

**LAVA RANCHES FUEL REDUCTION
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

Environmental Assessment No: ID-075-2001-0028

Prepared by: Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Pocatello Field Office
1111 North 8th Ave
Pocatello Idaho 83201

Dated: August 2001

1. Introduction:

1.1 Need for the Proposed Action

Decades of fuel accumulations in the high desert steppe and montane communities of Southeast Idaho has resulted in high intensity stand replacement fires which can result in unacceptable public and private property loss and occasionally injury and death. The National Fire Plan commissioned by the President and approved by Congress has directed the federal land management agencies to reduce, where possible, the unacceptable and unnatural fuel accumulations which exist on the public lands.

1.2 Purpose:

The Bureau of Land Management proposes to reduce, by mechanical treatment and prescribed fire (pile and low intensity broadcast burning), the fuel loading on approximately 920 acres of public lands immediately adjacent to and contained within the Lava Ranch Subdivision located in Southeast Idaho.

1.3 Project Location:

Selected portions of those public lands located in T 9 S, R 37 E, Section 36 (approximately 160 acres), T 10 S, R 37 E, Section 1 (approximately 140 acres), Section 12 (approximately 120 acres), Section 13 (approximately 160 acres), T 9 S, R 38 E, Section 31 (approximately 60 acres), T 10 S, R 38 E, Section 6 N/NW (approximately 20 acres), Section 7 (approximately 100 acres), Section 17 SW/SW (approximately 40 acres), Section 18 S/SW (approximately 80 acres) and Section 19 NW/NW (approximately 40 acres). Approximately 920 Acres total. See attached map.

1.4 Relationship to Policies, Plans and Programs:

This environmental assessment (EA) was prepared in accordance with the *National Environmental Policy Act of 1969* (NEPA) and is in compliance with all subsequent applicable laws and regulations, including the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.), Parts 1500-1508), U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI) regulations and requirements (Departmental Manual 516) and guidelines established in the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) NEPA Handbook (H-1790-1)

The proposed action is in conformance with the terms and conditions as stipulated in the Pocatello Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved January 1988.

2. Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives:

2.1 Proposed Action:

The Pocatello Field Office proposes to develop Ashaded fuel breaks[®] on public lands immediately adjacent to Lava Ranches.

The development of shaded fuel breaks requires that sufficient quantities of trees and brush be removed to significantly reduce the rate of spread (ROS) and intensity (ERC) of crown and surface fires.

Specific treatments include the selective removal of conifer and other overstory species to reduce the potential for a crown fire to occur or spread within the treatment area. Spacing and interval of Aleave trees[®] will be selectively determined based on slope, proximity to other crowns, crown height and width, species flammability, spotting potential, wildlife issues and other variables. Total widths of treated areas within the project will vary as dictated by anticipated wildfire behavior. Leave trees will be limbed to a height necessary to reduce the potential for surface fires to Aladder[®] into the remaining crowns.

Understory vegetation will be selectively removed in sufficient quantities to reduce the intensity and rate of spread of surface fires.

Where present, Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) clones will be treated mechanically and/or with prescribed fire to encourage their growth and regeneration. Invading species (conifers/juniper) will be removed from the clones to promote the establishment of AAspen Fuel Breaks[®].

Where present, Rocky Mountain Maple (*Acer glabrum*) will be treated mechanically and/or with prescribed fire to encourage its growth and regeneration to further promote the establishment of biological firebreaks.

Treatments will be accomplished by the mechanical removal of vegetation (chainsaw, bull-hog etc.), piling (dozer or hand) of the removed vegetation, burning of the piles when conditions allow and low fire intensity broadcast burning of any residual debris. Further removal and low intensity maintenance burning (pile and broadcast) would occur subsequent to the initial treatment as needed to maintain acceptable fuel loadings.

Except where identified as essential wildlife habitat all dead fuels (standing and down) will be removed.

Where reasonably accessible, all piled material will be made available as fuelwood.

Burning and pre-treatment activities will be planned and conducted by BLM fire staff. Piling of material will be strictly regulated to reduce scorching of leave trees and impingement on leave areas. Pile size will be restricted to reduce fire intensity.

