

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
White River Field Office
73544 Hwy 64
Meeker, CO 81641**

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

NUMBER: CO-110-2004-041-EA

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER: CO-936-2824-JW-EA81

PROJECT NAME: Wolf Ridge Prescribed Fire

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: T2S R99W Sec. 8, 9, 10, 16, 17

APPLICANT: USDI Bureau of Land Management - White River Field Office

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES:

Background/Introduction: Rio Blanco County (RBC) is among the top three counties in Colorado for probability of wildfire (Neuenschwander et al. 2000). As part of an emergency preparedness review, Rio Blanco County evaluated risk of wildland fire through geographic information systems analysis (RBC 2003, Strategic Emergency/Disaster Management Program, Revision B). This analysis involved overlaying fuels with community features, such as homes, oil & gas wells, roads, industrial facilities, electrical lines and wildlife habitat. The analysis revealed that electrical transmission lines, industrial, and oil and gas facilities had the most significant exposure to risk of wildland fire hazard in the county. Therefore, the county identified this infrastructure as a priority in their Strategic Wildland Fire Management Program (RBC 2003, Rio Blanco County, Colorado, Strategic Wildland Fire Hazard Management Program).

Proposed Action: BLM would initiate hazardous fuel reduction involving prescribed fire on four burn units (500 acres) depicted on the attached map. However, should burn windows be missed for three consecutive years this project will be reevaluated for implementation by mechanical treatment. This hazardous fuel reduction project would begin in the spring of 2004. Prescribed fire treatment will be conducted by federal employees whereas mechanical treatment would be preformed by private contractor.

Prescribed Fire: Broadcast burning will be used to reduce the fuel loading of woody species including sagebrush, serviceberry, snowberry, Utah juniper and pinyon pine. This will effectively change the vegetation from a mixed mountain shrub with pinyon/juniper (PJ) encroachment community to a grass and forb community. This treatment would result in a lower intensity wildfire in the event one should occur as compared to the current condition, thereby

reducing the risk of damage by wildfire to the EnCana compressor station and associated power line.

Holding operations in conjunction with prescribed fire may include hand line construction, black lining, and off road fire engine operations. A class III cultural clearance will be completed prior to any hand line construction. Any new routes established during burning or holding operations will be closed off after project completion to prevent the establishment of new roads.

The target area consists of the four units intended to be burned subject to the resource objectives listed in the resource management objectives section below. The allowable area is the surrounding area where burning is not planned. Fire may be allowed in this area, under specific criteria, without being declared a wildfire. Black lining will be conducted around the perimeter of the target areas and around any interior islands in order to reduce the chance of fire burning outside the target area. In the event that fire should spread from the target area and threaten mature pinyon/juniper stands (see map), the burn boss, holding specialist, and resource advisor will determine if suppression actions are warranted. If fire burns into any area consisting of mixed mountain shrubs, control actions will be taken only if there is potential for fire to burn beyond the allowable area or into mature pinyon/juniper. Further criteria may be identified by the prescribed fire plan.

All prescribed fire will be conducted in accordance with the State of Colorado Smoke Management Plan and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and will be regulated under Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Air Pollution Control Division, approved open burning permits, which must be issued in advance of the fire. Simple Approach Smoke Estimation Model (SASEM, 1991) air pollutant dispersion predictions will be completed for all prescribed burn plans and reviewed by the State.

Treatment Area Description and Resource Management Objectives: This 456 acre prescribed fire project would be located approximately 30 miles southwest of Meeker Colorado, on the ridge top between Stake Springs Draw and Box Elder Gulch. The units are approximately 60% sagebrush/grass, 15% sagebrush/serviceberry, and 25% sagebrush/grass with PJ encroachment. The fuels management goal is to treat 50-80% of the vegetation within each unit while leaving the adjacent mature pinion/juniper stands outside the units untreated. Some hand line construction may be needed to facilitate holding operations. Completion of this project will provide a fuel break/buffer for the EnCana compressor station and associated wooden pole power line (see attached map).

The objective for this treatment in sagebrush/serviceberry, and sagebrush/grass with PJ encroachment is to limit mortality of perennial bunch grasses to 10-15% and kill 75-90% of juniper and pinion trees. Total acreage consumed by fire should be limited to 60 – 80% of the targeted areas to create mosaic and edge effects for improved wildlife habitat. For the 130 acre unit west of the compressor station, the pure sagebrush/grass park will not be targeted for burning, individual saplings will be cut to inhibit PJ establishment within this park. Some burning may occur on the periphery of this park while burning of the more heavily encroached areas of the unit is conducted. All efforts will be made to limit large scale involvement of

sagebrush within this park. To insure plant recovery/establishment the treated areas will be rested from livestock grazing for two growing seasons.

Mechanical Treatment: If three years pass without the appropriate burn windows to complete the project as described above the project will be converted from prescribed fire to a mechanical treatment. A hydro-ax or similar type of large rubber tired machine, capable of shredding trees up to 12” in diameter and 15’ tall as well as mowing brush like a conventional brush beater, would be used to achieve the same objectives as described above. Operations would not be allowed in muddy conditions. Under mechanical treatment, islands or strips of untreated vegetation would be left to mimic a mosaic pattern that a fire might leave under low to moderate conditions.

