



Oregon Natural Desert Association

March 16, 2006

VIA EMAIL

Mike McGee
Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
28910 Hwy 20 West
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m1mcgee@blm.gov

Re: Scoping Comments on Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Project

Dear Mr. McGee,

Please accept these comments from the Oregon Natural Desert Association (“ONDA”) on the BLM’s Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Project Notice of Scoping (Feb. 28, 2007).

The Oregon Natural Desert Association is a non-profit public interest organization whose mission is to protect, defend, and restore forever the health of Oregon’s native deserts. ONDA has a long history of interest and involvement in BLM activities with respect to wilderness, grazing, riparian areas, water quality, and fish and wildlife. The members and staff of ONDA use and enjoy the public lands and natural resources on the Three Rivers Resource Area, including the project area, for recreational, scientific, spiritual, educational, aesthetic, and other purposes. ONDA and its members also participate in information gathering and dissemination, education and public outreach, agency land use planning, and other activities relating to the BLM’s management and administration of the public lands of eastern Oregon.

In general, ONDA is supportive of the project’s goal of improving sage grouse habitat and agrees that in some circumstances, limited juniper removal may help achieve that goal. ONDA would be more supportive if the project was undertaken in concert with addressing the cause of juniper expansion, and reducing other threats to sage grouse habitat.

There are several recent, informative papers on juniper control. ONDA requests that BLM consider two papers in particular and incorporate them into the project record:

1. Miller, R. F., J. D. Bates, T. J. Svejcar, F. B. Pierson, L. E. Eddleman. 2005. *Biology, Ecology, and Management of Western Juniper*. Technical Bulletin 152. Oregon State University, Agricultural Experiment Station (“Western Juniper”), available at <http://eesc.orst.edu/agcomwebfile/edmat/html/tb/tb152/tb152.html>.
2. Kerr, A. and M. Salvo. Managing Western Juniper to Restore Sagebrush Steppe and Quaking Aspen Stands, available at http://www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/SSC_WJ_Position_Paper.pdf

Addressing the Cause of Juniper Expansion: Livestock Grazing.

If the EA is to recover sage grouse with any success, it must address the root cause of juniper expansion, which current science informs us is primarily livestock grazing (and its resulting fire suppression).

Introduction of livestock in the 1860’s and the large increase of animals from the 1870’s through the early 1900’s coincide with the initial expansion of western juniper woodlands. Season-long grazing by the large numbers of domestic livestock during this period is believed to have reduced fine fuel loads, thus contributing to a significantly reduced role of fire in the northern Great Basin. Fire occurrence and fire size declined dramatically in the late 1800’s ... [resulting in] a large decrease in fire occurrence in southeastern Oregon shortly after large numbers of livestock were introduced in the late 1860’s. The lack of fire and decreased competition from herbaceous species probably contributed to an increase in shrub density and cover, thus providing a greater number of safe sites for western juniper establishment.

Western Juniper at 10-11 (citations omitted).

Thus, the EA should begin with a review of historic and current distributions of juniper within the planning area. The EA should provide a map showing the approximate age structure of the juniper present. The EA should then analyze land use practices that have caused or contributed to the spread of juniper, especially livestock grazing and fire history. When did livestock grazing start in the area? When was juniper expansion first documented?

Further, the EA should address how to alter grazing after juniper control. If management is not altered after juniper control, the original problems will inevitably return. Prevention is critical to developing a plan of action that will allow the permanent recovery of these lands. Because livestock grazing is the major cause of juniper expansion, livestock must be reduced or eliminated for the restoration of these lands. This reduction is necessary for the prevention of re-degradation of vegetative communities after costly restoration efforts.