Sufficient quantities of brush and lower age class conifers will remain (leave areas) to provide travel corridors and hiding cover for indigenous and transitory wildlife populations consistent with anticipated wildfire behavior. Wildlife Aleave areas@ will be pre-identified prior to project implementation.

Terrain significantly limits the use of dozers within the project area. If dozers are used for piling of material and debris, surface disturbance will result. Minor surface disturbance will result from handline construction.

Road construction or improvement is not required

Pre and post treatment monitoring will be conducted to document percentage of removal and impacts.

Any noxious weed populations located within the project site will be identified and treated as needed.

2.2 No Action Alternative:

Under the ANo Action Alternative@ fuels would continue to accumulate until removed by human caused or naturally ignited wildfire.

2.3 No Action Alternative:

Under the ANo Action Alternative@ fuels would continue to accumulate until removed by human caused or naturally ignited wildfire.

2.4 Alternatives Considered But Dropped From Further Consideration

2.4.1 Prescribed Fire without Mechanical Treatment:

There presently exists over 250 permanently, semi-permanently and seasonally occupied residences in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project site. The fire intensities which would result from igniting the untreated fuels prevents the use of prescribed fire without prior mechanical treatment. Due to the magnitude and severity of the safety issues associated with prescribed fire without

mechanical pre-treatment no further analysis of this alternative will be provided within this document.

2.4.2 Chemical Treatments:

The list of currently approved herbicides for application on public lands does not contain chemicals suitable for this purpose and need. Chemical application would have long term adverse effects upon non-targeted species resulting in undesirable impacts. No further analysis of this alternative will be provided within this document.

2.4.3 Chaining

Topography, vegetation types, amount of soil disturbance and other undesired consequences preclude the use of chaining for this proposal. No further analysis of this alternative will be provided within this document.

2.4.4 Harvest and Sale Alternative

Insufficient volumes of commercial material exist within the project area to make harvest and sale a viable alternative. No further analysis of this alternative will be provided within this document.

3. Affected Environment

ELEMENT	Issues Present?		Affected By			
	Issues Present?		Proposed Action?		No Action Alternative?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Air Resources/Quality	X		X			X
ACECs		X		X		X
Cultural Resources	X		?			X
American Indian Religious Concerns	X		?			X
Flood plains		X		X		X
Livestock	X			X		X
Wildlife including T&E Species	X			X		X
T&E Fish		X		X		X
Vegetation including T&E Plants	X		?			X
Wastes, Hazardous and Solid		X		X		X
Soils and Water Quality	X		X			X
Wetlands (also see Riparian Zones)		X		X		X
Wild & Scenic River Corridors		X		X		X
Wilderness		X		X		X

General Setting.

The Lava Ranch Subdivision is located in Bannock County Idaho approximately six (6) air miles southwest of the community of Lava Hot Springs. Subdivided and developed over twenty (20) years the area contains over four hundred (400) individual lots. The majority of these lots have been developed and contain either permanent, semi-permanent or temporary dwellings. Temporary dwellings generally consist of recreational trailers (some very large and effectively immobile) which are moved into the site during the summer months (fire season) and removed prior to the on-set of winter. The permanent and semi-permanent residences consist of cabins and homes with outbuildings and other improvements. Many of these residences exceed \$100,000.00 in appraised value.

The Bureau of Land Management manages approximately forty acres within section 17 which is entirely contained within the Lava Ranch subdivision (isolated tract). See map.

The fuels and topography within the subdivision and on immediately adjacent public lands currently provides sufficient potential for stand replacement wildfires to occur. Three (3) large wildfires have occurred in the immediate vicinity during the 1992 (52 acres), 1994 (98 acres) and 2000 (1,177 acres) fire seasons. Fifteen (15) small wildfires have been documented in and around the affected environment.

3.1 Air Resources:

The project area is contained within Idaho/Montana Airshed group twenty (20). The nearest Class 1 airsheds are Grand Teton National Park and Yellowstone National Park located 100+ air miles north-northeast of the project area. The Pocatello Airshed, a non-attainment area, is located approximately 35 air miles northwest of the project area.

