

# Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment

April 2002

A  
Briefing  
Package



United States Department of Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Upper Snake River District  
Idaho Falls, ID 83401

## Briefing Package

### Fire, Fuels, and Related Vegetation Management Direction Plan Amendment

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#### Proposed Action Summary:

The proposed action would establish fire management direction for public lands managed by the Upper Snake River District (USRD). This direction would serve as the basis for development of future Fire Management Plans (FMP). These plans in turn would implement land use plan direction.

Wildland fires would be managed based on constraints identified through the planning process. A result of the proposed action would be more prescribed fires and vegetation treatments being implemented than have occurred in the past.

Short-term goals are to reduce hazardous fuels through various treatment methods (i.e. mechanical, chemical, and prescribed fire), and re-introduce fire into the ecosystem. Long-term goals are to allow fire to resume a more natural ecological role within the USRD, reduce fire suppression costs, and reduce acres requiring rehabilitation.

#### Proposed Action:

The proposed action (or proposed land use plan amendments) includes **two key components**:

- 1) the delineation of fire management areas, and
- 2) the identification of broad fuel and related vegetation treatments.

#### Delineation of Fire Management Areas

The first component of the Proposed Action is the delineation of fire management areas. Public lands would be managed as one of four fire management areas. These areas would be managed for the purposes of wildland fire and prescribed vegetation management based on the historic role of fire in the ecosystem, the desired role of fire, and other resource considerations.

The four fire management areas:

**A** - Wildland fire is not desired in this management area. Wildland fire poses a direct threat to life or property. Suppression is the only wildland fire management strategy allowed. Wildland fire for resource benefit is not allowed.

Treatments are needed for the maintenance and protection of life and property. Non-fire treatments (mechanical or chemical) are emphasized with only limited application of prescribed fire (i.e. roadside cleanup, hand-pile burning).

**B** - Areas where wildland fire will adversely impact resource management objectives because of current conditions. Protection and limiting size and occurrence of wildland fire is the emphasis. Suppression is the only wildland fire management strategy allowed. Rehabilitation and restoration efforts following wildfire are likely to be needed. Wildland fire for resource benefit is not allowed.

Fuels treatments are desired to reduce the number and impacts of unwanted ignitions. Opportunities for prescribed fire may be limited due to risk of loss to resources in the event of an escape. This fire management area may include previously rehabilitated, restored, or treated areas where wildland fire is not desired in the short-term. They may also include "priority habitat areas" or areas in good condition where the desire is to maintain conditions in the short-term by excluding wildland fire. Restorative treatments may consist of multiple non-fire treatments before and or after the use of prescribed fire.

**C** - Areas where wildland fire for resource benefit is desired to meet resource objectives, but environmental, political, or safety concerns will likely limit its use.

All wildland fire management strategies are acceptable, including wildland fire for resource benefit. Generally, these areas will be a lower suppression priority as wildland fire can be managed to meet resource objectives. Rehabilitation and restoration efforts following wildfire may be needed in some cases.

Constraints may limit fire use. Fire use can occur where ignitions meet pre-determined parameters to achieve resource objectives.

Non-fire and prescribed fire treatments are designed to address resource, political, environmental, and safety constraints. Treatments might include the construction of fuel breaks or "pre-treatment" to contain fire within prescribed boundaries. Restorative treatments may consist of multiple non-fire treatments before or after the use of fire. These would include priority restoration areas where treatments are needed to improve conditions (i.e., weed infested areas or dry forest types where thinning will improve stand health and reduce fire hazards).

**D** - Areas where wildland fire is desired to meet resource objectives and where few environmental, political, or safety concerns exist.

All wildland fire management strategies are acceptable including wildland fire for resource benefits. These areas are generally lower suppression priority as wildland fire can be managed to meet resource objectives. Rehabilitation or restoration efforts are generally not needed following wildfire.

Wildland fire for resource benefit can occur where ignitions meet pre-determined parameters to achieve resource objectives.

Treatment is less likely to be needed in these areas. Treatment may include construction of fuel breaks if necessary to contain fire within prescribed boundaries. All treatment types are allowed.

The USRD proposed fire management areas (A-D), as described above, are shown in Attachment I.

Existing Land Use Plans do not identify fire management areas. At the time these plans were written, it was the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) policy to suppress all wild fires. Existing plans do generally provide for the use of management ignited prescribed fire.

## Identification of Broad Fuel and Related Vegetation Treatments

The proposed action fuel and related vegetation treatment scenario is displayed in Table 1 and 2. This scenario was developed by BLM specialists to portray treatment levels thought to be needed over the next decade to achieve the goals of the proposed action.

Table 1. Summary of USRD estimated annual average acres to be treated by various methods under the Proposed Action for the period 2002 through 2011.

Treatment Methods	Annual Average Acres Treated
Wildfire (unplanned)*	170,000
R <sub>x</sub> Fire	29,000
Mechanical/Seeding	52,000
Chemical	39,000
Wildland Fire for Benefit	10,000

*\*Wildfire estimates based on 1991-2001 average annual acres burned.*

Table 2. Ten-year summary of total estimated acres treated 2002 through 2011.

