

**Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact
Emergency Stabilization for the Juniper Dunes Fire (P401)
EAOR135-EA-04-01**

DECISION:

It is my decision to implement Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) for fence replacement and the treatment of insect pests and noxious weeds on the area affected by the August 2003 fire in the Juniper Forest and Juniper Dunes Wilderness Area.

Rationale: These improvements would limit impacts from livestock and recreational vehicles to protect native plant communities and also prevent invasion of noxious weeds in the Juniper Forest and the Juniper Dunes Wilderness area affected by the fire in August 2003. Important resource values would be adequately protected during project implementation.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Considering the limited extent and impacts of the proposed projects, along with the project design features, as described in the attached environmental assessment to protect sensitive resources, it is my determination that the Proposed Action (Alternative 1) does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment (a finding of no significant impact). Therefore, this action does not require preparation of an environmental impact statement.

/s/ K. R. Devitt
Kevin R. Devitt
Field Manager, Border Resource Area

10/6/03

Juniper Dunes Post-Fire Emergency Stabilization Environmental Assessment# OR 135- EA-04-01

Introduction

The Juniper Dunes fire of August 2003 burned about 4,350 acres of public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and 316 acres of private lands in Franklin County, approximately 15 miles northeast of Pasco, Washington. Public lands affected by the fire consisted of 3,526 acres within the Juniper Dunes Wilderness area and 824 acres of non-wilderness lands leased for livestock grazing. A designated off-highway vehicle (OHV) use area borders the western boundary of the wilderness area.

The majority of the fire burned with low intensity and low severity, so the affected area should need limited rehabilitation efforts. The source of the fire was determined to be lightning. Suppression activities followed the Minimum Impact Suppression tactics inside the wilderness boundary. On adjacent private land, several acres of double disc line were used during suppression activities. The fire damaged several miles of fence associated with the wilderness boundary and adjacent BLM lands. The proposal is to replace the fences and treat insect pests and noxious weeds on the public lands affected by wild fire in August 2003.

Purpose and Need

Rebuilding and replacing damaged fences is needed to limit impacts from livestock and recreational vehicles, to protect native plant communities, and to prevent the invasion of noxious weeds in the area affected by the fire.

Conformance With Other Plans

The proposed project is in conformance with the Spokane District Resource Management Plan (1985) and its Record of Decision (ROD)(1987), as well as its amendment and ROD (1992).

Background

The Juniper Forest and Juniper Dunes Wilderness are popular recreational areas for many people throughout southeast Washington and neighboring states. Residents of the Tri-Cities area (Pasco, Kennewick, and Richland) have extensively used the Juniper Forest Management Area since the early 1960s for various recreational activities including camping, hiking, nature studies, and off-highway vehicle use. Because of a growing awareness of the unique nature of the juniper/sand dune ecosystem, BLM has increased management activities in the area. In 1971, the BLM initiated a land acquisition program to consolidate the area under Federal ownership and management. As a result of these efforts, a 7,100-acre portion of the area was designated as the Juniper Dunes Wilderness in 1984. The adjacent off-highway vehicle area consists of 3,920 acres designated as "OPEN" for off-highway vehicle use. Another 8,620 acres is within an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), which is designated as "LIMITED" off-highway vehicle use.

Several activities occur within the Juniper Forest area, including OHV use, livestock grazing, and hunting. The Juniper Dunes Wilderness Area is fenced separately from the Juniper Forest and is maintained as a wilderness area with associated wilderness values.

Description of Alternatives

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action)

The Proposed Action is to remove about 7 miles of damaged fences and burned posts by hand and/or with mechanized equipment, and replace the fences with a new 5-strand barbed wire fence. New gates would also be installed. In addition, pesticides would be used to control noxious weeds and insect pests such as Mormon crickets. Carbaryl bait would be applied outside of the Wilderness area using cyclone spreaders attached to balloon tire all-terrain vehicles or hand spreaders. The following documents address the control of Mormon crickets in the Juniper Forest:

- USDA/APHIS Rangeland Grasshopper and Mormon Cricket Suppression Program, Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) dated 2002.
- USDA/APHIS Site-Specific Environmental Assessment (EA. No. WA-03-01)
- Juniper Forest Mormon Cricket Control Environmental Assessment Supplement (OR130-04-15, dated June, 1994)(BLM- Spokane District)
- Juniper Dunes Fire Rehabilitation Environmental Assessment (#OR-135-06-16) dated September 18, 1996.
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between USDA/Aphis and USDI/BLM dated February, 2003

Monitoring points would be established throughout the burned area to monitor recovery of native plant communities. The monitoring will be implemented according to the Spokane District Monitoring Plan. Noxious weed monitoring will be included and necessary treatments applied according to the Spokane District Juniper Forest Noxious Weed Control Environmental Assessment (OR130-01-06) and the Juniper Dunes Wilderness Noxious Weed Control Environmental Assessment (OR130-01-04).

In accordance with 43 CFR 4110.3-2(a) and 43 CFR 4110.3-3(b), the burned area subject to the grazing lease would be closed to livestock for two years.

