

**BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
ELKO FIELD OFFICE
BURNED AREA EMERGENCY REHABILITATION TEAM**

ELKO 21 FIRE COMPLEX

WILDLIFE ASSESSMENT

I. ISSUES

- **Critical sage grouse and mule deer habitat loss from fires.**
- **The threat of exotic annual plant species establishment/domination of burned areas and subsequent increase in fire frequency.**
- **Critical loss of limited wildlife habitat (deciduous woodland habitat) as a result of fires.**
- **One federally listed threatened species, the Lahontan cutthroat trout(LCT), and its habitat occurs in Wildcat Creek (within the O'Neil Allotment administered by the Elko Field Office)) which was impacted by the Camp Creek fire.**
- **One federally listed candidate species, the Columbia spotted frog, and its habitat potentially occurs in the Wildcat Creek drainage of the Elko Field Office which was affected by the Camp Creek fire.**
- **Potential impacts to the LCT and the Columbia spotted frog from the fire, suppression activities, as well as post fire flooding and siltation issues.**
- **Potential impacts to the LCT and the Columbia spotted frog from rehabilitation actions.**

II. OBSERVATIONS

The purpose of this Wildlife Assessment is to document the effects of the fire, suppression activities, and proposed rehabilitation work to all Threatened, Endangered, Candidate, Sensitive (TECS) or otherwise significant mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, invertebrates and their habitat, which may be found within or downstream from the fire areas. Five TECS Species will be addressed in this assessment.

Species and issues identified by the BLM staff at the Elko Field office to be addressed include wide scale loss of sage grouse habitat, small acreage loss of critical mule deer habitat, and loss of limited deciduous woodland areas that provide habitat for numerous wildlife species. Although not addressed under the BAER wildlife issue "umbrella", the fires affected important mule deer transitional range areas throughout the major Elko 21 fire complex areas. Depending on given years and population levels, several thousand mule deer may use these areas during migration to and from winter range areas.

This report addresses impacts of the Camp Creek Fire, suppression activities, and proposed rehabilitation work on the Lahontan cutthroat trout (LCT) and Columbia spotted frog found in Wildcat Creek. Based on formal surveys, these two species are known to occur in Wildcat Creek within the Camp Creek fire area. Survey data is on file at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Elko Field Office. This report also addresses the potential post fire flooding and sediment threats to the Endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout and Columbia spotted frog in Wildcat Creek.

A Wildlife Background

The Year 2000 "Elko 21 Fire Complex" fires burned approximately 220,497 acres in July and August, 2000 within the Elko Field Office area. Because of strong winds, fuel types, and extremely dry conditions, these fires burned quickly through these areas and consumed large acreage in a short period of time. Vegetation resources were impacted by varying degrees as burn intensities were relatively uniform across the landscape. The major concern was large block burns in mountain brush, big sagebrush, or big and low sagebrush mosaics. Many large block fire areas have no intact unburned areas for future low or big sagebrush seed sources. Elevation ranges within the fires areas on BLM public lands are from approximately 5,000 to 7,800 feet.

Plant communities within the fire areas include large blocks of sagebrush, mountain shrub communities, juniper, aspen, and riparian habitats with willow and other riparian species. Some affected areas are vegetated by the pinon-juniper or juniper woodland forest vegetation, reflecting shallow rocky soil types. The climate in the area is arid, with precipitation primarily occurring during winter months with a variety of wildlife habitats present within the fire area. Wildlife species found in these habitats vary in abundance and diversity depending on the type and condition of the vegetation. Approximately 300 species of wildlife including mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish are seasonal or year long residents within these fire areas.

B. Reconnaissance Methodology and Results

Wildlife information for this assessment was based upon a review of relevant literature, consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), personal communications with BLM, Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDOW), and other resource professionals. Reconnaissance included field reviews and aerial flights from 08/10 through 09/01.

1. Biological Assessment For Federally Listed Species

LAHONTAN CUTTHROAT TROUT (*Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi*) (Threatened):

This assesment of direct and indirect fire impacts is based on observations by the BEAR team biologist, soil scientist and hydrologist, and BLM and NDOW resource specialists.

