 miles south of Burns, Oregon, in Harney County.

A. Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is to develop a repeater site on Wrights Point to facilitate reliable communication for an interagency dispatch system, be responsive to changes in existing facilities, and to reduce costs.

At its present location, the Burns Interagency Communication Center (BICC) cannot access all the repeaters that are necessary to provide full radio coverage for the local interagency dispatch center. Currently, BICC accesses several repeaters operated by other agencies through T-1 phone lines instead of radio signals. Use of these lines is unreliable and a major operational cost for the dispatch center.

Although demand and potential is low, development of a new site by BLM could result in additional communication proposals at the site by other entities. For this reason a com-site plan is also being developed concurrently with BLM's repeater proposal. The purpose of the com-site plan is to establish site management policies, development procedures, strategies, and standards to enable BLM to efficiently manage the site, protect resources, and limit interference and conflicts among communication users.

B. Conformance with Land Use Plans

This action is in conformance with the Three Rivers Resource Management Plan (RMP) (1992), LR 2.6, which states that applications for right-of-way will be processed in a timely manner, on a case-by-case basis, utilizing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, and is not in a right-of-way or land use permit exclusion or avoidance area as identified in the Three Rivers RMP. Preparation of the com-site plan is in conformance with the BLM Manual 2860. 1.1 I.A. and with the guidelines described in the BLM Manual Handbook, H2860-1.

This proposed action and alternatives are in compliance with known State, local and tribal plans and policies for the area.

## CHAPTER II: ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

### A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to construct a repeater site on a 100-foot by 100-foot site located on BLM land at Wrights Point (see attached Site Map, Site 1). Improvements to be constructed on the site include a building approximately 10 feet wide, 20 feet long, and 10 feet tall, and a 40-foot tall antenna tower. The site will be enclosed with a chain link fence. Materials with nonreflective earth-tone colors will be used to reduce the visual impact of the facility. Neither the tower nor the building would require exterior lighting except for a possible motion sensor security light. Any unoccupied land disturbed during construction will be seeded with crested wheatgrass. Electric power would be supplied to the site by three-quarter mile of overhead line from an existing line below Wrights Point to its base. Buried or surface-installed line would then be laid up the ridge to the proposed repeater site.

All development of electrical and communication facilities on public land would be in accordance with current codes, standards, and guidance including Suggested Practices for Raptor Protection on Powerlines, Raptor Research Foundation, 1981; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Guidance on the Siting, Construction, Operation and Decommissioning of Communications Towers, September 14, 2000; and, the Burns District Integrated Weed Management Program.

Access to the site would be all across BLM ownership. It would follow an existing road off State Highway 205 for about 200 feet. From that point a new low standard road would be required for about 500 feet to the proposed site. Actual construction of the new segment of road may not be necessary. Tracking to the site by construction and maintenance vehicles may be all that is necessary to establish the new road segment as the land is level and contains only low lying crested wheatgrass.

A Federal right-of-way reservation would be established to legally protect the repeater site from conflicting applications, uses, entries or disposals.

The communication site management plan would be implemented upon an affirmative decision on this proposal (see Appendix A). Future communication applicants could be permitted to install equipment and operate in accordance with the plan at the site following BLM review and approval, including additional NEPA review. Future development under the com-site management plan would be limited to 2.5 acres unless a new management plan is adopted specifying a larger area.

B. Action Alternative A - Site 2

Alternative A includes all provisions of the proposed action except the site would be at a different location on Wrights Point (see Site Map, Site 2). Two primary differences in development of Site 2 are proposed. Most, if not all of the power line installation, approximately one-quarter mile, would be buried or on the surface. Access directly to the site would be by 1.75 miles of existing two-track road routed along the top of Wrights Point. The first one-half mile of this road would require acquisition of an administrative easement for access.

C. Alternative B - No Action

No changes would be made to the way the Bums Interagency Communication Center (BICC) currently provides radio coverage to the agencies that are serviced by BICC. No communication site plan for Wrights Point would be implemented

### CHAPTER III: AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The proposed Site 1 is located in W.M., T. 24 S., R. 30 E., Section 35, W $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$  on top of a long prominent ridge known as Wrights Point in the Harney Basin. Site 2 is also on Wrights Point but about 2 miles further east in W.M., T. 24 S., R. 30 E., Section 33, NE $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$ . The land status at both sites is unreserved, unappropriated public land and Federal mineral estate administered by the BLM.