Management Actions/Project Design Features for Alternative 1

Cultural/Paleontological Resources: Archeological surveys will be conducted prior to any ground-disturbing activities associated with fence construction. An archaeologist will be onsite to monitor posthole digging and fence removal in areas containing high potential for cultural resources. If any cultural resources are encountered during implementation of this project, activity in the affected area will stop until an archaeologist is notified and appropriate follow-up measures are directed.

Should scientifically important paleontological resources be identified during project implementation, the project will be redesigned to avoid the locality or mitigations will be identified in consultation with paleontologists.

Habitat of Special Status Species: If any threatened or endangered plant or wildlife species are encountered during project implementation, activity in the affected area will stop until the appropriate specialist is notified and mitigation measures taken.

Noxious Weed and Invasive Plant: Noxious/invasive weeds will be treated or controlled using chemical or biological methods, according to the *Final EIS for Vegetation Treatment on BLM Lands in Thirteen Western States* (July 1991), the Spokane District Noxious Weed Control Environmental Assessment, and any subsequent updates, revisions, or replacements to either of these documents.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

This alternative would consist of no fence reconstruction activities and no pesticide applications. This alternative also would not provide for any other activities associated with post-fire monitoring of vegetative community recovery.

Affected Environment & Environmental Impacts

In keeping with the direction of the National Environmental Protection Act, the following discussions focus on impacts that have potential to be significant.

Vegetation

The tree/shrub community is comprised of Juniper trees, big sagebrush, Antelope bitterbrush, and rabbit brush, all of which are common throughout the area. Several herbaceous plant species occupy the area to include Sandberg's bluegrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, needle and thread grass, thickspike and cheatgrass. The cheatgrass comprises a significant portion of the vegetative community and is expected to occupy disturbed areas.

Alternative 1: Replacing damaged fences would limit access of livestock and off-highway vehicles to the burned areas. Limiting access of cattle and vehicles would reduce the transport and establishment of weedy species and non-native grass species such as cheatgrass. Not grazing the public lands affected by the fire for two years would allow for recovery of native species, reduce impacts associated with livestock, and limit the potential for increased weed invasion into the area. Actively treating noxious weeds would reduce impacts associated with weeds and increase the potential for recovery of native plant species. In addition, treating Mormon crickets infestations with Carbaryl baits would reduce the impacts on native vegetation.

The pesticide is incorporated into wheat bran baits and subsequently consumed by the Mormon Crickets and therefore would not adversely affect plant life or pollinators.

Alternative 2: Not replacing fences destroyed by the fire would leave the wilderness area accessible to livestock and off-highway vehicles, both of which are prohibited in the wilderness

area. In addition, not closing the burned area outside the wilderness to grazing would allow livestock access to this area and could result in the vegetative communities being converted to noxious weeds and other non-native invasive species. Not treating noxious weeds and insect pests would further retard re-establishment of native vegetation.

Wildlife Habitat

The project area provides habitat for a wide array of wildlife species for part or all of their life cycle. The following sensitive species are of particular concern: the ferruginous hawk (State Threatened, Federal Species of Concern), burrowing owl (State and Federal Species of Concern), and long-billed curlew (State Monitor). There are three recent (2003) ferruginous hawk nests in the burned area. Ferruginous hawks are sensitive to human disturbance, especially during nesting, roosting, and foraging. The burrowing owl frequently nests within 10 miles of the area, with the last known burrowing owl nesting record in 2001. Nests are not known to occur within the burned area. Long-billed curlews were detected nesting within 1 mile of the burned area during 2003 surveys, and BLM biologists have observed curlews nesting in the area historically.

Alternative 1: Limiting access to the wilderness area and other public lands affected by the fire would decrease the amount of disturbance to wildlife species and increase wildlife security, specifically during the hunting season. Limiting livestock access would also benefit wildlife by reducing the potential for lost habitat. Livestock presence shortly after the fire may change the vegetative communities and cause a shift from native to non-native noxious and invasive species.

Fences would also deter trespass from off-highway vehicles that may venture into areas affected by the fire. Using Carbaryl baits to control Mormon cricket infestations may improve recovery of native vegetation. Application of Carbaryl baits in accordance with rates and methods of application identified on the product label is not expected to impact wildlife.

Alternative 2: The No Action Alternative would allow for livestock and off-highway vehicle trespass on areas within the wilderness boundary that were not previously accessible by either. The increase in activity would have a direct impact, such as habitat loss and displacement by the presence of people, livestock and vehicles. Temporary and/or permanent loss of habitat and increased disturbance could cause wildlife to utilize other areas. The potential shift from native to non-native vegetative species, such as cheatgrass, would reduce forage availability, nesting suitability, and security/escape cover use for many species. The damaged fence would allow vehicle access, presenting increased risk to wildlife security, specifically during the hunting season.

Cultural Resources

In 1996, a fire burned portions of the same fence line that burned during 2003. Approximately six miles of this fence line were surveyed for cultural resources in 1997, and no sites were found. The project area is within the traditional use area of members of the Yakama Nation and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Both groups have expressed concerns regarding ground-disturbing activities in the area.

