



1. Purpose and Need

Fire Management
Amendment
Environmental
Assessment

CHAPTER 1 - PURPOSE AND NEED

The Federal Wildland Policy, developed in 1995 by nine different federal agencies, has recognized the need for fire management plans as the primary tool to manage fire. Neither the Elko nor the Wells Resource Management Plans (RMP) specifically addresses fire management. A Fire Management Plan (FMP), an operational document, was prepared in 1998. The 1998 FMP focuses primarily on the logistical aspects of responding to and suppressing a wildfire, and rehabilitation of the burned area immediately following the fire. The current RMPs and the 1998 FMP do not provide adequate direction consistent with current policies for fire management; therefore, a RMP Amendment is necessary.

The Fire Management Amendment will be referred to as the FMA for the remainder of this document. This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to analyze impacts of alternatives for the FMA. The EA was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4332) and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) (43 U.S.C. 1701 et seq.). This FMA will serve as a guide in the control of frequency, size, distribution and intensity of wildfires on lands managed by the Elko Field Office (District). The District encompasses both the Elko and Wells resource areas.

A. Purpose

Single focus policies, based solely on systematic fire suppression, have had an impact on the landscape causing fuel loads to increase. More integrated approaches, based on restoring fire-adapted ecosystems, reducing hazardous fuel loads, suppression, and rehabilitation after burns all play a vital role in an effective fire management strategy. An integrated approach will reduce the danger to fire fighters, improve the productivity of public lands, protect public and private property from devastating fire and, over the long term, reduce fire suppression costs. In most cases, fire will be suppressed immediately; however, the approach described in the Proposed Action provides a greater range of tools, focusing on general fire management, prevention, response and rehabilitation.

The FMA/EA for the District has been developed to provide direction and continuity in establishing operational procedures to guide all fire management activities, and will be a tool to guide the implementation of resource management objectives. The FMA will also provide the guidance necessary for the "Fire Management Plan" (FMP) prepared by the District's fire management officer. This document outlines the operational framework and funding mechanisms necessary to implement the FMA.

The purpose of the FMA is to:

- Provide an integrated, balanced approach for fire management that addresses fire prevention, fire response and fire rehabilitation.
- Provide for the protection of life and property.
- Provide for the protection of habitat required by special status species.
- Provide for effective resource protection and enhancement.
- Reduce hazardous fuels.
- Accomplish resource objectives.



Alternatives for the FMA have been formulated to meet these purposes to varying degrees and are described in Chapter 2.

B. Need

Severe fire seasons have affected not only the number of acres burned, but also the number of firefighters mobilized, amount of tax dollars spent on emergency suppression and damage to private property. To address these conditions, the Federal Wildland Policy states that:

"Federal agencies will develop Fire Management Plans for all areas subject to wildland fires. These plans will address all potential wildland fire occurrences and include a full range of fire management actions; use new knowledge and monitor results to revise fire management goals, objectives and actions; and be linked closely to land and resource management plans."

The Fire Policy's 1996 Implementation Action Plan Report clarified that:

"Individual field units are responsible for Fire Management Plan development. They must involve their fire management partners and the public."

The need for this approach was again emphasized in the Review and Update of the 1995 Wildland Fire Management Policy in 2001. Much like the 1995 review, the 2001 review repeatedly emphasized the critical importance of "... the development and implementation of high-quality Fire Management Plans by all land managing agencies."

Since the current RMP's do not provide adequate direction for fire management; a RMP Amendment is necessary to complement these documents. This FMA and EA explore the various alternatives in which this policy can be carried out, consistent with agency direction, and analyzes the foreseeable impacts associated with an integrated fire management program. The FMA/EA compliments the management actions adopted in the Elko and Wells RMPs by providing the necessary guidance for effective fire management.

