



NOTICE OF PROPOSED ACTION

AND

OPPORTUNITY TO COMMENT

ANTELOPE VEGETATIVE TREATMENT PROJECT

United States

Department of

Agriculture

Forest

Service

**AUSTIN/TONOPAH RANGER DISTRICTS
EUREKA AND LANDER COUNTIES, NEVADA**

May 2012



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COMMENTS WELCOME

The Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest welcomes your comments on the Antelope Vegetative Treatment Project. This is a proposal to use prescribed fire and mechanical methods to increase vegetation diversity and create a mosaic structure to improve wildlife habitat and insure these habitats are more resilient to disturbance such as wildland fires. We would like your thoughts on the scope of issues to be addressed in the environmental analysis and your comments on the proposed action. The purpose of this comment period is to provide additional opportunity for public participation prior to a decision by the Responsible Official (Austin-Tonopah District Ranger). In addition, submission of comments during this period is required to establish appeal eligibility. We will accept written, facsimile, hand delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action for thirty calendar days following the publication of the Notice of Proposed Action in the Battle Mountain Bugle. For detailed information on how to provide comments, please refer to Comment Process section of this document.

SUMMARY

The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest proposes to use prescribed fire and mechanical removal to treat up to 29,000 acres within approximately 65,000 acre project area. The treatments are being proposed to restore vegetative communities, restore and improve wildlife habitats and reduce fuel loading to lessen the fire severity on National Forest System lands (NFS) within Eureka and Lander Counties in Nevada. Elevation in the project area ranges from 6,500 to 10,461 feet with slopes between 15 and 80 percent (average slope is approximately 50 percent). The project area is predominately a mountain big sagebrush community type with expansion of pinyon-juniper woodlands. Within the project area the density of the pinyon-juniper woodland canopy is increasing which has caused a decline in understory shrub and herbaceous vegetation. Removal of the overstory will allow re-establishment of understory herbs, grasses and over time, shrubs.

LOCATION

The Antelope Project is located the northern end of the Monitor Mountain Range between Bald Mt to the south and the north, east and west to the Forest boundary. The Project area is located in all or portions of the following: Townships 16, 17, 17½, and 18 North -- Ranges 48, 49, and 50 East and all or portions of the sections. The project area is in Eureka and Lander Counties, Nevada and is approximately 25 miles west of Eureka, Nevada.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose for the Antelope project is to:

- 1) Increase the vegetative diversity and sagebrush habitat within the project area. Currently pinyon-juniper expansion is causing increased competition for light, water and nutrients reducing understory shrub and herbaceous cover. These species are critical habitat components for many wildlife species including mule deer, sage grouse and other sagebrush obligate species.
- 2) The reduction of fuel loading within the project area is needed to lower the possibility of large scale high severity fires.
- 3) To treat sage steppe communities to restore sagebrush and mountain shrub communities.

THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service proposed action will improve wildlife habitats by using prescribed fire and mechanical treatment methods to restore important vegetative communities, enhance the diversity of age classes and structure of vegetation communities, restore and, reduce the severity of wildfires on approximately 29,000 acres. Implementation of the project will be conducted over a five-ten year period with the intent of treating 1,000 to 5,000 acres per year.

Approximately 22,500 acres will be treated using prescribed fire. Prescribed fire treatments may occur during any season of the year within established prescriptions. Prescribed fire treatments would be used to reduce pinyon-juniper densities in the Phase I and Phase II.

Since the pre-settlement period (pre 1880's) pinyon and juniper have expanded mainly into sagebrush and to a lesser degree, other ecosystems. This rapid expansion is due to fire suppression, grazing practices, and a climate which favored the establishment and growth of these woodland species (Tausch et. al. 1981). It is estimated that two thirds of the area within the Great Basin currently occupied by the pinyon-juniper cover type is considered expansion pinyon-juniper; only 1/3 are historic woodlands (Miller, et. al. 2008). Expansion pinyon-juniper are in various phases of development. Miller et. al. 2008 defines the early, mid, and late phases of pinyon-juniper woodland successional development as:

Phase I - trees are present but shrubs and herbs are the dominant vegetation that influence ecological processes on the site (low canopy).

Phase II - trees are co-dominant with shrubs and herbs and all three vegetation layers influence ecological processes on the site (medium canopy).

Phase III - trees are the dominant vegetation and the primary plant layer influencing ecological processes on the site (high canopy).

As Phase I and II transition into Phase III, the understory shrubs, grasses and forbs are lost as trees dominate the site and tree canopy cover increases. The loss of the ground vegetation and increased density of canopy fuels marks a shift in biomass to crown fuels which can significantly affect fire severity. The more tree dominated the woodlands become, the less likely they are to burn under moderate conditions. In addition, Phase III pinyon-juniper has lost much of the seed source necessary to regenerate understory herbs, grasses and shrubs following a disturbance (Miller et, al. 2008). These types of stands are generally small diameter trees with a diverse understory grasses, forbs and shrubs. Treating these stands would improve structural and age class diversity within the sagebrush and mountain brush communities.

Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire treatments may include:

- Ground ignition-drip torches and/or flares
- Aerial ignition using helicopters-helitorch and/or Plastic Sphere Dispenser (PSD)
- Management of naturally occurring (unplanned ignitions) wildfires for resource benefits

Burned openings will generally range from 10 to 2,000 acres in size and will occur in a mosaic pattern scattered across the landscape.. Size of openings will vary widely depending upon the specific vegetation community and intensity of burn prescriptions.

Ground support staging areas will be on existing roads or designated areas. The use of handlines will be discouraged; however may be used to protect archeological resources, historic properties, private lands or other high value resources. Staging areas for equipment parking and material storage would be necessary for project implementation. These areas will be located on existing designated roads and at a minimum of 300 feet from riparian areas.

No road construction or construction of dozer lines are planned as part of this project. Roads within the project area would be closed to the public for the brief time that operations are in

progress. Proper signs would be posted, as would a notification through proper media (e.g., television, radio and newspapers). Local residents, businesses and local governments would be notified. The project area would also be checked and cleared of any campers, hunters, or other recreational users. These actions would ensure the safety of both the public and project personnel. Burn plans will be prepared.

Mechanical

Approximately 6,500 acres will be treated using mechanical methods (primarily tree species) to reduce pinyon-juniper densities in the Phase I and Phase II (small diameter) stages or categories, improve structural and age class diversity within the sagebrush and mountain brush communities. On slopes less than 30%, mechanical means will be used to cut generally small diameter trees.

Mechanical treatments may be followed by limited prescribed burning to reduce residual slash or meet other vegetation objectives specific to that site. Mechanical treatments could improve the health and diversity of vegetation and restore and improve wildlife habitats, particularly winter ranges and important shrub communities.

Prescribed fire treatments may be used in association with mechanical treatments to further reduce slash build-ups or to treat areas where road access prevents the efficient use of mechanical treatment methods. The use of both mechanical and prescribed fire treatments will be closely coordinated with adjacent landowners to prevent any adverse impacts to their private lands. A variety of mechanical treatment methods that may be used include:

- Mastication, chipping, or similar methods
- Hand thinning with chainsaws.
- Hand cutting/thinning with chainsaws (personal green fuelwood harvest).
- Commercial green fuelwood harvest using low impact mechanized vehicles or other equipment.
- Whole tree removal using low impact mechanized vehicles or other equipment.
- Slash created from any of the above treatments may be disposed of through chipping, removal from the project area or jackpot burning.

Cultural Resources

- Historic and Prehistoric resources will be identified. Mitigation measures agreed to with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) will be implemented prior to, during, and after project completion.

- Avoid burning known historic wood features within the project area. Hand clearing of vegetation around these features may be done as needed to protect the sites.
- Avoid active ignition of other known cultural sites.

Noxious Weeds

The known noxious weeds; Whitetop (*Cardaria draba*), Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Musk thistle (*Carduus nutans*), cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), curly dock (*Rumex crispus*), perennial pepper weed (*Lepidium latifolium*).

- As part of the NEPA process, a noxious weed assessment will be performed and any prevention measures recommended will be implemented..
- As needed, control of noxious weeds and invasive species would be done under the Forest's approved treatment program
- No mechanical treatment will occur within 300 feet of any stream bed.
- No mechanical or prescribed fire treatment will occur within 300 feet of the edge of any known invasive species infestation.
- No machinery of any kind will pass through known invasive species infestations.

Rare Plants

The Regional Forester's (R4) sensitive plant species that have potential habitat or are located in the project area include Eastwood milkweed (*Asclepias uncialis* ssp. *ruthiae*), Toquima milkvetch (*Astragalus toquimanus*), ophir rockcress (*Boechera* (=Arabis) *ophira*), upswept moonwort (*Botrychium ascendens*), dainty moonwort (*Botrychium crenulatum*), slender moonwort (*Botrychium lineare*), moosewort (*Botrychium tunux*), Goodrich biscuitroot (*Cymopterus goodrichii*), desert whitlow-grass (*Draba arida*), Snake Range whitlow-grass (*Draba oreibata* var. *serpentina*), Snake Mountain erigeron (*Erigeron cavernensis*), waxflower (*Jamesia tetrapetala*), bashful beardtongue (*Penstemon pudicus*), whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*), Nachlinger's catchfly (*Silene nachlingerae*), alpine goldenweed (*Tonestus* (=Haplopappus) *alpinus*), and Rollins' clover (*Trifolium macilentum* var. *rollinsii*).