The following critical resources or issues are not known to exist within or adjacent to either of the sites or there would be no known effects to these resources by the proposed action or alternatives: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, adverse energy impacts, air quality, cultural heritage, environmental justice, prime or unique farmlands, hazardous materials, migratory birds, American Indian religious concerns, paleontology, Special Status plants or animals, wetland or riparian resources, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness, and Wilderness Study Areas.

A. Vegetation

The vegetation at both sites consists primarily of crested wheat seeding.

B. Noxious Weeds

With the exception of cheatgrass, no noxious or nonnative invasive species were found at either of the proposed sites.

C. Wildlife

Wildlife that can occasionally be found at these sites are jackrabbits and coyotes. Various birds and small mammals that are generally associated with the shrub/steppe plant communities also visit the sites being considered.

D. Visual Resources

The proposed sites are located in visual classification Zone 3, partial retention of landscape character. Wrights Point is a long ridge and prominent landmark in Harney Basin. State Highway 205 crosses Wrights Point within a few hundred feet of Site 1. There is also a rock pit, stockpile site, roads, and other humanmade features in the immediate vicinity of Site 1. The viewshed from the top of Wrights Point along Highway 205 includes the Steens Mountain and the Blitzen Valley to the south and the Harney Basin and the communities of Burns and Hines to the north.

E. Ownership/Rights-of-Way

Both sites are close to adjacent private land (see Site Map). A portion of the access to the Site 2 is across private land for which BLM currently has no formal legal easement. The landowner grants BLM permission to access the area on a casual basis for grazing administration and other occasional purposes. This private land is owned by Cheer Osborn.

F. Social

The BLM's existing communication facilities are located at locations that do not adequately communicate with all repeaters and communication links within the interagency communication zone.

There is a pullover area at a rock stockpile site southwest of Highway 205 on top of Wrights Point a few hundred yards south of Site 1. This pullover area is used primarily as a viewpoint of the Blitzen Valley and the Steens Mountain to the south. It is also used occasionally for partying, plinking, and other activities. Some vandalism has been reported in the area.

## CHAPTER IV: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Vegetation

Existing vegetation at either site would be destroyed in an area of less than one-quarter acre. Following construction, disturbed areas would be seeded with crested wheatgrass. It is estimated that within 2 years land not under the footprint of the communication structures and facilities would return to its previous productivity.

There would be no vegetative impacts under the no action alternative.

B. Noxious Weeds

Surface disturbance would increase the possibility of establishment of invasive nonnative plant species. Equipment wash down procedures would minimize that risk. Seeding with crested wheatgrass would prevent the establishment of invasive nonnative plant species.

The potential for noxious weed establishment under the no action alternative would be minimized under the no action alternative.

C. Wildlife

Some minor disturbance to other local species such as jackrabbits and coyotes may take place during construction and maintenance activities for either site. This disturbance would be localized and of short duration. All overhead power lines would be constructed so as to be raptor proof as required by Rural Electrification Service specifications.

There would be no impacts under the no action alternative.

D. Visual Resources

For either action alternative, the tower and building could be visible from most locations to the north in the Harney Basin. The sites would not be visible to viewers south of Wrights Point because the sites are located on the northern edge of the Point where the Point itself would screen most if not all of the facilities from this aspect. For this same reason a northbound traveler on Highway 205 would not be able to clearly see either site until he/she is on top of the Point. From any location visibility and noticeability would decrease with increased distance from the sites. Due to its proximity to Highway 205, Site 1 would be clearly visible to a southbound traveler along the highway's immediate approach to Wrights Point. However, other intrusions in the immediate vicinity of Site 1 such as rock pits, fences, and the highway already impact the visual quality of the site.

Neither site would be within the viewshed of Steens Mountain and the Blitzen Valley to the south as viewed from the top of Wrights Point on Highway 205. A traveler southbound on Highway 205 would be past both sites before these scenic attractions came into view. The viewshed of the Harney Basin to the north would be impacted by Site 1 which would momentarily be in the foreground to a northbound traveler on Highway 205.