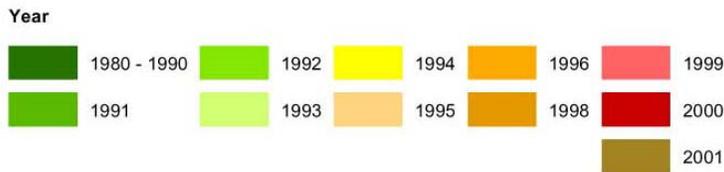
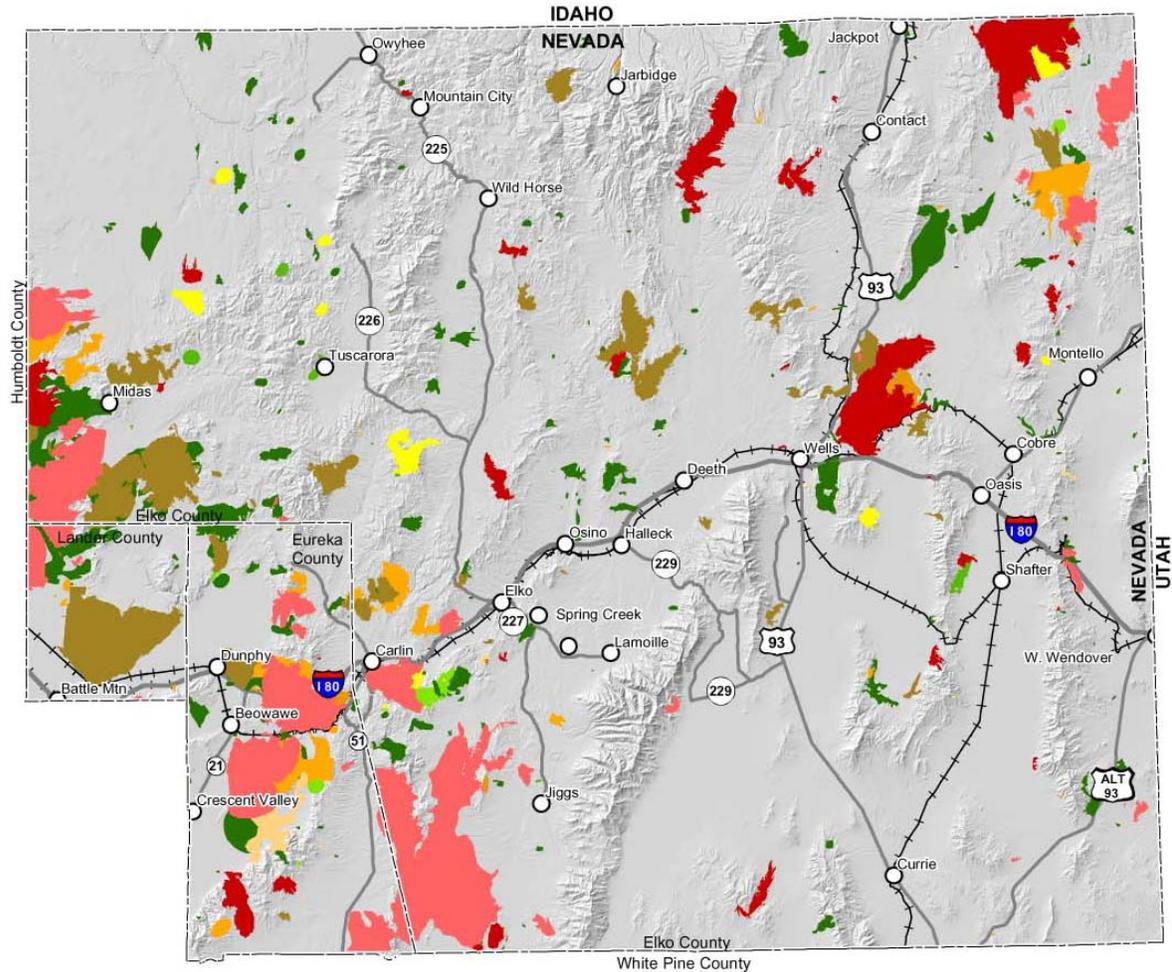
C. Fire History

An understanding of why, when and where fires typically occur in the District is essential when determining locations for fire management to reduce fire hazards, modify fuel loading or alter wildlife habitat. Areas recently burned by wildfire may not be suitable candidates for prescribed burns. Similarly, areas that have burned frequently throughout recorded history may be candidate sites for wildfire prevention practices, such as fuelbreaks, fire roads and limited prescribed burns.