LCT OCCURRENCE AND DISTRIBUTION

LCT are native to Wildcat Creek, an intermittent stream located within the Marys River Subbasin. No other salmonid species occur in Wildcat Creek.

Fish sampling in Wildcat Creek was conducted by the Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDOW) in 1979 and 1994. The results of sampling between 1979 and 1994 indicate that LCT populations increased on Wildcat Creek. In 1979 there was an average of 581 LCT/mile of stream and in 1994 there was an average of 792 LCT/mile.

ENVIRONMENTAL BASELINE

Approximately 3.5 miles of Wildcat Creek is located within the O'Neil Allotment administered by the Elko Field Office of the BLM. Only about 0.53 miles occur on public land. Dominant riparian species include aspen, willow, Kentucky bluegrass, Nebraska sedge and a wide variety of grasses, rushes, and forbs.

Habitat surveys were conducted by BLM on Wildcat Creek in 1979 and 1988. Habitat condition was rated as poor during both surveys. Primary limiting factors were lack of high quality pools and stream bank vegetative cover, unstable stream banks, and excessive sedimentation. The upper segments of Wildcat Creek within the O'Neil

Allotment have a moderate stream gradient which increases the chance of bank erosion during high water. Because of the poor riparian conditions, the extremely high flows of 1983 and 1984 caused extensive vertical and lateral channel movement. Extensive deposition of gravel and finer material also occurred.

An allotment evaluation was completed and a final multiple use decision was issued for the O'Neil Allotment in 1992 which implemented changes in grazing management to ensure attainment of multiple use objectives, including those for good or better riparian/stream habitat conditions on Wildcat Creek. In 1992 a fence was constructed north of Wildcat Creek which divided the Wildcat Pasture and created the new Wildcat Riparian Pasture south of the new fence. The Wildcat Riparian Pasture, which contains Wildcat Creek, was then closed to grazing until good or better riparian/stream habitat conditions were achieved. In 1997, much of the private portions of Wildcat Creek within the Wildcat Pasture were fenced and grazed separately from the adjoining BLM lands by the private landowner.

A habitat survey conducted by BLM in 1993 showed that riparian/stream habitat conditions remained poor to fair for the public portion of Wildcat Creek. A habitat survey conducted in 1997 showed that substantial improvement in riparian conditions had occurred. The stream width to depth ratio improved by more than 100% since 1988, while the riparian condition class indicated streambanks were mostly stable and well vegetated. The 1997 survey data also indicated that streambanks on Wildcat Creek were becoming increasingly well developed. The channel type was determined to be a Rosgen "B4" channel type (Rosgen 1996). These stream types are generally quite stable and fairly resistant to trampling impacts. The stream was given a functionality rating of "functioning at risk with an upward trend". The "at risk" designation was due primarily to limited vertical instability, areas of silt accumulation and limited riparian zone development in some areas.

A new grazing system was implemented within the Wildcat Riparian Pasture (which contains the public portions of Wildcat Creek) in 1998 wherein grazing use would be made on even numbered years for two weeks in July and rested on odd numbered years. The Wildcat Riparian Pasture was rested from grazing in 1999 and grazed from 7/28 to 8/10 during 2000. The new grazing agreement for the Wildcat Riparian pasture includes a monitoring program as well as utilization restrictions. Although the hot season treatments are short duration (less than 3 weeks), if utilization of woody and herbaceous riparian species within the stream/riparian corridor exceeds an average of 20% and 30% respectively (as measured at the end of annual growth or end of grazing period, whichever occurs later), the riparian pasture would be rested for the following three years.

Formal consultation with the USFWS, including development of a biological assessment by BLM and issuance of a biological opinion by the USFWS, has been completed for the 1992 Final Multiple Use Decision for the O'Neil Allotment (File No. 1-5-91-F-187) and the 1998 Wildcat Riparian Pasture Grazing Agreement (File No. 1-5-98-F-171).

Approximately 2.75 miles of Wildcat Creek in the Elko Field Office area of administration within the O'Neil Allotment was located within the Camp Creek Fire. Of the 2.75 miles of stream affected by the fire, 0.43 stream miles are public lands administered by the Elko Field Office. Approximately 0.75 miles of Wildcat Creek was not impacted by the fire, including about 0.1 miles of public stream.