Alternative 1: Replacing the fence would control livestock grazing and off-highway vehicle access, allowing vegetation to recover from fire-related damage. Reduction of grazing and off-highway vehicle use would likely reduce rates of erosion and trampling, thereby reducing their potential damage to cultural resources. Application of Carbaryl bait would control Mormon cricket infestations and reduce impacts to recovering vegetation, including traditional use plants. The pesticide is not expected to negatively impact traditional use plants or other cultural resources.

Fence and gate construction would cause some ground disturbance that could damage cultural materials. However, the project is expected to have limited potential to impact cultural resources, when considering the construction consists of replacing a section of fence that was in place before the fire. Also, most of the project area was previously field reviewed for cultural sites and none were found.

Potential impacts to any cultural materials discovered during project implementation would be mitigated by Class III cultural resources surveys of project areas, project redesign, and work stoppage and notification of a BLM Archaeologist as specified in “Management Actions/Project Design Features” above.

Alternative 2: The No Action Alternative would allow livestock and OHV trespass on areas within the wilderness boundary that were not previously accessible by either. The increase in activity would increase ground disturbance, possibly damaging cultural resources in the area through increased erosion and trampling. Since pesticides would not be applied to control Mormon Crickets, their populations may increase and make it more difficult for vegetative recovery. The potential shift from native to non-native vegetative species, such as cheatgrass, would reduce the abundance of many traditionally used plant species.

Paleontology

No paleontological resources have been identified in the project area, so none would likely be affected by the proposed project.

Soils

Soils consist primarily of Quincy loamy sand 0-25% slope with isolated pockets of silt overlain by 20-40 inches of loamy sand.

Alternative 1: By preventing disturbance from off-highway vehicles and livestock, the fence repair would likely promote re-establishment of soil-stabilizing vegetation.

Alternative 2: Unrestrained livestock and vehicle use of the burned area could contribute to the loss of soil-stabilizing vegetation, possibly leading to soil erosion and movement by the wind.

Recreation

Residents of the Tri-Cities area and neighboring states have extensively used the Juniper Forest Management Area since the early 1960s for various recreational activities, including camping,

hiking, nature studies, and off-highway vehicle use. The Juniper Dunes Wilderness area is known for many intrinsic values associated with the wilderness experience.

Alternative 1: This alternative would allow for continued recreational use of the OHV area, the ACEC area, and the Wilderness area, while protecting values associated with the special designated areas. The proposed fence repair would minimize user conflicts in the three areas (Wilderness, OHV, and ACEC). Replacing fences damaged by the fire would limit the likelihood of neighboring livestock wandering onto the wilderness area and adjacent BLM lands burned by the fire

Alternative 2: The potential for increased disturbance from vehicles and livestock use in the Wilderness area could result in a loss of habitat in the area affected by the fire. This would lead to a loss in recreational values associated with the wilderness experience.

Special Areas, Including Wilderness and ACEC

A 7,100-acre portion of the Juniper Forest area is designated as the Juniper Dunes Wilderness. The adjacent off-highway vehicle area consists of 3,920 acres designated as “OPEN” for off-highway vehicle use. Another 8,620 acres is within an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), which is designated as “LIMITED” off-highway vehicle use.

Alternative 1: Replacing the fence would protect the integrity of the wilderness values by reducing access of off-highway vehicles from the adjacent OHV area.

Alternative 2: Leaving the damaged fence would leave the Wilderness area open to access and possible entry by off-highway vehicles, and would also limit the capabilities of the manager to control livestock access to the wilderness area. Vehicle tracks and use in the wilderness area would damage its integrity and wilderness values, including scenery and solitude.

Socioeconomic Values

The grazing lease is a socioeconomic value associated with the project area.

Alternative 1. There would be a temporary loss in animal unit months to the grazing lessee for the two years that the burned area would be closed to grazing.

Alternative 2: There would be no change in AUMs associated with the leased BLM lands. However, any change in vegetation to noxious weeds and other non-native vegetation would reduce the amount of palatable forage for livestock. Not replacing fences would allow livestock access to the public lands affected by the fire, presenting difficulty for BLM in managing the grazing lease.

Other Resource Elements Analyzed

Environmental Justice: No disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations are expected to result from implementation of either alternative addressed in this EA.

Critical Elements That Were Considered

- Water quality: There are no water resources on the project area.
- Air quality: Air quality would not be affected.
- Energy: There would be no adverse impacts to energy.

None of the following elements occur on the project area:

- Wild and scenic rivers
- Prime/unique farmlands
- Floodplain
- Wastes (Hazardous or Solid):

Cumulative Impacts

The cumulative impacts of Alternative 2 (No Action) would be associated with increased disturbance to the wilderness area, from livestock and off-highway vehicle use encroachment. Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) is not expected to change cumulative impacts for the project area.

Coordination/Consultation With Other Agencies, Groups, and Individuals

Consultation for this project was initiated with the Yakama Indian Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (SHPO) on September 11, 2003.

This EA will be made available for public review and comment through the Spokane BLM Internet website <www.or.blm.gov/spokane>. Copies of the EA will also be mailed by request.