United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Elko Field Office

SPRUCE MOUNTAIN RESTORATION PROJECT

Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision Record
BLM/EK/PL-2005/002
JA56, JDR # 6492
March 2005

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based on the environmental assessment (EA) for the proposed Spruce Mountain Restoration Project (BLM/EK/PL-2005/002), I have determined that the proposed action, as described in the EA, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required prior to approval of the proposed action.

This finding is based on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27) with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts, as discussed in the EA.

Context:

The Spruce Mountain Restoration Project is a hazardous fuels reduction project which would allow for the restoration of wildlife habitat in the Spruce Mountain Area. This hazardous fuels reduction project would treat up to 16,000 acres of pinyon-juniper, sagebrush, and mixed conifer communities to improve wildlife habitat within crucial mule deer winter range. Treatment areas would be mostly concentrated within areas that are experiencing encroachment by pinyon-juniper or areas where pinyon-juniper is infested by diseases (such as bark beetle or mistle toe). Some areas of mixed conifer, predominantly white fir, may also be treated due to close proximity to pinyon-juniper proposed treatment areas. These white fir sites are being considered for treatment because they are also infested by diseases. We have determined that treatment of these sites will result in a more disease resistant stand.

Development of this project has been in cooperation and coordination with wildlife biologists from the Nevada Department of Wildlife. Coordination was completed and is ongoing with eight local tribes in the area, various sportsmen groups, permittees, and other interested publics.

The proposed action addresses the issue of reducing hazardous fuels to attain objectives that promote healthy forests by removing stressed and diseased trees, reducing the threat of a catastrophic wildfire, restoring and maintaining wildlife habitat, and protect historic pinyon-juniper woodlands.

Intensity:

1. Impact that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The analysis addresses the benefits of maintaining healthy forest ecosystems and wildlife habitats by reducing hazardous fuels to reduce the threat of a catastrophic wildfire. Special design features are proposed to avoid or reduce adverse impacts to wildlife habitats, cultural resources, and wilderness values. In addition, they allow for the protection of access areas throughout the project area, provide safety measures for project implementation, address public coordination, and post treatment measures to protect treated areas. The proposed action is expected to reduce the overall adverse impacts to natural resources.

2. This degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

For specific treatment areas where prescribed burning is determined to be the preferred treatment method, a burn plan will be completed to address public health and safety as well as firefighter safety.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The specific design features address the applicable procedures to ensure protection of historic and cultural resources that occur within the project area. There are no park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas within the project area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The proposed treatment methods are well known and documented as successful tools for reducing hazardous fuels. The proposed treatment methods will allow for attainment of resource objectives. The proposed special design features will reduce adverse impacts to natural resources. The effects are not likely to be controversial.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

For any prescribed burning treatments, a burn plan will be completed to address any environmental harm or risk. The overall project is subject to monitoring and evaluation to address any uncertainty.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about future consideration.

The proposed treatment methods are scientifically accepted methods that are intended to meet resource objectives. All treatments will be monitored and evaluated to also ensure that the resource objectives are met. The proposed action does not establish a precedent for future actions and does not represent a decision about a future consideration.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

All resources are evaluated for cumulative impacts in the EA and no significant impacts are identified. As a standard procedure, cumulative impacts would continue to be subject to further review as actions are proposed in the project area and on an area-specific and case-by-case basis.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.
The specific design features address the applicable procedures to ensure protection of historic and cultural resources that occur within the project area.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.
Bald eagles, a federally listed threatened species, may be seen throughout the project area during the winter months. A historic roost site is located outside the boundary of the proposed treatment areas. The special design features provide procedures to ensure protection of this historic roost site.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.
The proposed action is in conformance with the Wells Resource Management Plan, the January 2001 Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, and the Approved Elko and Wells RMPs Fire Management Amendment, dated September 29, 2004. In addition, the proposed action is also consistent with the Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI), the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, 2003 (HFRA), and with other Federal, state, and local policies and plans to the maximum extent possible.

Decision
It is my decision to implement the Spruce Mountain Restoration Project as described in the attached Spruce Mountain Restoration Project EA (BLM/EK/PL-2005/002). This action will allow for the treatment of pinyon-juniper, sagebrush, and mixed conifer communities to improve wildlife habitat within crucial mule deer winter range. Treatments will be completed via burning, mechanical, and/or selective cutting and would be subject to the special design features and monitoring and evaluation procedures outlined in the EA.

Rationale
As a result of the analysis in the Spruce Mountain Restoration Project EA and the above FONSI, I have determined that the Proposed Action will not result in unnecessary or undue degradation to the public lands.

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the decision of the 1985 Wells Resource Management Plan (RMP) for Terrestrial Wildlife Habitat and Woodland Products. It is also consistent with the January 2001 Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and the Approved Elko and Wells RMPs Fire Management Amendment, dated September 29, 2004. In addition, the Proposed Action is also consistent with the Healthy

Forest Initiative (HFI), the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, 2003 (HFRA), and with other Federal, state, and local policies and plans to the maximum extent possible.

The implementation of the Proposed Action will allow for the removal of stressed and diseased pinyon-juniper, thereby reducing hazardous fuels and promoting healthy forests to restore and maintain wildlife habitat. The proposed treatments would break up the continuity of hazardous fuels that would aid in fire suppression efforts. This action would allow for the removal of pinyon-juniper to open up areas to restore the sagebrush community understory. In the long-term, implementation is expected to directly benefit mule deer, sage grouse, and other sagebrush obligates because it would restore wildlife habitat that has been compromised due to pinyon-juniper encroachment. The special design features will allow for minimal impacts to wildlife species as the treatments are implemented.

The No Action Alternative was not selected because it would allow for the continued spread of disease and insect infestations within the pinyon-juniper community. With no reduction in hazardous fuels, the threat of a stand replacement fire would still exist. Crucial mule deer winter range would continue to degrade as a result of pinyon-juniper encroachment. Sage grouse and other sagebrush obligate species would not experience any long term benefits from the forage diversity that would result from the proposed treatments.

Public Involvement

Presentations of the proposed action were presented to the Western Shoshone (8 Tribes), Elko Bighorns Unlimited, and the Elko Convention and Visitors Authority (Recreation Trails Committee). In addition, a field tour was held with Northeast Nevada Stewardship Group and US Placer Dome. Nevada Bighorns Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, and the Nevada Wildlife Heritage Program (Account) were all notified of the project via project proposals.

Approval

JOE FREELAND, Fire Management Officer
Elko Field Office

3/03/05
Date

Public and Administrative Review

All documents supporting this decision are available for review by the public. This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with the procedures in 43 CFR, Part 4. Implementation of this project will be effective following the completion of the administrative review process.

Attachment:
Spruce Mountain Restoration Project Environmental Assessment.