The removal of livestock grazing is especially critical for the period immediately following the treatment. Miller states that “[f]ollowing western juniper control, some level of grazing rest or deferment will usually be required to achieve restoration goals.” Western Juniper at 51. “[I]ntroducing livestock too quickly after western juniper treatments may inhibit

understory recovery, particularly on sites with a diminished perennial bunchgrass component and may permit dominance by weedy annuals.” *Id.* The paper states that grazing management must permit both short- and long-term successional response. In the short term, “this necessitates permitting existing plants on site to grow and produce viable seed,” which does not occur until “the second or third year after western juniper control.” *Id.* at 50. ONDA therefore requests that, under all action alternatives, BLM require at least two to three years of rest following the treatment.

Range of Alternatives.

For the reasons explained above, ONDA requests that the EA consider alternatives that reduce and remove livestock grazing in concert with the juniper control. The purpose and need statement is overly narrow in its suggestion that mechanical treatment and prescribed fire are the only method by which to achieve the goal of improving sage grouse habitat. NEPA requires that federal agencies provide a detailed evaluation of alternatives to the proposed action in every NEPA document. 42 U.S.C. § 4332; 40 C.F.R. § 1502.14(a). This discussion of alternatives is essential to NEPA’s statutory scheme and underlying purpose. *See, e.g., Bob Marshall Alliance v. Hodel*, 852 F.2d 1223, 1228 (9th Cir. 1988), cited in *Alaska Wilderness Recreation & Tourism Ass’n v. Morrison*, 67 F.3d 723, 729 (9th Cir. 1995). Indeed, NEPA’s implementing regulations recognize that the consideration of alternatives is “the heart of the environmental impact statement.” 40 C.F.R. § 1502.14.

In this instance, reasonable alternatives to achieve the purpose of improving sage grouse habitat include reducing the level of authorized AUMs, implementing more rest, especially immediately following the treatments, and a no-grazing alternative. The BLM must “[r]igorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives” in order “to restore and enhance the quality of the human environment and avoid or minimize any possible adverse effects of [the agency’s] actions upon the quality of the human environment.” 40 C.F.R. §§ 1502.14(a), 1500.2(f).

Sage Grouse.

The EA should present the baseline status of sage grouse populations and habitat within the project area. This includes providing habitat maps and existing monitoring data. The EA should also discuss the projected impacts, both short-term, long-term and cumulative, of the project on sage grouse. How will the impacts of the project on sage grouse be monitored? The scoping letter indicates the juniper may be providing perches for raptors. Could you please let us know if there is science on this issue?

The EA should discuss the project’s consistency with the BLM’s Greater Sage- Grouse and Sagebrush-Steppe Ecosystems Management Guidelines. For example, the Guidelines indicate that with respect to vegetation treatment: vegetative manipulations should benefit the long-term health of sage grouse habitat; the BLM should avoid treatments in areas highly susceptible to cheatgrass or other exotic species invasion; and restoration should involve reseeded to native vegetation that will recover ecological processes and habitat features.

Monitoring.

To determine whether this action has success in helping sage grouse, and what the ecosystem's response is, long-term monitoring is needed. Please provide the monitoring that has occurred on the Resource Area for juniper control projects conducted thus far. (The scoping letter indicates that at least one juniper control project already took place near the project area.) Please also explain in detail what monitoring will occur for this project. We suggest that both monitoring on plant composition (including weeds) and sage grouse populations will be necessary.

Commercial Use.

The scoping letter implies that there will be no commercial use of the juniper and that all cut trees will be burned. ONDA supports this component, and discourages commercial use or removal of the junipers, to insure their nutrients will be recycled back into the land.

Visual Impacts.

The EA should address visual impacts of the project. Will the stumps remain visible? How tall will they be? ONDA requests that the trees be cut as low as possible to minimize the effect stumps have on the appearance of naturalness.

Exotic Weeds.

The return of fire or other juniper-removing disturbance to the sagebrush steppe can result in an increase of exotic species such as cheatgrass. The EA should analyze this risk in light of site-specific conditions such as elevation and moisture, and incorporate recent science on this issue.¹ The project should be explicit with respect to setting a goal of restoring native plant species in all areas where juniper is removed.