DIRECT EFFECTS:

A field review by Elko Field Office and BEAR team personnel indicated direct fire impacts to LCT were minimal due to the condition of the riparian zone and approximately 0.75 miles of stream was not affected by the fire. Because of the good riparian conditions and attendant high soil moisture, the riparian zone has remained intact. The direct loss of woody riparian species was sporadic with most impacts occurring on the outside fringes of the riparian zone. An adequate buffer of woody and/or herbaceous vegetation appears to have been unaffected by the fire to maintain riparian functionality. The Field observations by Elko Field Office and BEAR team personnel on 8/14/00 and

8/15/00 confirmed that LCT survived the fire. There were no dead fish observed on these dates and several mature LCT were observed in pools within areas of the stream most affected by the fire. Water was observed to be clear and stream temperatures were measured between 67°F and 73°F.

Fire suppression activities including retardant drops, water extraction, and line construction were not conducted within the Wildcat Creek drainage.

INDIRECT EFFECTS:

Potential indirect impacts to Wildcat Creek include sediment loading, excessive overland runoff, increase in stream temperature, and changes in pH. Parts of the adjacent uplands are unburned along 0.75 miles of the middle reach of the stream located in the O'Neil Allotment, while most of the riparian zone has remained intact. Occasional areas of scorched willows and aspen occur along the stream channel, however, the moisture content of most of the riparian vegetation appeared to be high enough to prevent it from burning.

There will be a "first-flush" of ash and fine-grained soils to the fluvial systems potentially causing adverse impacts to fish populations. Burned portions of the Wildcat Creek watershed still has over 1" of ash, which may have a pH of 9+, which can modify water quality enough to affect fish. Sediment loads to Wildcat Creek are expected to increase, however; the low water repellency of soils in these watersheds will reduce soil particle entrainment during periods of overland flow. Excess sediment can clog fish gills, causes loss of spawning habitat, increase water temperature, and cause adverse channel adjustments.

Sediment and ash may settle out of overland flow before reaching the stream channel or may be filtered out by the riparian zone. The filtering function will work best in areas where residual riparian vegetation remains.

Loss of vegetative cover on the watershed can lead to increases in overland flows. Increased water delivery to Wildcat Creek may accelerate channel down cutting causing a loss of fisheries habitat. Stream temperatures may also increase in response to increased heat absorption by the blackened watershed and to increases in sediment loads.

COLUMBIA SPOTTED FROG (*Rana luteiventris*) (Candidate): Spotted frogs are known to exist in the Wildcat Creek drainage system at higher elevations on the Humboldt National Forest. There are no records of spotted frogs being found on public or private land portions of Wildcat Creek in the O'Neil Allotment.

DIRECT EFFECTS: The direct effects to spotted frogs is unknown. Spotted frogs have not been recorded in Wildcat Creek on the O'Neil Allotment. No spotted frogs were observed during assessment visits on 8/14/00 and 8/15/00.

INDIRECT EFFECTS: The potential indirect effects to spotted frogs would be similar to the potential indirect effects to LCT as described above.

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) (Threatened): The bald eagle winters at low density in northeastern and north-central Nevada. The bald eagle is a wintering species in some of the area affected by the fires with possible night roosts in higher elevation areas.

DIRECT EFFECTS: No Bald eagles occurred within or adjacent to the area during these fires. Therefore there are no direct effects to bald eagles.

INDIRECT EFFECTS: Some of the indirect effects from fires of this large scale would be the reduction in prey base. The bird is an opportunistic feeder and a portion of its foraging habitat was degraded by the recent fires. Many of the small mammals and birds that the eagles rely on for a winter food source will be limited for several years in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Reconstruct all burned fences as necessary that make up the boundary of the Wildcat Riparian Pasture to ensure these protection fences are in place to exclude grazing from Wildcat Creek during the post fire recovery period.
2. Close the Wildcat Riparian Pasture to grazing for a period of two years to allow for recovery of LCT and potential spotted frog habitat.
3. Continue stream and riparian habitat monitoring on Wildcat Creek to allow for comparison of post-fire impacts to existing baseline information. Where determined appropriate and necessary, collect and incorporate thermal monitoring data and water quality data to evaluate the fire impacts to LCT and to formulate future management recommendations.