Mitigation:

- 1) BLM will monitor the project sites and eradicate all noxious, problem and invasive species using materials and methods approved by the authorized officer.
- 2) If the project is converted to mechanical treatments, it should not be implemented during the nesting season (May 15 – July 15).
- 3) If it is determined that fire should be allowed to burn within the allowable area, suppression actions will be taken to prevent fire from significantly impacting riparian resources.
- 4) For prescribed burning, efforts shall be made to avoid construction of hand line across exposed rock outcrops. If a mechanical fuel reduction effort becomes necessary, every effort shall be made to avoid exposed outcrops with the hydro-ax or other brush grinding equipment.
- 5) BLM will perform rangeland monitoring to include creation of an unburned check study.
- 6) The Colorado One Call center will have to be notified of the proposed prescribed fire activity (800-922-1987 or 800-833-9417).
- 7) Prior to any fuels reduction operations, BLM will inform the public via newspaper articles, internet postings, and on the ground signage.
- 8) Any line constructed will be promptly rehabilitated to inhibit the creation of eroded lines that may create strong vertical line in the landscape.
- 9) Black lining will be done in a manner that allows wild horses a safe escape route. This may be accomplished by black lining only portions of the burn perimeters at one time.
- 10) Fire personnel would be made aware of the potential for young foals to be present on location. Prior to black lining or primary burning, all fire personnel will make a conscientious effort to alert wild horses of their presence. This allows any horses present time to escape at a leisurely pace; a situation which decreases the potential for newborn foals to become separated from their band.

11) All prescribed burning operations will have a burn plan prepared and approved prior to ignition. A Colorado State Smoke permit will also be approved and included in the burn plan, prior to any ignitions on this project.

12) The operator is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project operations that they will be subject to prosecution for knowingly disturbing historic or archaeological sites, or for collecting artifacts. If historic or archaeological materials are uncovered during any project or construction activities, the operator is to immediately stop activities in the immediate area of the find that might further disturb such materials, and immediately contact the authorized officer (AO). Within five working days the AO will inform the operator as to:

- whether the materials appear eligible for the National Register of Historic Places
- the mitigation measures the operator will likely have to undertake before the site can be used (assuming in situ preservation is not necessary)
- a timeframe for the AO to complete an expedited review under 36 CFR 800-11 to confirm, through the State Historic Preservation Officer, that the findings of the AO are correct and that mitigation is appropriate.

If the operator wishes, at any time, to relocate activities to avoid the expense of mitigation and/or the delays associated with this process, the AO will assume responsibility for whatever recordation and stabilization of the exposed materials may be required. Otherwise, the operator will be responsible for mitigation cost. The AO will provide technical and procedural guidelines for the conduct of mitigation. Upon verification from the AO that the required mitigation has been completed, the operator will then be allowed to resume construction.

13) Pursuant to 43 CFR 10.4(g) the holder of this authorization must notify the AO, by telephone, with written confirmation, immediately upon the discovery of human remains, funerary items, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony. Further, pursuant to 43 CFR 10.4(c) and (d), you must stop activities in the vicinity of the discovery and protect it for 30 days or until notified to proceed by the authorized officer.

No Action Alternative: Under this alternative, hazardous fuel reduction activities would not occur.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT CARRIED FORWARD:

Chemical Treatment: Using herbicides to kill woody vegetation was considered but eliminated from further analysis because the dead plant material would still present a hazardous, yet reduced, fuel situation. Additionally, selective chemical treatment is problematic and results are visually unappealing.

NEED FOR THE ACTION: In accordance with the National Fire Plan of 1999, public land agencies are directed to take actions to reduce hazardous fuels, especially in those areas where communities and human development are at risk from wildfire. The White River Fire

Management Plan, which was developed as a required action in the White River Resource Management Plan, identifies areas where hazardous fuel reduction take place to protect, maintain and enhance ecosystems, economic values, and multiple resource management programs. The proposed action was developed to comply with these two plans.

Currently the area in which this project is proposed is managed as a “B” polygon (B6 Yellow Creek). “B” polygons are those where unplanned wildfire is not desired because of potentially negative impacts to the environment or property. This “B” polygon is adjacent to the C5 polygon which has a significant recent fire history and a number of these fires have in fact burned out of the C5 polygon into the B6 polygon. Also, the B6 polygon is adjacent to a “D” polygon which has fire management objectives where fire is desired and some naturally occurring fire may be allowed to burn. Currently fires having potential to burn into “B” polygons must be suppressed. The completion of this hazardous fuels reduction project will allow for more latitude in how fire is managed in the adjacent “D” polygon and may potentially limit the size of fires occurring within the “B” polygon while also mitigating wildfire threat to the Stake Springs compressor station and adjacent powerline.

PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW: The Proposed Action is subject to and has been reviewed for conformance with the following plan (43 CFR 1610.5, BLM 1617.3):

Name of Plan: White River Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan (ROD/RMP).

Date Approved: July 1, 1997

Decision Number/Page: 2-55

Decision Language: “Manage fire to protect public health, safety, and property as well as allowing fire to carry out important ecological functions.” “Utilize prescribed fire, both natural and management ignited, to protect, maintain and enhance ecosystems, economic values, and multiple use resource management programs.”

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT / ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES / MITIGATION MEASURES:

STANDARDS FOR PUBLIC LAND HEALTH: In January 1997, Colorado Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved the Standards for Public Land Health. These standards cover upland soils, riparian systems, plant and animal communities, threatened and endangered species, and water quality. Standards describe conditions needed to sustain public land health and relate to all uses of the public lands. Because a standard exists for these five categories, a finding must be made for each of them in an environmental analysis. These findings are located in specific elements listed below:

CRITICAL ELEMENTS

AIR QUALITY

Affected Environment: Air quality is not currently being monitored in the project area, however it is considered to be within the national and Colorado air quality standards. There are two class 1 (visibility) areas located in northwest Colorado including the Mt. Zirkel Wilderness 120 miles to the northeast and the Flat Tops Wilderness 70 miles to the east.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Both prescribed and wildland fires are potentially a significant source of air pollution emissions including particulate matter, volatile organic compounds, and carbon monoxide.