Description	Total Acres Treated
Treatment Acre Estimates	1,300,000
Total "footprint" acres	610,000
Estimated Wildfire Acres 2002-2011	1,700,000

The treatment levels displayed above represent a sizable increase over past treatment levels implemented under existing Land Use Plans.

### **Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action**

The proposed land use plan amendments are based on the Federal Fire Policy and would guide development and implementation of the District's FMPs. Currently, land use plans in the District do not incorporate direction from the Federal Fire Policy or current BLM policies and handbooks. Therefore, plan amendments are needed to integrate fire management with resource management planning.

Since 1996 wildfires have occurred in the USRD at an unprecedented rate. A total of 730,759 acres have burned in this time period. This is approximately 13.5 percent of the BLM lands in the district. Wildland fire has had a dramatic impact on the sagebrush ecosystem, which constitutes a major vegetation type within the district.

Additionally, the Wyoming big sagebrush portion of this ecosystem has been highly impacted by the proliferation of annual cheatgrass, Medusahead rye, and perennial noxious weeds. These invasive species have altered vegetation succession patterns. These species have also altered the historical fire cycle to the extent that the entire Wyoming big sagebrush ecosystem may be at risk by increased and extensive wildland fire occurrence. None of the existing land use plans adequately address the current status of this ecosystem.

The scale of fire impacts and the scale of rehabilitation and restoration activities were not anticipated when the existing 12 land use plans were written. The scale of fire impacts in the sagebrush ecosystem and the absence of fire in other ecosystems have created altered vegetation associations that were not addressed in these land use plans. The purpose of the proposal is to address these changes, evaluate the impacts at the landscape scale, and chart a course of action to bring the ecosystems more in balance with their natural potentials and into a condition that brings wildland fire into a safe and less extensive/frequent condition.

The proposed action is needed to reduce risks to public and firefighter safety by reducing the need for repeated fire fighting efforts in the same localities, by reducing the risk of wildland fires to urban/rural areas, and by reducing fire occurrence in these areas.

The proposed action is needed to comply with the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and the 2001 Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. The current land use plans contain minimal fire management direction. It was BLM policy, when these plans were written, to suppress all fires.

Until the 1995 Federal Fire Policy, the role of fire was not viewed as an integral, essential part of the ecosystem. The Federal Fire Policy now requires the integration of fire management into the land use planning process.

## Preliminary Planning Issues

A number of preliminary issues have been identified to date. These issues emerged from a variety of sources including the BLM, other agency staff, phone calls, e-mails, and letters from individuals and groups. Preliminary issues were published in the Notice of Intent in the "Federal Register" and include:

- Protection of human life,
- Protection of property,
- Protection of natural/cultural resources,
- Integration of fire and resource management,
- Air quality, and
- Wildlife habitat.

It is anticipated that the upcoming scoping meetings and other opportunities to comment will lead to the identification of additional issues and provide a broader perspective.

## Planning Process

The overall planning process will include the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The proposal being evaluated would result in the amendment of all 12 land use plan's in the Upper Snake River District. The EIS will incorporate public and agency comments received throughout the analysis process. The Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS was published in the "Federal Register" on February 21, 2002. Preparation of the EIS is expected to take place over an 18-month period beginning March 2002.

Project milestones include:

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|----|--|----------------|
| 1. | Begin Scoping                            | March 2002     |
| 2. | Hold Public Scoping Meetings             | April 2002     |
| 3. | Identify Issues/Develop Alternatives     | June 2002      |
| 4. | Issue Draft EIS/Preferred Alternative    | December 2002  |
| 5. | Hold Public Meetings on Draft EIS        | January 2003   |
| 6. | Analyze Comments on Draft EIS            | March 2003     |
| 7. | Issue Final EIS/Proposed Plan Amendments | July 2003      |
| 8. | Protest Period                           | August 2003    |
| 9. | Sign Record of Decision                  | September 2003 |

## How You Can Be Involved In The Planning Process

This is your opportunity to provide us with comments, issues, or concerns regarding the proposal. The team will review your comments and revise the preliminary issues presented in this briefing package to better reflect your concerns. Additional opportunities for public comment will be provided throughout the process. Public meetings will be held to facilitate review and comment on the Draft EIS.

Comments may be e-mailed to: [ID\\_USRD\\_FMDA@blm.gov](mailto:ID_USRD_FMDA@blm.gov)

Written comments may be sent to:

Bureau of Land Management  
Attention: Terry Smith  
FMDA Project Manager  
1111 N. 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Pocatello, ID 83201  
Telephone: (208) 478-6347

Visit Project Web Site at: [www.id.blm.gov/planning/usrd\\_fmda](http://www.id.blm.gov/planning/usrd_fmda)

Comments need to be received no later than May 17, 2002.

We want to ensure that we are keeping you informed. If you wish to stay involved in this process and remain on the mailing list for this project, you will need to contact, Terry Smith, Project Manager, at the address above. If you attend one of the scoping meetings you will be kept on the mailing list for all future correspondence. **If you do not attend one of the meetings and we do not hear from you, your name will be removed from the project mailing list.**

**PRIVACY NOTICE:** If requested, a copy of all comments provided in response to this briefing package will be made available to the public including names, addresses, and any other personal information provided with the comments. Individual respondents may request confidentiality. If you wish to withhold your name or address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comments.