Site 1 would require more overhead power line but it would be located in the Harney Basin below Wrights Point where these facilities are common. There would be no power poles or lines visible against the skyline on top of Wrights Point.

Due to the small size of the facility, existing intrusions, distance, and topography either site would not degrade the overall quality of the viewer's landscape. Each alternative would meet the visual quality objectives identified in the Three Rivers RMP.

There would be no new visual impacts under the no action alternative.

E. Ownership/Rights-of-Way

At Site 2 a large capitol investment such as a repeater site would be at risk without legal access to the site should the landowner or a new landowner decide to revoke the permissive access. Legal access is currently available at Site 1.

F. Social

Either site would improve the quality of communication links and the area of coverage, however, electronic testing determined that Site 2 would provide the best overall coverage. This would improve communication safety concerns for the public and agency personnel during fire fighting activities and search and rescue operations.

The no action alternative would not provide for the safest communication system. Unreliable communication in certain areas of the coverage area would continue to put the public and agency personnel at risk during times of fire fighting and search and rescue operations.

Site 1 being adjacent to Highway 205 may be more vulnerable to vandalism than Site 2, which is a more remote location where access could be more readily controlled. The converse could be true, because suspicious activities and vandalism are more observable and thus more preventable at Site 1 near Highway 205. Benton Rock Products, who operates the rock pit adjacent to Site 1, was the victim of vandalism to some of their vehicles and equipment. However, they indicated that this was an isolated incident and not an ongoing problem. They also suspected that the incident may have been a hostile act specifically targeting their business and not random vandalism. Discussions with a representative of CenturyTel, who operates a microwave site on private land immediately adjacent to Highway 205 about 5 miles south of Wrights Points, indicates they have had no problem with vandalism at their site.

## CHAPTER V: CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Two potential cumulative impacts were identified. The impact of the proposed structures in addition to any additional activities taking place in Harney Basin that could impact the areas visual quality. Based on the the design features of the proposal and the fact that very few additional activities are occurring in the Harney Basin, it was determined that there would be no negative cumulative impacts from the proposed action or any of the alternatives.

Secondly, in the future, additional antennas and facilities could be constructed if other communication providers are permitted by the BLM to operate at the site. Additional applications for communication are possible and could be considered, since the land is open to right-of-way uses and is not in a right-of-way avoidance or exclusion zone identified by the Three Rivers RMP. However, due to the low population density in Harney County and limited communication corridors passing through the area, demand for sites is relatively low.

There are only two authorized sites on public land in the Burns District which are isolated microwave link facilities operated by CenturyTel, a regional telephone company. Most of the communication uses serving the community of Burns/Hines and the Harney Basin is on State land at Burns Butte.

Based on these factors, a reasonably foreseeable future development scenario at Wrights Point would be two additional communication service providers in the next 20 to 30 years, assuming population and economic conditions in the area remain stable. At least one of these could be accommodated in the BLM facility without additional building or tower construction. With this in mind, one new building and tower could be anticipated within the foreseeable future. Any additional development would be within parameters established by the Wrights Point Com-Site Plan which limits tower height and building size, and potential impacts, to that similar to BLM's proposed facility. Since these facilities would share a common site and infrastructure such as power supply, the cumulative impacts, particularly to visual resources, would be slightly additional to that being proposed but not twice that of a single facility.

## CHAPTER VI: CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

### A. List of Preparers

Al Foulke, Telecommunication Specialist  
Gary Foulkes, Planning and Environmental Coordinator  
Terri Geisler, Geologist  
Rudy Hefter, Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist  
Holly LaChapelle, Team Leader, Land Law Examiner  
Brian McCabe, Archaeologist  
Fred McDonald, Natural Resource Specialist  
Skip Renschler, Realty Specialist  
Lesley Richman, Weed Coordinator  
Fred Taylor, Wildlife Biologist  
Nora Taylor, Botanist/Ecologist

### B. Persons, Groups, and Agencies Consulted

Judy Benton, Benton Rock Products  
Burns Paiute Tribe  
Buck Windom, CenturyTel  
Harney County Court  
Harney Electric Cooperative, Incorporated  
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Cheer Osborn, Landowner