Under the proposed action, all fire activities will be conducted within existing laws that protect air quality. Specifically, all fire activities must comply with the applicable air quality regulations required by FLPMA, the Clean Air Act, and the Colorado Air Quality Commission. By complying with applicable air quality standards and regulations, impacts to air quality will be short term and considered acceptable.

Prescribed fires are typically smaller than uncontrolled wildfires occurring during peak burning conditions and typically involve less total combustion than wildfires as a result of the more mesic conditions under which prescribed fires are conducted. Resulting in less over all smoke production. Also, prescribed fires are conducted under atmospheric conditions that will promote air pollutant dispersion.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: The direct environmental consequences associated from this project will obviously be absent in the no action alternative. However, greater long term consequences could occur as a result of increasing potential for large scale uncontrolled wildfires. Uncontrolled wildfires tend to produce more smoke as a result of more fuel consumption, their larger size, and longer burning duration. A large wildfire in this area has the potential to impact the two class 1 designated areas.

Mitigation: None

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: The proposed fuel manipulation area has been inventoried at the Class III (100% pedestrian) level by Uncompahgre Archaeological Consultants (Pointkowski 2004) with no significant resources identified in the treatment area.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The proposed action will not impact known cultural resources of scientific importance.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would be no new impacts to cultural resources under the No Action Alternative.

Mitigation: None

INVASIVE, NON-NATIVE SPECIES

Affected Environment: There are no known noxious or problem weeds at the site of the proposed action. The invasive alien cheatgrass is found on disturbed areas associated with roads at the lower end of the treatment units.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: There is low likelihood of noxious/invasive species invading the site because there will be no earthen disturbance. However, because roads and vehicles are a principal means of weed spread and proliferation, it is important that the project site be monitored on an annual basis, as described in the proposed action.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would be no change from the present situation.

Mitigation: None.

MIGRATORY BIRDS

Affected Environment: Wolf Ridge provides both foraging and nesting habitat for a variety of migratory birds. Birds that may nest in sagebrush parks include green-tailed towhees, Brewer's sparrows, Vesper sparrows and Sage thrashers. The area designated for treatment is composed of sagebrush and grass with a younger pinion/juniper component. The pinion/juniper component was examined during a site visit on March 8, 2004 and found too young to support raptor nests.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The proposed action will mimic natural disturbances and will improve the overall vigor and health of the ecosystem. Removing pinion/juniper trees in the project area will improve sagebrush parks for sage obligate bird species. Healthy sagebrush parks in the project area will remain intact, leaving nesting habitat for migratory birds while sagebrush in the burned area re-grows. The surrounding pinion/juniper woodlands will not be treated and therefore migratory birds which utilize this habitat will not be impacted. The prescribed burning would likely take place during the early spring or fall months and will not impact migratory birds during the nesting season (May 15 – July 15). If the project is converted to mechanical treatments, it should not be implemented during the nesting season.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: The No Action alternative will have no impacts to migratory birds; however, the risk of a large wildfire fire still exists with this alternative.

Mitigation: None

THREATENED, ENDANGERED, AND SENSITIVE ANIMAL SPECIES (includes a finding on Standard 4)

Affected Environment: No Federal ESA listed animal species would be affected by the proposed action. The project area is historic range for the Greater sage grouse, a BLM sensitive species. The area designated for treatment is composed of sagebrush and grass with a younger pinyon/juniper component. Young trees in the sagebrush parks have decreased habitat quality for sage grouse.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The proposed action will improve habitat for Greater sage grouse by restoring the sagebrush parks in the area. Prescribed fire conducted in the spring generally leaves a mosaic pattern on the landscape, increasing the herbaceous component of the ecosystem while leaving islands of sagebrush for cover. Healthy sagebrush parks in the project area will remain intact, leaving adequate habitat while sagebrush in the burned area re-grows. The proposed action will improve the overall health and vigor of sagebrush parks, increasing the likelihood of sage grouse use in the future. Mechanical treatments of the area will produce the same results as prescribed burning, but would allow for faster re-growth of sagebrush.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: The No Action alternative will have no impacts to Threatened and Endangered animal species; however, the risk of a large wildfire fire still exists with this alternative.

Mitigation: Habitat considerations for Greater sage grouse, consistent with objectives established in the White River RMP, were cooperatively developed and integrated with the proposed action.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for Threatened & Endangered species: There is no reasonable likelihood that the proposed action or no action alternative would have an influence on Threatened and Endangered animal species, and thus no effect on achieving the land health standard. The proposed action will improve habitat for the Greater sage grouse, a BLM sensitive species.

THREATENED, ENDANGERED, AND SENSITIVE PLANT SPECIES (includes a finding on Standard 4)

Affected Environment: No Threatened or Endangered plant species are present in the vicinity of, or will be affected by the proposed action.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: None

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: None

Mitigation: None

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for Threatened & Endangered species:
There is no reasonable likelihood that the proposed action or no action alternative would have an influence on the condition or function of Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive plant species. Thus there would be no effect on achieving the land health standard.

WASTES, HAZARDOUS OR SOLID

Affected Environment: Hazardous or solid wastes are not expected to be a part of the affected environment. However, these materials may accidentally be introduced in the environment through the implementation of the proposed action. Fuel, oil, grease, and antifreeze are all associated with vehicles and fire suppression equipment associated with implementing the proposed action and would only be introduced into the environment because of equipment failure. Minute loss of these materials through normal operation of equipment, maintenance and fueling procedures are not considered spills. Spills are generally defined as the loss of large quantities of these materials into the environment and are determined to be a spill on a case-by-case basis.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: For any given accident or incident involving hazardous materials, consequences will be dependent on the volume and nature of the incident and material released. Short term impacts such as contaminations of soils, vegetation, and surface water could occur.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: No hazardous wastes would be introduced into the environment under the no action alternative.

