

RIDDLE CREEK FENCE REALIGNMENT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
OR-025-04-030

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
28910 Hwy 20 West
Hines, Oregon 97738

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A. Background

On October 30, 2000, the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act (Steens Act) of 2000, Public Law 106-399 was signed into law. The Steens Act authorized a number of land exchanges between private landowners and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Many of the exchanges occurred in areas where fences were not located along property lines. One of the landowners in the Riddle Creek area (Map 1) has proposed fencing this newly-acquired land with the remainder of his private property. The terrain makes it difficult to place a fence along the ownership lines. To place the fence along topographical features, where it is practical to fence, would necessitate the inclusion of public land, which was included in the Riddle/Coyote Allotment prior to the land exchange. The removal of land within this allotment reduced available forage for the grazing permit. The allotment is managed in conjunction with the Riddle Creek Allotment. The fence realignment between the Smyth-Kiger Allotment and the Riddle Creek Allotment would balance the forage loss created by the exchange and improve management of the three allotments. This Environmental Assessment will analyze these issues.

B. Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to realign fences along a portion of Riddle Creek to enclose private land acquired during the Steens Act by Home Ranch, LLC, and to mitigate the loss of public land grazing within the Riddle /Coyote Allotment by removing existing fence and realigning new fence between the Riddle Mountain and Smyth-Kiger Allotments (Map 2). Riddle-Coyote and Riddle Mountain Allotments are permitted to the same operator and managed together. Realignment of this portion of fence would replace the forage lost to private ownership during the exchange and provide a water source not needed for the management of the Smyth-Kiger Allotment.

The action is needed to facilitate livestock management along Riddle Creek in a manner that would not cause livestock to become trapped in a fence corner and be forced into the Riddle Creek riparian area and to balance forage between use areas for the two ranches involved.

C. Conformance with Land Use Plans, Laws, Regulation and Policy

This action is in conformance with the Three Rivers Resource Management Plan (RMP) (1992). It is also in conformance with State, local, and tribal laws, regulations, and land use plans.

CHAPTER II: ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action involves the construction of new fences in two different locations, and the associated removal of adjacent fences. Location 1 is in the Riddle-Coyote Allotment in T. 30 S., R. 34 E., Section 24, NE¼. The fence would be approximately one-half mile long. This would require a 4-strand, barbed wire fence with 5½ foot steel posts due to livestock pressure to gain access to Riddle Creek. The bottom wire would be smooth. It would remove approximately 20 acres of BLM land from the Riddle Creek Allotment. Approximately three-quarter mile of fence would be removed at this location. Location of the second fence is in T. 30 S., R. 35 E., Section 30, NE¼. This fence would be approximately three-quarter mile in length. It would be a 3-strand, barbed wire fence with 5½ foot steel posts. It would shift approximately 140 acres from the Smyth-Kiger Allotment to the Riddle Mountain Allotment. Approximately one-half mile would be removed at this location (Map 2). All proposed fencing and fence removal has been agreed upon by both permittees and this will be encompassed in a cooperative agreement. A Special Status plant survey and cultural resources survey would be completed prior to any construction to assure avoidance of possible impacts. A cooperative agreement addressing the landowner and permittee responsibilities for fence construction and maintenance would be prepared upon affirmative final decision of this proposed action.

B. Alternative A - No Action

Home Ranch, LLC, would fence along surveyed private property lines to include all the land which was from the Steens land exchange and no fences would be removed or constructed on public land.

CHAPTER III: DESCRIPTION OF THE AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The following critical elements of the human environment are either not known to be present or not known to be impacted by the proposed action or the alternatives: Floodplains, Air Quality, Prime or Unique Farmlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, American Indian Religious Concerns, Paleontological Resources, Hazardous Materials, Wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern.

The following critical elements are not analyzed in the Three Rivers RMP/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), but either are not known to be present or affected: Socioeconomic concerns, Adverse Energy Impacts, and Environmental Justice.

The following noncritical elements of the human environment that are not present or not impacted by the proposed action include: Fisheries, Recreation, Visual Resources, and Minerals. Therefore, none of the resources described above will be analyzed further in this document.

This section describes site-specific affected environmental components not adequately described in the Three Rivers RMP/Final EIS. The discussion is divided into critical and noncritical elements.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS

A. Water Quality

This proposed project would be constructed along a portion of Riddle Creek, which is a 303d listed stream. It warrants this listing due to water temperature exceeding the maximum daily average of 64 °F.

B. Migratory Birds

Migratory birds are known to use the area for nesting, foraging, and resting as they pass through the area on their seasonal migrations.

C. Special Status Species

Special Status species redband trout and mottled sculpin can be found in Riddle Creek. Sage-grouse habitat occurs within 2 miles of the project site, but no specific seasonal habitat has been identified. No other Special Status species are known to exist in this area. There are no known sites of Special Status plants in the vicinity of these projects. There has been little inventory done in these areas and there is moderate potential for Special Status plants to occur in these project areas.

D. Cultural Resources

A cultural resource survey would be completed by District Archaeological personnel prior to any construction activities.

E. Noxious Weeds

There have been no official weed inventories in the vicinity of this proposed project. According to the District Weed Management Plan, an inventory for noxious weeds would be conducted during the survey of the project area.

NONCRITICAL ELEMENTS

A. Wildlife

Wildlife species in these areas include mule deer, pronghorn antelope, deer mouse, Brewer's sparrow, western fence lizard, and numerous other species common to the sagebrush steppe of southeastern Oregon.