Livestock also play a major role in the spread of weeds. See A.J. Belsky & J.L. Gelbard, Livestock Grazing and Weed Invasions in the Arid West, Oregon Natural Desert Association (2000), available at <<http://www.onda.org/library/papers/index.html>>. This is another reason to consider the suggested alternatives involving reduced or eliminated livestock grazing. Research suggests that disturbance recovery may take as long as a decade or more and that the BLM's frequent decision to rest such areas for only two years is inadequate. See, e.g., U.S. Forest Serv., Restoring Western Ranges and Wildlands, RMRS-GTR-136, Vol. I at 194–198 (2004). It will be particularly important to monitor these processes at the outset of the project, in order to determine this specific landscape's response to juniper removal without the significant influence of livestock grazing.

¹ E.g. Chambers, J., S. Meyer, B. Blank, B. Roundy, A. Whittaker. 2005. Susceptibility of sagebrush communities to cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*): effects of native herbaceous species removal and fire. Pages 43-49 in Sagebrush steppe and pinyon-juniper ecosystems – effects of changing fire regimes, increased fuel loads, and invasive species. Final Report to the Joint Fire Science Program Project #00-1-1-03; T. Svejcar. 1999. Implications of weedy species in management and restoration of pinyon and juniper woodlands. Pages 394-396 in S. B. Monsen and R. Stevens (compilers). Proc. Ecology and Management of Pinyon-Juniper Communities within the Interior West; Sept. 15-18, 1997; Provo, UT. RMRS-P-9. USDA-Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. Provo, UT.

Old Growth Juniper.

The EA should address whether old growth juniper stands and individual trees are present. **We would appreciate an age class map of the project area.** Would the proposed action remove any old growth trees? ONDA requests that BLM protect the relatively rare stands of old growth juniper as well as any individual old growth trees. If the proposal is to protect them, please explain what the protocol will be.

Impacts to Soils.

The EA should address direct and cumulative impacts to soils expected from the mechanical treatments. Is hand-treatment an option? Disturbances to soils should be minimized. Disturbed soils act as natural seedbeds that are vulnerable to exotic plant invasions. Areas where soils have been disturbed (such as after juniper removal by mechanical means) should be closed to livestock grazing until native vegetation has been fully reestablished and the soils have been fully restabilized. Livestock trampling disturbs the soil and microbiotic crusts. Livestock graze selectively on native species, leaving the less palatable, introduced weed species behind. They also weaken native plants by compacting soil, and enhance weed growth by creating nitrogen hotspots with their dung and urine. Livestock enhance weed growth in so many ways that it is difficult to prevent weed invasion and rapid weed growth in the presence of livestock.

Water quality.

The EA should address whether water quality is a concern in the project area. Are there any water quality limited streams in the project area? The EA should address the main causes of watershed degradation, such as grazing practices.

Wilderness Values.

Finally, the EA should present and analyze the effects of the proposed action on wilderness values. From the initial map provided, it appears that the project is almost entirely within an area ONDA has found to contain wilderness resources, which we have labeled in an attached map as the Sheep Mountain Proposed WSA. See Attachment 1. Specifically, please discuss how the cutting will affect wilderness resource values including roadlessness, naturalness, and opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation (as well as any supplemental values present).

As you know, BLM has an obligation to analyze the impacts of projects proposed on the public lands, on wilderness resource values. See Ore. Natural Desert Ass'n v. Rasmussen, 451 F.Supp.2d 1202, 1213 (D. Or. 2006). Therefore, the EA should present and discuss the any wilderness values present and consider whether any aspect of the proposed action would impact wilderness values or these areas' ability to be designated as wilderness in the future. The EA should also include maps showing the locations of current WSAs and any other special status areas, as compared to the project area.

Thank you for considering these comments. Please keep us updated on this project. If you have any questions regarding these comments, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

s/ Kristin F. Ruether

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