Mitigation: None

WATER QUALITY, SURFACE AND GROUND (includes a finding on Standard 5)

Affected Environment: The proposed action is in segment 13b, identified in the Stream Classifications and Water Quality Standards as the mainstem of Yellow Creek, including all tributaries from the source to the confluence with the White River.

A review of the Colorado's 1989 Nonpoint Source Assessment Report (plus updates), the 305(b) report, the 303(d) list and the Unified Watershed Assessment was done to see if any water quality concerns have been identified. All actions are within the White River watershed.

The State has designated this segment as "Use Protected". They further classified this stream segment as Warm Aquatic Life 2, Recreation 2, and Agriculture. The state has further defined water quality parameters with table values. These standards reflect the ambient water quality and define maximum allowable concentrations for the various water quality parameters. The anti-degradation rule does not apply to segments that are considered to be use protected. For these drainages, on the parameters listed in the table apply.

Historic data collected by USGS during the early 80's is available for Box Elder Gulch. This data indicates the stream flows starting in late March and last usually through June. The specific conductance is of good quality averaging 780 us/cm.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Infiltration rates are likely to decline following fires and could cause an increase in overland flows. Flashy runoff can be expected in bare areas that are subjected to high intense storms immediately after burning. These runoff events are the major water quality hazard of fires, because of an increase in erosion and sediment yields.

Impacts to Box Elder Gulch are expected to be minimal since the drainage area is relatively small. It is unlikely adverse affects on water quality and quantity would occur as a result of the proposed manipulations. Prescribed burns can result in vegetation rejuvenation and/or conversions which are hydrologically beneficial.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: Impacts are not anticipated from the no-action alternative, except that the potential for wildfire is greater. Wild fire would result in impacts similar to those described under the proposed action, only of greater intensity.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for water quality: The water quality of Box Elder Gulch is well within the standards set by the state.

WETLANDS AND RIPARIAN ZONES (includes a finding on Standard 2)

Affected Environment: There are no perennial streams or springs with associated riparian vegetation located within the target units. There are three springs (P-157-36, P-158-01, P-158-04) located within the allowable area. None of these springs have water rights filed on them. Box Elder Gulch is an ephemeral stream that does contain riparian vegetation.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Because the springs and riparian resources are not located within the target units, there is little chance that these resources would be impacted. The three springs and riparian vegetation in Box Elder Gulch were previously burned in 1995; conversely the fuel loading adjacent to these resources is very light. In the unlikely event that fire should reach these areas, it would be of low intensity and any riparian vegetation would resprout/regrow quickly after being burned. Mitigation measures described in the proposed action should minimize the risk of impacts to riparian vegetation.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would be no impacts to riparian or wetland resources under this alternative.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for riparian systems: No formal assessment has been conducted to date to determine if the three springs that fall within the allowable area, are or are not meeting riparian system standards. Proper Functioning Condition (PFC) assessment was conducted for Box Elder Gulch in 1997. Reach one, two, three and four were found to be functioning at risk with a downward trend, reach five was found to be properly functioning with an unapparent trend and reach six was functioning at risk with an unapparent trend.

Since the riparian resources are not located within the target treatment areas, the chance of impacting these resources is very small. In the unlikely event that fire should burn these areas, it would be of low intensity and any riparian vegetation would resprout/regrow quickly after being burned. There would likely be no effect on achievement of the land health standard as a result of the proposed action.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS NOT PRESENT OR NOT AFFECTED:

No Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, flood plains, prime and unique farmlands, Wilderness Areas, or Wild and Scenic Rivers exist within the area affected by the proposed action. There are also no Native American religious or environmental justice concerns associated with the proposed action.

NON-CRITICAL ELEMENTS

The following elements **must** be addressed due to the involvement of Standards for Public Land Health:

SOILS (includes a finding on Standard 1)

Affected Environment: The following table describes the soils that are present within the burn units. The Rentsac Loam is shallow and well drained while the other two soil types are deep and well drained. The permeability of these soils is moderate to moderately rapid and the available water capacity is moderate to very low. Runoff rates vary from slow to rapid and water erosion hazard is slight to moderate. Soils within the allowable area are similar in physical and vegetative characteristics to those found within the targeted area.

Soil Name	Ecological Site	Slope	Erosion	Acres
Glendive Fine Sandy Loam	Foothills Swale	2-4%	Slight	401.5
Rentsac Channery Loam	Pinyon Juniper woodlands	5-50%	Moderate-Very High	50.2
Yamac Loam	Rolling Loam	2-15%	Slight-Moderate	4.8

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The effects of prescribed burning on soils is directly related to the depth and intensity of soil heating as well as vegetation removal which exposes the soil to wind and water erosion. Conducting this burn while soil and live fuel moisture is high, combined with light to moderate fuel loading, will result in lower surface

temperatures and short burning duration. As a result, soil heating should not be severe enough to cause significant changes in physical properties of the soil, mortality of perennial grasses and forbs, and mortality of the seed bed. It is anticipated that soil erosion will increase for one to three growing seasons post burn due to increased soil surface exposure. Within that time frame herbaceous vegetation cover should increase above pre-burn levels resulting in increased soil stability, water infiltration, and reduced soil erosion.

Fire in the allowable area that is woodland may adversely affect soils for a longer duration, due to steeper slopes, shallower soils, lower composition of perennial grasses and forbs, thick duff, and greater fuel loading. These areas will require more time to adequately revegetate and are more prone to soil erosion. The most adverse impacts would be to those areas with thick duff and/or heavy accumulations of fuels because of the intense long duration heat produced. Short term soil sterilization and hydrophobicity may occur if burned under very dry conditions however, burning under these conditions should be avoided by conducting the burn when soil and fuel moistures are relatively high. Despite these short term effects, soil erosion would be at or below pre-burn levels in three to five years due to increased ground cover.