B. Vegetation

The vegetation consists primarily of shrub species such as mountain big sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and low sagebrush. Grasses include bluebunch wheatgrass, squirreltail, Idaho fescue, Thurber's needlegrass, basin wild rye, and Sandberg's bluegrass. Juniper, aspen, and mahogany are also common within the project area.

C. Soils

Soils are generally shallow and rocky on the hills and ridges with shallow to moderately deep loams on the slopes and drainage bottoms.

D. Livestock Grazing Management

The Riddle/Coyote Allotment is utilized by livestock every other year from mid-May to mid-June. The Hamilton Pasture in the Smyth/Kiger Allotment is normally utilized during June one year and rested the following year. The Sheep Trail Pasture is used every year from mid-June to late July.

CHAPTER IV: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The following impacts may result from implementation of the proposed action or the alternative.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS

A. Water Quality

Proposed Action: The proposed project is located on the ridgetops above Riddle Creek and there would be no negative impacts to water quality. These fences would improve the control of livestock from reaching Riddle Creek and prevent the removal of stream shading vegetation during the middle of the summer.

Alternative A - No Action: The construction of the fence along the exact private property line would cause a livestock trap that would put significant pressure on the fence. This would make the fence difficult to maintain and may result in livestock reaching Riddle Creek during the critical growth period for riparian vegetation.

B. Migratory Birds

Proposed Action: This type of project would have little or no effect on migratory bird activities.

Alternative A - No Action: The increased opportunity for removal of vegetation along Riddle Creek may impact migratory bird nesting, foraging, and resting activities.

C. Special Status Species

Proposed Action: The fences would not be placed through any Special Status plant populations. The locations of the fences should not impact sage-grouse breeding and nesting activities. Preventing cattle from reaching Riddle Creek should improve redband trout habitat.

Alternative A - No Action: The construction of the fence along the exact private property line would cause a livestock trap that would put significant pressure on the fence. This would make the fence difficult to maintain and may result in livestock reaching Riddle Creek during the critical growth period for riparian vegetation.

D. Cultural Resources

Proposed Action: If cultural resources are located within close proximity to the proposed project locations mitigation measures may be necessary. These measures may include, but are not limited to, one or more of the following: data recording and collection; resource test probes; area avoidance; and/or adjustment of project location.

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no direct or indirect effect from not implementing the proposed action.

F. Noxious Weeds

Proposed Action: If noxious weeds are found in the course of conducting botanical clearances, treatment would occur prior to fence construction activities according to the District Weed Management Plan.

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no opportunity for the spread of noxious weeds.

NONCRITICAL ELEMENTS

A. Wildlife

Proposed Action: Disturbance of wildlife during construction would take place and some short duration displacement is expected. A short adjustment period would occur for deer and elk to become accustomed to the new fence locations.

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no impacts to the area's wildlife.

B. Vegetation

Proposed Action: A moderate increase in utilization of bunchgrass species would occur on the land fenced into the Sheep Trail Pasture. Heavy utilization would occur along the fenceline in the Riddle Creek Allotment.

Alternative A - No Action: There is a strong possibility that cattle would breakdown the fence corner if the fence were placed on line in the Riddle Creek Allotment. This would result in livestock accessing over 3 miles of the Riddle Creek riparian area during a time of the year when heavy damage might occur to streambanks and heavily browsed woody vegetation.

C. Soils

Proposed Action: Soils may become compacted along the fencelines over time.

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no direct or indirect impacts to the soil at this site, but heavy use around the other sites would continue to be disproportionately heavy.

D. Livestock Grazing Management

Proposed Action: The land and additional waterhole proposed to be included in the Sheep Trail Pasture of the Riddle Mountain Allotment would increase distribution of livestock in this pasture and with no increase in stocking levels, should improve the range condition.

Alternative A - No Action: Placing the fence along the property lines in the Riddle Creek Pasture could result in livestock becoming trapped in the fence corner at the bottom of the hill, which could result in livestock breaking down the fence and getting down into the Riddle Creek riparian. This would result in livestock mixing and more importantly it could result in a setback of riparian improvement that has been attained over the last 12 years.

CHAPTER V: MITIGATING MEASURES

All equipment used for the project should be cleaned prior to transport to the site and upon completion of the project. If noxious weeds become introduced, timely, appropriate treatments will occur.

CHAPTER VI: CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Proposed Action: In considering the proposed action with those activities that have previously occurred at or in the vicinity of the project site or those activities that may occur in the reasonably foreseeable future, no cumulative effects were identified or anticipated.

Alternative A - No Action: There would be no cumulative impacts associated with this

alternative.

CHAPTER VII: CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Participating Staff

Bill Andersen, Range Management Specialist
Lindsey Aschim, Watershed Specialist
Jim Buchanan, Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist
Gary Foulkes, District Planning and Environmental Coordinator
Terri Geisler, Geologist
Fred McDonald, Natural Resource Specialist
Skip Renschler, Realty Specialist
Fred Taylor, Wildlife Biologist
Nora Taylor, Botanist
Scott Thomas, District Archaeologist
Brian McCabe, Archaeologist

B. Persons, Groups, and Agencies that will be or have been Consulted

Stacy Davies, Roaring Springs Ranch Manager
Larry Otley, Riddle Creek Ranch Owner