DETERMINATION:

Based upon the analysis of direct and potential indirect impacts, it has been determined that the impacts of the Camp Creek Fire, reconstruction of existing protection fencing, the subsequent closure to livestock grazing for two years, and continued riparian and stream habitat monitoring is not likely to adversely affect LCT or Bald Eagles (potential winter residents). These actions are also consistent with current BLM policy direction for the management of habitat for the Columbia spotted frog which provides for a level of management and protection to Federally listed candidate species so as to minimize or eliminate the need for Federal listing in the future.

2. Other Species Of Concern:

Sage grouse: It is widely known that sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) are a growing concern across the West. At a sage grouse workshop in Billings, Montana in July, 1998, representatives of every western state presented data depicting long-term population decline. In Nevada, sage grouse populations in certain areas continue to decline according to most trend indices (Saake and Stiver 1999). Sage grouse have been designated by the Nevada Bureau of Land Management State Director as a BLM Sensitive Species and therefore afforded by BLM policy (BLM 1988, 1998) the same level of protection as candidate species, this is, "BLM shall carry out management, consistent with principles of multiple use, for the conservation of candidate species and their habitats and shall ensure that actions authorized, funded, or carried out do not contribute to the need to list any of these species as threatened or endangered".

Although the suspected causes of sage grouse decline are numerous, loss of habitat ranks at the top of the list (Braun 1998). The primary concern of local experts with respect to range fires is the loss of sage grouse habitat. Rehabilitation of sage grouse habitat is a wildlife management priority of both NDOW and BLM and is reflected in the treatment specifications of this plan.

The Northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), is another species of concern (State of Nevada Listed Species) for some of the fires covered in this plan. Goshawk nesting habitat, typically aspen groves containing streams, was impacted by some of the fires addressed in this plan. Protection and monitoring of aspen will be necessary in order to ensure regeneration and survival. Aspen regeneration from seed under present climatic conditions is not very successful, therefore protection from grazing is necessary to ensure that resprouting aspen suckers from the fire are protected.

Other species listed on the Nevada State and BLM sensitive species lists not requested by BLM or NDOW personnel to discuss here, is located in Appendix III.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Management: (Specifications related)

The following activities can be accomplished by using EFR funds as outlined in the stipulations section of this plan.

a. N-1a BLM 98-148 III O Protection of Threatened and Endangered Species (Flora and Fauna) (BLM 98-148 III O)

General Description: Immediately reconstruct permanent range fence around Wildcat Creek to protect the Lahontan cutthroat trout. By fencing this area the riparian vegetation will respond and be able to trap sediment and ash from entering the creek to protect the Lahontan cutthroat trout, a Federally listed threatened species.

b. N-1b BLM 98-148 III O Protection of Threatened and Endangered Species (Flora and Fauna) (BLM 98-148 III F)

General Description: Monitor post fire effects on the Lahontan Cutthroat trout (LCT). Provide for the continuation of riparian/stream habitat condition studies, functionality assessments, thermal monitoring, and water quality sampling of Wildcat Creek. This information will allow the BLM and US Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate effects of the burn and recovery in comparison to baseline conditions.

c. N-1c BLM 98-148 III O Protection of Sensitive Species: Sage Grouse

Survey for sage grouse lek activity inside the fire perimeter. Sage grouse populations have exhibited long-term declines throughout North America and have been extirpated in five states. In May 1999, the western sage grouse in Washington was petitioned for listing as endangered under the Endangered Species Act because of population and habitat declines. The Nevada population is considered secure although it too has exhibited long-term population declines. BLM in Nevada is developing management guidelines. Numerous recorded lek locations exist within the fire and are recorded on GIS maps. Sagebrush habitats need to be surveyed to determine impacts from the fire and assess future habitat needs.

d. N-3a BLM 98-148 III. E Ecological Stabilization - Planting/Seeding

Aerially seed crucial big game winter range and sage grouse habitat to reestablish shrub species important for cover, nesting, and forage.

e. N-3b BLM 98-148 III. Q Ecological Stabilization - Planting/Seeding

Fires within the Elko 21 Fire Complex have negatively impacted mid to late seral plant communities and increased the potential for erosion, loss of ecological integrity through the invasion of non-native species, and the spread of known populations of noxious weeds. Range sites within the 21 fires covered under this plan have been analyzed and prioritized for treatment to prevent site degradation, maintain ecological stability, and prevent spread of non-native, invasive weeds along roads by reseeding using species adapted to the sites.