3.2 Cultural Resources

Both prehistoric and historic sites have been recorded near the area of concern. The Hudspeths Cutoff passes to the north of the project area along the Portneuf River.

3.3 American Indian Religious Concerns

The area may contain areas of sacred or religious concern to American Indians. While these have not been identified, the area is sufficiently close to traditional tribal lands and ceded areas to have retained interest by the tribes.

3.4 Livestock:

The project includes 20 acres of public lands contained within the Jenkins Canyon-1 Allotment. The permitted use for the allotment is 20 head of cattle from May 1 through July 15 with a total preference of 58 AUMs, 40 active and 18 suspended. This Section 15 lease is held by Nathan M. Casperson.

3.5 Wildlife including T & E Species

There are no listed species found in the project area. The parcels of public land proposed for the work are small and don't have the vegetation and isolation that we'd expect to find supporting goshawks. For the most part, the habitat is typical dry Douglas-fir and aspen which supports a complex of common animals and birds such as deer, coyote, chickadees, juncos and robins.

3.6 Vegetation including T & E Species:

No special status (threatened, endangered, proposed or sensitive) plants are known to occur within the project area. Most of the project area has an overstory of Douglas Fir and an understory of Mountain Snowberry and Pine Reedgrass. Other parts of the area are dominated by Curlleaf Mountain Mahogany, Mountain sagebrush, and Bluebunch Wheatgrass. Rocky Mountain Juniper is also present in abundance throughout the project area.

3.7 Soils and Water Quality:

The project area is wholly contained within the Deer Creek and Dempsey Creek watersheds. None of the proposed treatment sites are in the proximity of any perennial streams.

Soils for the treatment area are identified on the soils map (attached). Additional information for these soil mapping unit types can be found in the 1987 Bannock County Soil Survey including range sites with listing of the native natural species.

Generally the soil material of these kind of soils is moderate to low for erosion. The water erosion hazard is very high for these soils with vegetation cover loss by burning, especially on steep slopes.

The Hades, Lanoak and Greys soils have the greatest erosion potential, because of lack of rock fragments. If burned by wildfire, the potential for silt reaching streams during the erosion process from all of these soils is very high and would affect water quality bases. This erosion situation will continue until vegetation cover returns.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES/IMPACTS

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action

4.1.1 Air Resources:

Short term reductions in air quality will result from smoke generated during the pile and broadcast burning phases of the project. Strategies will be developed within the burn plan to mitigate smoke impacts. Burning will be conducted in accordance with the provisions as described by the Montana/Idaho Airshed Group. Some blowing dust will result until vegetation re-establishes itself within the project site.

Prevailing winds are predominantly from the southwest. No intrusions into Class 1 airsheds are anticipated. No intrusions or impacts into the Pocatello Airshed is anticipated.

4.1.2 Cultural Resources:

Compliance inventories will be completed prior to surface disturbing activities. The proposed action will be altered or redesigned to avoid impacts to any cultural resource.

4.1.3 American Indian Religious Concerns:

Consultation with Tribal Governments will be completed prior to any specific action. Proposed actions will be altered or redesigned to avoid impacts to sacred places, traditional cultural properties, or religious sites.

4.1.4 Livestock:

No adverse impacts to livestock grazing is expected to occur.

4.1.5 Wildlife including T & E Species:

The proposal calls for a partial removal of vegetation, particularly the lower tree branches and taller brush that create ladder fuels. This vegetation provides nesting and foraging habitat for several animals and will decrease available habitat for them. The open habitat created by the proposed action will provide habitat for another complex of animals. The net result is there will be a change in animal species using the area. The plan is to maintain the openings which will result in a more or less permanent change. Since the animals present are common, and the ones which replace them are common, there will not be a significant impact on any given species that requires mitigation.

4.1.6 Vegetation including T & E Species:

Although no special status plants are known to occur within the project area the actual presence of such plants is still to be determined with a field survey. Affects on special status plants is entirely dependent upon species present, if present at all. Affects cannot be determined at this time.