Another related effect of implementing the proposed action is the reduced chance of large fire occurrence and improved ability for wildland fires to be managed under moderate environmental conditions.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would be no direct impact to soils under this alternative. However, the threat of large fires occurring under extremely dry conditions would continue to exist. The scale and duration of adverse soil impacts is much higher under extreme burning conditions associated with large fire occurrence.

Mitigation: None

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for upland soils: Soils within the burn units and allowable area are currently meeting Public Land Health Standards. Prescribed fire will cause a short term increase in soil erosion by decreasing canopy cover and surface litter. However, since soil heating should not be severe, organic content of the soil should remain high, canopy cover should increase with vigorous desirable perennial grasses and forbs, and plant diversity should increase from current conditions. It is anticipated that by implementing this proposed action the long term effect should improve the indicators for the upland soils standard.

VEGETATION (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Affected Environment: The principle ecological site in all burn units is the Rolling Loam site. Vegetation on the proposed treatment sites is dominated by mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp *vaseyana*) at the upper end and Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp *wyomingensis*) at the lower end. Between the two upper and lower units, the two species are mixed and probably hybridize. Herbaceous understory components include needle and thread, western wheatgrass, mutton bluegrass, buckwheat, lupine, tapertip hawksbeard and long leaf phlox. In the upper two units, pinyons are invading the site. In the lower two units,

primarily junipers are invading the site. The uppermost burn unit had a 3.2% canopy cover of lichens and cyanobacteria and a 9.4 % canopy cover of mosses when last sampled in August, 2001. Lichens, cyanobacteria and mosses are commonly collectively referred to as biological crusts.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Implementation of the burn project will result in 80-90% mortality of big sagebrush in all burn units. Big sagebrush (primarily mountain big sagebrush) will reinvade the treatment sites within 10-20 years, the rate of reinvansion will be faster in the higher elevation units. Wyoming big sagebrush reinvansion will take place at slower rates, probably in the range of 20-60 years. Utah serviceberry plants in the upper burn units will resprout from the crown following burning. Fire will result in almost complete mortality of pinyon and juniper in the burn units.

Herbaceous species are generally well adapted to fire. Grasses such as needle and thread and western wheatgrass respond favorably to fire and would be expected to be herbaceous codominants in the first ten years after burning. Mat forming forbs such as Antennaria (pussytoes) and Eriogonum (buckwheat) can be severely damaged by fire if the fire occurs under hot, dry conditions such as would occur in a wildfire. In general, if the burn is completed in the spring under prescribed soil moisture conditions, it will favor forbs in the post burn herbaceous composition. Burning can be expected to lengthen the growing season and enhance the nutrient quality of forbs and grasses on the burn sites.

Burning will result in a net decline in the biomass and cover of the biological crusts on site with the extent of the loss being dependent on fire intensity and the resulting mosaic of the burn. Depending on fire intensity, biological crust structural components such as fungal hyphae, algal and cyanobacterial filaments, and moss and lichen rhizomes may persist for some time after burning, reducing erosion while the biological crusts and vascular plants recover after burning. Crust recovery rates vary widely, and may range from 2-5 years for partial recovery of algal crusts to up to 200 years for moss and lichen crusts.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: Presently the treatment units could be considered to be in Stage One relative to their conversion into PJ woodlands. That is, pinyon and juniper trees have invaded the Wyoming/mountain big sagebrush type but they have not reached sufficient density and height to dominate the site. No action would allow the invasion process to continue so that over the long term the treatment areas would be dominated in both structure and composition by pinyon-juniper, absent the occurrence of an uncontrollable wildfire event.

Mitigation: None.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for plant and animal communities (partial, see also Wildlife, Aquatic and Wildlife, Terrestrial): Vegetation in the proposed project area currently meets the Standard. Successful implementation of this project, while decreasing mountain and Wyoming big sagebrush cover over the short term, will result in a long term improvement in the vegetation cover and composition, and the standard would continue to be met.

WILDLIFE, AQUATIC (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Affected Environment: There are no aquatic wildlife species occurring within the target areas or maximum manageable area (MMA).

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: None

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: None

Mitigation: None

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for plant and animal communities (partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Terrestrial): Since there are no perennial waters occurring within the target areas or MMA the proposed action will have no influence upon the Public Land Health Standard pertaining to aquatic wildlife.

WILDLIFE, TERRESTRIAL (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Affected Environment: Wolf Ridge provides habitat for elk, mule deer and a variety of small mammals, amphibians and reptiles. The project area is mapped as winter range for elk and mule deer. The areas designated for treatment are sagebrush parks with scattered serviceberry and pinion and juniper trees.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The proposed action will create a mosaic landscape and should improve habitat for wildlife in the area. Important browse species, such as serviceberry, will be thinned but not completely removed. This will allow for shrub re-sprouting and will improve browsing conditions for wintering big game species. The proposed action will also increase the herbaceous component of the ecosystem, improving grazing conditions. Healthy sagebrush parks in the project area will remain intact, leaving adequate habitat while sagebrush in the burned area re-grows. Adjacent pinion/juniper woodlands will be left intact, providing cover for big game species. Converting prescribed burns to mechanical treatments will result in a similar mosaic pattern and will have the same impacts on wildlife.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: No Action alternative will not impact wildlife, however, the threat of a large wildfire occurring still exists if no fuels reduction occurs. Suppression activities and habitat modification from a wildfire may have significant impacts on wildlife in the area.