B. Monitoring (specification related):

The following rehabilitation-related monitoring may be accomplished through the use of EFR funds.

a. M-2a BLM 98-148 III O and V Monitoring and Evaluation of Emergency Treatments

Monitoring aspen/cottonwood stands with walk-thru examinations or establish a grid of fixed plots to insure that excessive browsing from wildlife and livestock does not inhibit the growth and survival of aspen/cottonwood seedlings and monitor woodland areas with walk-thru examinations to determine acceptable levels of seedling survival.

b. M-2b BLM 98-148 III O and V Monitoring and Evaluation of Emergency Treatments

Monitor vegetation for rehab seeding success in crucial big game winter range and sage grouse habitat. Measure utilization on rehab seeding from livestock grazing and wildlife.

c. M-2c BLM 98-148 III O and V Monitoring and Evaluation of Emergency Treatments

Monitor shrub reestablishment within the burned areas to identify any management actions needed to help restore ecological processes on crucial big game winter range and sage grouse habitat.

C. Management: (Non-specifications related)

The following recommendations are made for the purpose of mitigating fire, suppression activity and subsequent long term rehabilitation effects to all wildlife species found within the fire area.

1. Complete management actions necessary to protect affected deciduous trees and shrubs including, but not limited to, quaking aspen and cottonwood stands and chokecherry from grazing as necessary to ensure that resprouting stems from the fire are protected. This would include said vegetation that was affected by the fire that was or was not initially identified during summer 2000 after post-fire reconnaissance surveys.
2. Monitor critical bitterbrush and other mountain shrub areas, not covered under the Elko 21 Complex plan, for post-fire resprouting and utilization, and address possibilities or need for planting or resource protection in the future if dictated from monitoring. Note: The Nevada Division of Wildlife will pursue bitterbrush seeding on an estimated 665 acres within several areas that collectively equal about 2,000 acres on the Camp Creek Fire. The seeding effort would be a measure to reestablish bitterbrush in case natural seed sources were negatively affected by the moderate to high burn severities on affected sites between Goat Creek and Camp Creek .
3. Ensure flexibility in the wildlife seed operation based on seed availability and priority areas. In case of seed shortages, the identified areas could be strip-seeded in a fashion other than what is essentially planned. For example, if only 50% of the seed is available, the same identified areas would be seeded, but only every other swath would be seeded.
4. Evaluate the need to apply strips of excelsior mulch to limited areas along identified stream channels. (Preliminary investigations indicate application of this treatment is not necessary).
5. Close the Wildcat Riparian Pasture to grazing for a period of two years to allow for recovery of LCT habitat.

VI. SOURCES OF INFORMATION FROM WHICH THIS REPORT WAS DERIVED:

Personal Communication with:

Skip Ritter, Forester, BLM, Elko Field Office 775-753-0273
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VII. REFERENCES:

*FWS Species list for Elko Field Office 07/26/00 (Ray Lister)
FWS, Endangered Species Act of 1973 as Amended through the 100th Congress, 1988.
FWS, Endangered Species Consultation Handbook, Chapter 7 - Emergency Consultation, received 8/4/95.
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Braun, C.E. 1998. Sage grouse declines in Western North America: what are the problems? Western Assoc. State Fish and Wildl. Agencies.
Rosgen, C. 1996. Applied River Morphology. Wildland Hydrology, Pagosa Springs, CO.
Saake, Norm and San Stiver. 1999. Nevada upland game, furbearer and waterfowl: status and hunting seasons recommendations. Nevada Division of Wildlife. Reno