4.1.7 Soils and Water Quality:

Generally the soil material of these kind of soils is moderate to low for erosion. Mechanical removal of the shrubs and trees and slash pile burning will reduce the fuel load with only a minor amount of soil erosion. None would be expected to affect stream water quality.

4.2 Impacts of the ANo Action@ Alternative:

Under the ANo Action@ Alternative fuels would continue to accumulate until removed by human caused or naturally ignited wildfire. Dependent upon environmental conditions present at the time of ignition, a wildfire could result in severe degradation of the natural and human environment.

In the absence of wildfire, continued fuel accumulations will result in a slow degradation of floral and faunal diversity as seral maturity develops in the absence of disturbance.

5. Cumulative Impacts:

5.1 Proposed Action

The predominant uses within the project area are recreation (primary), wildlife use and livestock grazing (minor). Past fire suppression standards have allowed tree and brush species to increase in numbers and density resulting in an increasing fire hazard. Implementation of the proposal will result in reduced fuel loadings in an area subject to extensive habitation during the fire season. This reduction of fuel loading is anticipated to reduce the overall fire behavior resulting in more manageable wildfires and increased safety to the public and firefighters with minor impacts to air quality, soils, wildlife and grazing.

5.2 No Action Alternative

There would be no additional cumulative impacts with the no action alternative in the absence of wildfire. Should wildfire occur with the present fuel loading serious and unpredictable impacts may result.

6. Mitigation and Monitoring Requirements

If a cultural resource site is discovered, by pre-project inspection or during implementation of the project, an archeologist will inspect the site and designate the area(s) to avoid treatment.

Monitoring of the amount of bare ground and subsequent vegetation recovery following treatment will occur.

Soil mapping units 23 and 70 will be excluded from slash pile burns to reduce erosion potential.

All surface disturbance will be hand reseeded with an appropriate mix of grasses to reduce erosion and reduce the establishment of undesirable (weed) species.

Field survey for special status plants will be conducted prior to field operations.

Wildlife Aleave areas@ will be pre-identified prior to project implementation.

7. Consultation and Coordination:

7.1 List of Preparers

William Swann, Fire Use Specialist, Pocatello Field Office. Team Lead.
Patricia Roller, Fire Use Specialist, Upper Snake River District
Ray Brainard, Zone Forester, Upper Snake River District
John Lytle, Archaeologist, Upper Snake River District
Cleve Davis, Botanist, Pocatello Field Office
Geoff Hogander, Wildlife Biologist, Pocatello Field Office
Matt Rendace, Rangeland Management Specialist, Pocatello Field Office
Nancy Fetterman, GIS Specialist (fire), Upper Snake River District
Darwin Jeppesen, Soil Scientist, Upper Snake River District

7.2 Parties Consulted:

Joel Price, Fire Chief, City of Lava Hot Springs Id. (Dynamac meeting on 08/21/01)
Mr and Mrs Robinson, Spring Canyon Estates (Dynamac meeting on 08/21/01)
Nathan Casperson, Livestock Permittee

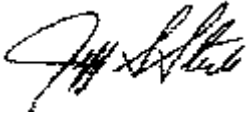
7.3 References

Bureau of Land Management, Pocatello Resource Management Plan, 1987.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/DECISION RECORD

I have reviewed this environmental assessment and have determined that the proposed action, as described, will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. I have also determined that the proposed project is in conformance with the approved Resource Management Plan for the Pocatello Field Office. It is my decision to implement the project as proposed. There would be benefits to adjacent private land owners while meeting multiple-use needs.


Authorizing Official:













Jeff Steele
Pocatello Field Office Manager

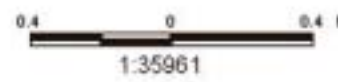
Date: August 31, 2001


Lava Project Area

-  Lava Project Area
1,065 acres
-  RX 2002-03
(192 Acres)

Land Status-100k

-  BIA
-  BLM
-  DOI
-  MIL
-  NPS
-  PRIVATE
-  STATE
-  USFS
-  USFWS
-  WATER



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