Mitigation: Big game woody forage considerations consistent with RMP objectives were integrated with project design.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard for plant and animal communities (partial, see also Vegetation and Wildlife, Aquatic): The project will meet this standard by returning decadent areas to a younger, healthier and more productive state. The greater potential under this

alternative for creating landscapes composed of several plant communities that vary in successional stages and patterns will contribute to meeting this standard.

No Action Alternative: This alternative is less likely to meet this standard on a landscape basis. Without treatment, there will be fewer age classes and successional stages across the landscape, which will reduce vegetation and animal diversity. Allowing vegetation across large areas to become old and decadent will reduce the health and vigor of plants as well as their reproductive capability. It also promotes increased the likelihood of large catastrophic fires occurring in the area

OTHER NON-CRITICAL ELEMENTS: For the following elements, those brought forward for analysis will be formatted as shown above.

Non-Critical Element	NA or Not Present	Applicable or Present, No Impact	Applicable & Present and Brought Forward for Analysis
Access and Transportation			X
Cadastral Survey	X		
Fire Management			X
Forest Management			X
Geology and Minerals	X		
Hydrology/Water Rights	X		
Law Enforcement		X	
Paleontology			X
Rangeland Management			X
Realty Authorizations			X
Recreation			X
Socio-Economics		X	
Visual Resources			X
Wild Horses			X

ACCESS AND TRANSPORTATION

Affected Environment: All units identified in this proposed action have legal public access via Rio Blanco County Road 70 from Stake Springs Draw, or from RBC road 24 in Corral Gulch, BLM road 1187, and unimproved two-track roads. County road 70 does have occasional traffic associated with oil and gas development in the area. County road 24 has moderate traffic from the Shell facilities at the terminus of RBC 24, and BLM road 1187 also has some light oil and gas traffic. Recreational use of routes around the project area occurs primarily during deer and elk hunting seasons.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Units one and four border county road 70 and unit four also borders BLM road 1178. Portions of these routes may need to be

closed or restricted for short periods of time while burning operations are being conducted on these units. Due to the low traffic volume and alternate routes in the area the impact would not be significant.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would be no impacts from the no action alternative.

Mitigation: None

FIRE MANAGEMENT

Affected Environment: The project area currently consists of three vegetation types; sagebrush/grass, sagebrush with mountain brush species, and sagebrush/grass with PJ encroachment. The areas with PJ encroachment are approaching Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) 3 and the other two types of areas are in FRCC 2. Some level of encroachment is present in all three of the different type areas. See discussion below in “Forest Management” section as to the relationship of this project to the White River RMP.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The proposed action will result in a lessening of potential fire behavior and fire intensities after the prescribed burning for a period of 20 to 30 years. The burned areas will be dominated by grasses and forbs, and if they would burn, the intensities would be much lower than at present. Suppression activities would thereby be safer and more effective than in the current situation with the heavier, taller fuels. Protection efforts around the compressor station and the power line poles will be greatly enhanced after implementation of this proposed action.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There will be no change from the current condition. In the event of a wildland fire event in the area, the compressor station and a number of the power line poles could be threatened or damaged. The over all condition of the area will continue to progress toward FRCC 3.

Mitigation: None

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Affected Environment: Within the project area there is invasion by Utah juniper and pinyon pine. These sites are not considered as woodland sites. The White River ROD/RMP described specific Desired Plant Community (DPC) goals for Pinyon /Juniper woodlands including: “Reducing the pinyon/juniper tree component where pinyon or juniper has dominated or is invading other ecological sites.” This project would contribute to achieving this goal.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The proposed action would not affect woodland management goals, but would contribute to achievement of DPC goals outlined in the White River RMP.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would not be any impacts to woodlands, but plant community goals would not be achieved.

Mitigation: None

PALEONTOLOGY

Affected Environment: The area of the proposed fuels reduction is in an area mapped as the Uinta Formation (Tweto 1979) which the BLM has classified as a Category I formation. Category I formations are those formations that are known to produce scientifically important fossil resources.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Low temperature prescribed fire is not expected to have significant impacts to fossil resources, especially those resources covered by soils. Exposed outcrops, if covered with duff may experience some thermal fracturing or discoloration to the stone and exposed fossil resources. However, these impacts are considered to be fairly minor. Construction of hand lines has the potential to impact fossils if excavation extends into outcrops of exposed stone.

Should it become necessary to use mechanical fuel treatment methods due to inability to achieve the correct prescribed fire conditions there is some potential to impact fossil resources with the Hydro-ax equipment. Impacts could potentially occur as the heavy equipment traverses exposed outcrops, crushing exposed fossil remains. Impact could also potentially occur as the cutter head occasionally gouges into the underlying bedrock due to the naturally occurring roughness of the terrain. In that case any remains present could be crushed and/or scattered by the mechanical action of the cutter head.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: There would be no fuel reduction related impacts to fossil resources under the No Action Alternative.

Mitigation: None.

RANGELAND MANAGEMENT

Affected Environment: The proposed action is within the Stake Springs pasture of the Square S allotment (06027). This pasture is used as a transitional pasture between the spring/fall pastures and the Square S summer range. The area of the burn units typically receives slight to light use when the pasture is used.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Successful implementation of the project will result in a long term increase in herbaceous forage production and a short term increase in herbaceous forage quality.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: Invasion of pinyon and juniper into Wyoming and mountain big sagebrush parks would continue to occur, resulting in a decline in forage quantity and quality for livestock over the long term.

Mitigation: None.

REALTY AUTHORIZATIONS

Affected Environment: The area of the Wolf Ridge Prescribed Fire contains several rights-of-way. The proposed action is in an area that contains several right-of-way facilities. USGS has 3 well monitoring sites (sec. 8, 9, 10). There are 2 meteorological sites in sec. 17. The area is crossed by 2 powerlines. The Stake Springs Compressor Station in sec. 17 also contains a remote terminal unit and a communication facility. There are 4 pipelines that are in the prescribe fire area—2 of these are major transportation lines.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: Potential for adverse effects from wildfire to facilities in these rights of way would be reduced.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: Potential for adverse effects from wildfire to facilities in these rights of way would continue to exist.