***Filed with 2000 Elko Fire Complex BAER report.**

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APPENDIX

THREATENED AND CANDIDATE SPECIES AND SPECIES OF CONCERN THAT MAY OCCUR
IN THE AREA OF

Elko BLM District

Portions of Elko, Eureka, and Lander Counties, Nevada

Threatened Species

Bird

bald eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Fish

Lahontan cutthroat trout
henshawi

Oncorhynchus clarki

Candidate Species

Amphibian

Columbia spotted frog

Rana luteiventris

Species of Concern

Mammals

pygmy rabbit

pale Townsend's big-eared bat
pallascens

Pacific Townsend's big-eared bat
townsendii

spotted bat

small-footed myotis

long-eared myotis

fringed myotis

long-legged myotis

Yuma myotis

Preble's shrew

Sierra Nevada red fox

Brachylagus idahoensis

Corynorhinus townsendii

Corynorhinus townsendii

Euderma maculatum

Myotis ciliolabrum

Myotis evotis

Myotis thysanodes

Myotis volans

Myotis yumanensis

Sorex preblei

Vulpes vulpes necator

Birds

northern goshawk

western burrowing owl

ferruginous hawk

black tern

least bittern

white-faced ibis

Columbian sharp-tailed grouse *

Accipiter gentilis

Athene cunicularia hypugea

Buteo regalis

Chlidonias niger

Ixobrychus exilis hesperis

Plegadis chihi

Tympanuchus phasianellus

columbianus

Fishes

leatherside chub

interior redband trout

relict dace

Gila copei

Oncorhynchus mykiss gibbsi

Relictus solitarius

Invertebrates

California floater

Nevada viceroy

Anodonta californiensis

Limenitus archippus

lahontani

Plants

Grouse Creek rockcress

Elko rockcress

Goose Creek milkvetch

Barren Valley collomia

broad fleabane

grimy ivesia

Grimes vetchling

Bruneau River prickly phlox

Packard's stickleaf

Cottam cinquefoil

rock violet

Arabis falcatoria

Arabis falcifruca

Astragalus anserinus

Collomia renacta

Erigeron latus

Ivesia rhypara var. *rhypara*

Lathyrus grimesii

Leptodactylon glabrum

Mentzelia packardiae

Potentilla cottamii

Viola lithion

* Taxa presumed extinct or extirpated in Nevada.

APPENDIX

2000 NORTHERN NEVADA BAER ELKO 21 FIRE COMPLEX CONSULTATION WITH U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

9/13/00 Called the Nevada State office and talked with Pat Coffin (775-861-6346). Provided Mr. Coffin with general and legal map descriptions of the fire areas included in the BAER 21 fire complex. Discussed with Mr. Coffin and concluded that the site specific FWS species list currently on file with BLM Elko Field Office which covered the specific fire areas was a recent and accurate list. The conversation included the following discussion points:

- FWS: There are no listed plants in any of the BAER Elko 21 fire areas.
- The Following information was provided to FWS: A description of the Camp Fire area was provided, although the majority of the suppression activities had already taken place. Although the fire did burn through some LCT habitat on Wildcat Creek, no suppression activities affected LCT or its habitat.
- Based upon observations assessments of the impacts to Wildcat Creek as a result of the Camp Creek Fire, it was concluded that the fire did not impact the entire portion of Wildcat Creek within the O'Neil Allotment administered by the Elko BLM Field Office. Impacts to and loss of riparian vegetation was sporadic and an adequate buffer of woody and/or herbaceous vegetation appears to have been unaffected by the fire to maintain riparian functionality. Therefore, the following recommendations were being made by the Elko BLM:
 1. Reconstruct all burned fences as necessary that make up the boundary of the Wildcat Riparian Pasture to ensure these protection fences are in place to exclude grazing from Wildcat Creek during the post fire recovery period.
 2. Close the Wildcat Riparian Pasture to grazing for a period of two years to allow for protection and recovery of LCT and potential spotted frog habitat.
 3. Continue stream and riparian habitat monitoring on Wildcat Creek to allow for comparison of post-fire impacts to existing baseline information. Where determined appropriate and necessary, collect and incorporate thermal monitoring data and water quality data to evaluate the fire impacts to LCT and to formulate future management recommendations.
- Mr. Coffin concurred with the Elko BLM's recommendations and requested a letter from the Elko Field Office documenting impacts, listing proposed measures for monitoring and rehabilitation, and requesting concurrence with a not likely to adversely affect determination through informal consultation.