The local area fire history can provide clues for identifying areas with the greatest risk for ignition, areas with potentially dangerous fuel loads, the expected rate of fire spread and its likely intensity. As shown in Table 1-1 and Figure 1-1, the District has experienced large fires over the last 5 years.

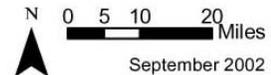


The most active year was 1999, when fires burned over 380,000 acres. Annual changes in fire occurrence can be explained by factors such as fuel loads, change in vegetation, and climatic conditions. Wildland fires occur on a year-round basis, but the accepted length of season is from May to September.



Note: Fires may overlap each other. Only one year is visible.

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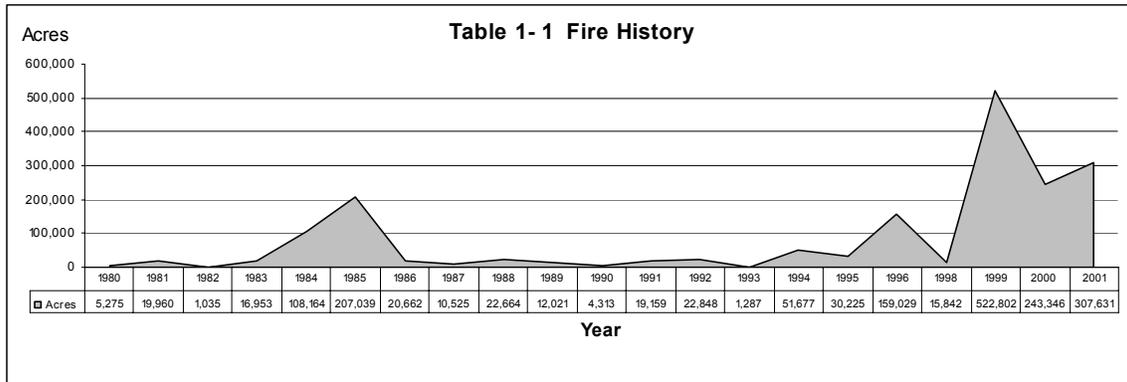


Fire History
Figure 1 - 1

The desired result of fire management activities is the establishment, or maintenance, of healthy ecosystems characterized by good distribution and successional stages of vegetation communities, such as would occur over time under a natural fire regime.



Cheatgrass encroachment on low elevation lands (below 6,500 feet) within District boundaries may cause the average acreage burned per year to increase, as continued expansion of this vegetation type increases the size and intensity of wildfire.



Note: Based on District GIS coverage for fire history. No data was available for 1997; does not include fires under 300 acres.

Lightening has been the principal ignition source of wildland fire in the District. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of wildfires are human caused, primarily due to railroad fire, isolated mining activity and recreational caused fires.

D. Issues

Issues regarding fire management were raised internally by BLM staff, identified by the BLM and other agencies during public meetings, or have been brought up by individuals or user groups by way of phone calls, e-mails and letters. Preliminary issues were published in the Federal Register under a Notice of Intent (NOI) and/or were the subject of public comment periods and multiple public meetings. A full list of issues and the NOI can be found in Appendix 1. Issues addressed by this FMA/EA include:

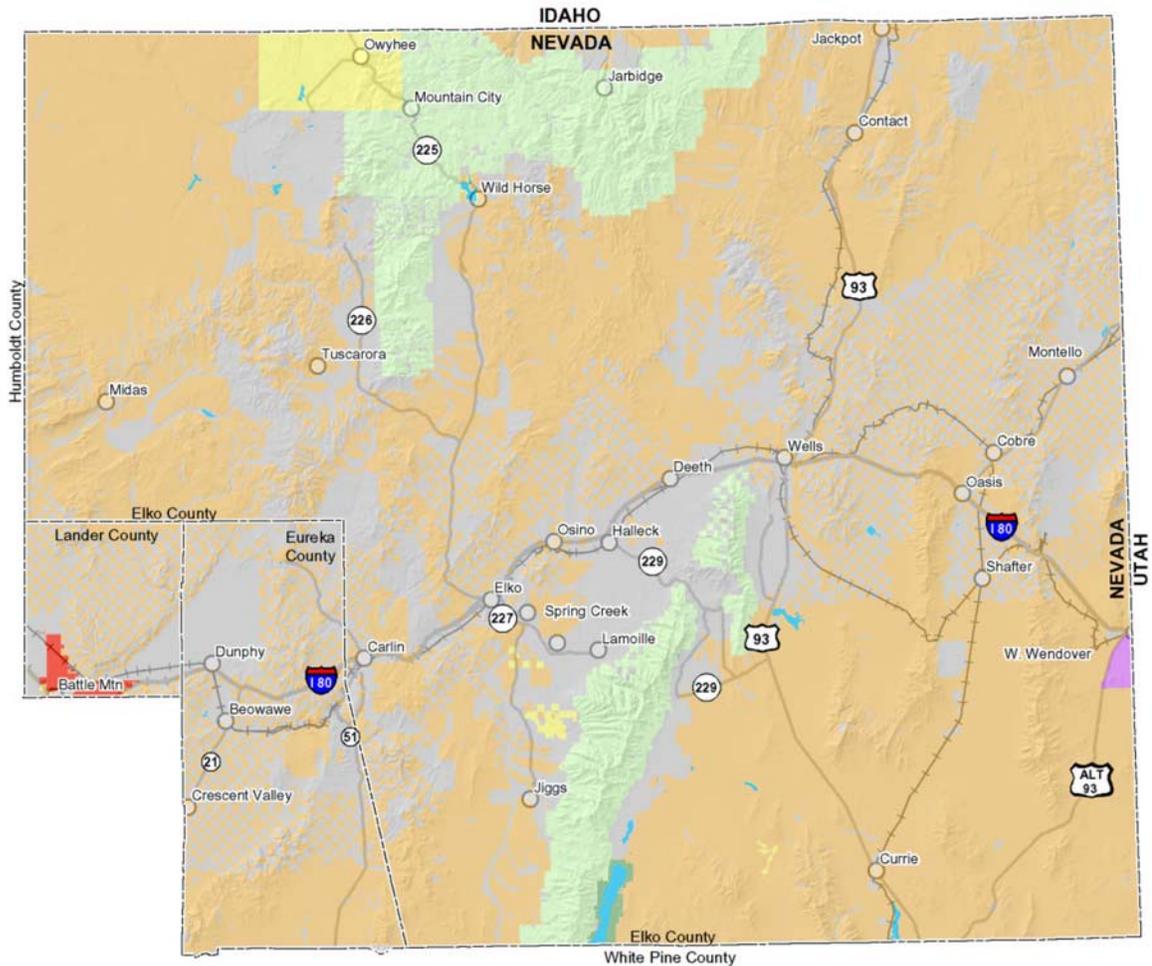
- Need for enhanced guidance for setting suppression strategies.
- Use of prescribed fire in high fuel load areas to reduce the potential for severe wildfire and to improve habitat.
- Protection and management of habitat for special status (threatened, endangered, candidate, sensitive) species, including sage grouse.
- Use of Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (ESR) procedures, including fencing, grazing and seeding of nonnative plant species.
- Managing forest resources to address diverse agency and user concerns.
- Management of invasive, nonnative weeds.
- Preservation of critical big game habitat.
- Determining the economic effect of fire suppression on local communities.
- Use of local resources to manage fire.
- Consideration of grazing to manage fire.
- Communication, training and cooperation with local communities.
- Cultural resources operating procedures.

A number of additional issues were raised during the public scoping and are described in Appendix 1. The public involvement process is described further in Chapter 5.



E. Project Location

The focus of this FMA/EA is limited to public lands included in the Elko and Wells Resource Management Areas and administered by the Elko Field Office. As shown in Figure 1-2, the Elko District, also known as the Elko Field Office is located in northeastern Nevada. The District is located in Elko County and portions of two other counties – Eureka and Lander. Adjacent Nevada counties include White Pine, Eureka, Humboldt and Lander. The City of Elko is located in the center of this District. Interstate 80 bisects the project area.



Land Ownership



Site Context

Figure 1 - 2

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0 5 10 20 Miles

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