Mitigation: None.

RECREATION

Affected Environment: The proposed action would occur within the White River Extensive Recreation Management Area (ERMA). BLM custodially manages the ERMA to provide for unstructured recreation activities such as hunting, dispersed camping, hiking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing and off-highway vehicle use.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: The public will temporarily lose approximately 600 acres of dispersed recreation potential during the prescribed fire operation. If action coincides with hunting seasons (September through November) it will most likely disrupt the experience sought by those recreationists and will most likely result in complaints from hunters that have historically used this area.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: No loss of dispersed recreation potential and no impact to hunting recreationists.

Mitigation: None.

VISUAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment: The proposed action is located within a VRM class III area. The objective of this class is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape. At present, VRM III class objectives are being met.

The area is characterized by round forms created by a change in vegetation types. Lines are vertical bands described again by vegetational differences. Colors are predominantly juniper greens and shades of gray and brown. Texture could be described as being somewhat smooth in areas of similar vegetation to moderately rough when intermixing of vegetation types occur.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: By introducing fire to the landscape, it would be expected that the fire will create new openings in the vegetation introducing more round shapes within the existing landscape. Although the color of the burned area may be somewhat divergent in the season following the fire, it would be expected that the color divergence will, over time be unnoticeable to the casual observer. Immediately post-fire, VRM class III objectives may not be met as the color differences between burned and unburned material will likely be noticeable to the casual observer. This divergence in vegetation color will fade in time and in the long term, will be unnoticeable. VRM class III objectives will be met as vegetation returns in several years.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: VRM III class objectives will continue to be met.

Mitigation: None.

WILD HORSES

Affected Environment: The proposed action is located in the Boxelder/Corral Gulch portion of the Piceance-East Douglas Wild Horse Herd Management Area (HMA). This area of the HMA supports a resident population of wild horses. The animals rely on Stake Springs Draw and Maverick Spring for a portion of their water requirements and graze the higher slopes of Wolf Ridge during the spring, summer, and early fall months. Established stands of pinyon/juniper on Wolf Ridge and the surrounding, immediate country provide cover and shelter for the resident population. Wild horse primary foaling season occurs between March 1 and mid-June each year. Breeding season follows on the coattails of foaling season, with mares cycling within 6 weeks following birth of their foal. As with any wild animal, there are numerous internal and external variables that can result in deviation from the general foaling and breeding seasons. Band integrity is strongest during foaling and breeding season as a result of mares' increased maternal instincts and increased competition among studs for breeding dominance.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action: This project is scheduled to occur within the primary wild horse foaling season. The number of bands that will be present in the

prescribed burn area, and the number and age of foals that will be in the prescribed burn area are unknown. Implementation of this project will result in an unknown degree of disturbance to horse bands and to newborn foals within the bands. Because newborn foals sleep for many hours of each day adults in individual bands often graze some distance from sleeping foals. When bands are spooked adults run as a band and can leave newborn foals behind. When the disturbance that spooks a band continues, such as the activity proposed in this document, mares often will not return to retrieve their foals. The mares will remain within what they consider a safe distance from the activity. This distance can be to far away to allow reunion with displaced young. The potential for occurrence of these impacts will be greatly reduced by mitigation measures outlined in the proposed action.

Environmental Consequences of the No Action Alternative: Resident bands would not be disturbed.

Mitigation: None.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS SUMMARY: BLM has, and will continue to treat areas of heavy fuels throughout the White River Resource Area in accordance with the White River Fire Management Plan (BLM 1999). Treating various areas of heavy fuels will reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfire by transforming a running crown fire back to the surface, where suppression efforts can be more effective. Once the proposed action has been implemented, BLM can more safely treat other areas in the vicinity that have heavy or unnatural fuels buildup, using prescribed fire or fire use. This would further reduce the potential of wildfire damage to industrial facilities in the area and continue to allow fire to assume its natural role within the ecosystem.

By implementing the proposed action and other hazardous fuel reduction actions BLM will achieve a mosaic landscape with varying seral vegetation classes which result in a more fire resistant landscape and healthier rangelands. Effects are expected to be similar to effects from similar projects implemented in the past such as Big Duck Creek CO-WRFO-00-048-EA and East Douglas Creek CO-WRFO-96-043-EA. This coupled with the design criteria and the small overall percentage of public land being treated result in no significant cumulative impacts.

PERSONS / AGENCIES CONSULTED:

Brad Petch, Colorado Division of Wildlife
 Colorado State Forest Service
 Rio Blanco County Development Department
 Uintah and Ouray Tribal Council

INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW:

Name	Title	Area of Responsibility
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Name	Title	Area of Responsibility
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Air Quality
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Threatened and Endangered Plant Species
Michael Selle	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources Paleontological Resources
Mark Hafkenschiel	Rangeland Management Specialist	Invasive, Non-Native Species
Desa Ausmus	Wildlife Biologist	Migratory Birds
Desa Ausmus	Wildlife Biologist	Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Animal Species, Wildlife
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Wastes, Hazardous or Solid
Caroline Hollowed	Hydrologist	Water Quality, Surface and Ground Hydrology and Water Rights
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Wetlands and Riparian Zones
Chris Ham	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Wilderness
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Soils
Mark Hafkenschiel	Rangeland Management Specialist	Vegetation
Ken Holsinger	NRS	Access and Transportation
Mark Rogers	Fire Ecologist	Fire Management
Robert Fowler	Forester	Forest Management
Paul Daggett	Mining Engineer	Geology and Minerals
Mark Hafkenschiel	Rangeland Management Specialist	Rangeland Management
Penny Brown	Realty Specialist	Realty Authorizations
Chris Ham	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Recreation
Chris Ham	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Visual Resources
Valerie Dobrich	NRS	Wild Horses

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2. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) White River Resource Area, Colorado. (1997). White River Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan. Available on the BLM Colorado Web site: <http://www.co.blm.gov/nepa/rmpdocs/wrfodocs/wrformp.htm>
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**Finding of No Significant Impact/Decision Record
(FONSI/DR)
CO-110-2004-041-EA**

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)/RATIONALE: The environmental assessment and analyzing the environmental effects of the proposed action have been reviewed, resulting in a Finding of No Significant Impact on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary to further analyze the environmental effects of the proposed action.

This determination is based on the following:

Factors Considered	Potential Impact	Reasons the Impact is not Adversely Significant
Public Health and Safety	Firefighter and public safety will be improved on approximately 500 acres due to the reduced risk of destructive wildland fire.	The proposed action would not significantly affect public health and safety but would reduce current and expected risks.
Cultural Resources	Cultural resource surveys have been completed and no sites of scientific importance were identified within the treatment areas. Design Criteria will prevent impacts to existing sites and project provisions will provide protection if new sites are discovered during project implementation (EA page 6).	Non-significant because no sites will be impacted.
Sensitive Species	BLM Biologists have determined that the proposed action will improve historical habitat for Greater sage grouse by restoring the sagebrush parks in the area. (EA pages 7-8).	The proposed action could beneficially impact Greater Sage Grouse.
Wildlife	BLM biologists determined that pinion-juniper targeted for treatment is too young to support nesting raptors. (EA pages 6-7).	The proposed action will not impact nesting raptors.

Factors Considered	Potential Impact	Reasons the Impact is not Adversely Significant
Water Quality and Soils	Impacts associated with the proposed action include soil heating and increased wind and water erosion. Reduced water quality could result because of an increase in erosion and sediment yields. (EA pages 9 and 11)	The proposed action will be conducted under moderate environmental conditions, which will not expose soils, perennial grasses and forbs to intense long duration fire. The result will be rapid re-growth of vegetation that will stabilize soils, reduce erosion and decrease sediment yield.
Visual Resources	The proposed action will result in minor changes to the viewshed. However, these changes should blend in with the natural environment surrounding the project area. Immediate post fire Visual Resource Management objectives will not be met.	The impact of the proposed action on visual resources will be very minor and short-term as the color differences between burned and unburned material become less noticeable to the casual observer over time.
Wild Horses	The proposed action would prevent horses from using the immediate area while prescribed burning is being conducted and may impact newborn foals in the area.	Implementing the proposed action will occur over a 2-5 day period resulting in very short term disturbance to the resident horse population. Efforts will be made to alert horses present of impending activities to allow foals and adults present time to move out of the area.
Air Quality	Smoke from the prescribed burn may slightly diminish air quality for a short time period when burning operations are being conducted. This impact will be localized and not effect people or other resources.	The proposed action will be conducted under atmospheric conditions that will promote air pollutant dispersion and will not adversely affect people and other resources.

DECISION/RATIONALE: It is my decision to approve implementation of the White River Wolf Ridge Prescribed Fire project as described in the proposed action. This will result in a reduced fuel loading and risk of large-scale wildfire event that could threaten the Stake Springs compressor station and adjacent wooden pole structure powerline, and cause significant long-term ecosystem degradation. The proposed action will also result in greater latitude in managing future wildland and prescribed fire in the vicinity of the project and help improve the overall health of the ecosystem. This action is in compliance with decisions in the White River ROD/RMP, the White River Fire Management Plan and environmental impacts are expected to be minimal.

EFFECT OF DECISION: In accordance with 43 CFR 4190.1(a) published in the Federal Register Vol. 68, No.108 June 5, 2003, this decision is effective immediately. This action is being implemented immediately due to the substantial risk caused by hazardous fuel buildup around the Stake Springs compressor station and adjacent wooden pole structure powerline, and the imminent risk of significant ecological degradation in the event of a wildfire.

APPEAL PROCEDURES: If you wish to appeal, in accordance with 43 Code of Federal Regulation Part 4, you have within 30 days of the decision date to file a *Notice of Appeal*. Your *Notice of Appeal* must be filed with the office of the officer who made the decision. This is the Bureau of Land Management, White River Field Office, 73544 HWY 64, Meeker, CO. 81641. Your appeal must also be filed with the Office of the Solicitor, 755 Pearl St. Suite 151, Lakewood, CO. 80215.

Within 30 days of filing the *Notice of Appeal* a complete statement of the reasons why you are appealing must be filed with the United States Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, Board of Land Appeals, 4015 Wilson Blvd., Arlington Virginia 22203. No additional statement is needed, if you fully stated reasons for appealing the decision when filing the *Notice of Appeal*. A copy of the statement of reasons must also be filed with the Office of the Solicitor at the above address. Additional information about filing for an appeal can be found within Form 1842-1 (attached).

REQUEST FOR STAY: If you wish to file a petition (pursuant to regulation 43 CFR 4.21) (request) for a stay (suspension) of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, the petition for a stay must accompany your *Notice of Appeal*. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the *Notice of Appeal* and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the appropriate Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of a decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- (1) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied,
- (2) The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits,
- (3) The likelihood of irreparable harm to the appellant or resources if the stay is not granted and,
- (4) Whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

NAME OF PREPARER: Ken Holsinger

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR: Caroline Hollowed

Caroline P. Hollowed

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:

[Handwritten Signature]

ACRINE Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

6/25/04

ATTACHMENTS: Map of the Location of the Proposed Action