Wildlife

- Establish a minimum of a 30-acre protection area around any active goshawk nests. Also, establish an appropriate aircraft buffer around any active goshawk nests during spring or early summer burns to prevent disturbance to the nesting birds.
- Precautions would be taken to avoid disturbing any nesting sage grouse and protect brood-rearing habitat such as riparian areas and wet meadows.
- No igniting in pure mountain mahogany stands identified on the H-T current vegetation map and on the ground; avoid burning these stands which provide important wildlife habitat
- Prescribed fire will not be used in occupied habitat for pygmy rabbits. Trees in these areas may be removed with chainsaws and be accessed by foot.
- Ensure that ignition activities for prescribed burning are less than 2 weeks in duration within treatment units to allow for migratory birds that may lose their nest to re-nest.
- If mechanical treatments are implemented during the breeding season (May 1 to July 15), nesting bird surveys will be done and breeding territories found will be flagged and avoided
- If natural vegetative recovery doesn't meet objectives, seeding in the project area may be considered.

Vegetation

- No ignition will occur on rocky outcrops to avoid burning pre-settlement trees and rare plant communities
- Avoid igniting or cutting identifiable pre-settlement trees. These trees are identifiable on the landscape by their, flattened, rounded and/or asymmetrical crowns which stand well above the surrounding younger trees that are shorter with conical crowns that may display a pointed tip (stronger apical dominance).
- Avoid ignition of Phase III pinyon pine to reduce the risk of conversion to areas dominated by invasive species.
- Seeding of native grasses and forbs may be done before or following treatment to provide additional seed sources for vegetative recovery.

Public Safety

Mitigations for public safety include:

- The public will be informed of the project (location and dates of implementation) and hazards associated with the mechanical and burn treatments.
- Roads will be closed during implementation.
- Prior to ignition the burn boss will perform a thorough reconnaissance of the project area to insure no Forest users are in the immediate area.
- Local residents, permittees and the local governments would be notified
- The project area would be checked and cleared of any campers, hunters, and any other recreational users when treatments are implemented.

Rangelands

- Burn areas will be rested from livestock grazing for a minimum of two years or until vegetation has recovered sufficiently to support grazing.
- Monitor Winter and Kelly Creek/North Monitor Allotments are within project area.

Soils/Air/Water

- Skidding or other activities that would tend to loosen soils will avoid steep slopes
- Skidding of materials across drainages will be avoided whenever feasible.

MONITORING

Monitoring is proposed to 1) assess the effectiveness of treatments in achieving objectives; 2) identify unintended impacts to resources; and 3) determine success in achieving desired vegetation re-establishment.

- Vegetation – Photo point and vegetation density transects would measure pre and post vegetative response to treatments
- Cultural Resources - Conduct a post burn assessment on a minimum of three sites identified by the district archeologist to determine the effects of the treatments.
- Noxious Weeds and Invasive Species – Annual site visits will be conducted within the treatment area and noxious weeds will be treated.
- Known or identified Northern Goshawk nests will be monitored annually.

- Annual site visits will monitor sage grouse use of treated areas.

PROPOSED MITIGATION MEASURES

Mitigation measures will be implemented to avoid and minimize negative effects to resources surrounding and within the project area. Specific measures identified to date are:

- During implementation, wash all vehicles prior to entering the project area to avoid transmission of invasive and/or noxious weed seeds.

DECISION FRAMEWORK

The Austin/Tonopah District Ranger is the responsible official who will decide 1) whether to select the action as proposed or modified, 2) what mitigations are needed, and 3) what monitoring is needed for this project.

SPECIAL USE PERMIT/LEASE ISSUANCE

Antelope Vegetative Treatment Project does not require any special use permits and/or lease issuances. There is the Bald Mt communication site within the project area.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project has been listed in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning with the January 2012 edition and continuing through the present publication.

TRIBAL COORDINATION

On February 4, 2011 Tribal consultation was initiated with the Yomba Shoshone Tribal Council, Fallon and Duckwater Shoshone. On February 11, 2011 information was presented to the Tribal Council of the Yomba Shoshone. Fallon Paiute/Shoshone Business Council was presented the information to their Tribal Council on February 22, 2011 and on February 28, 2011. Information was presented to the Tribal Council of the Duckwater Shoshone. Duckwater Shoshone requested a site visit.

ANALYSIS PROCESS

A team of specialists has been identified to analyze the environmental effects of the proposed action. Preliminary analysis, displayed below, indicates that impacts to affected resources would be minor and short-term in nature. The final results of this analysis will be displayed in the environmental document that is being prepared.

SUMMARY OF THE POTENTIAL AFFECTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION	
Affected Resource	Summary of Affects
Soils	Due to the limited amount of potential disturbance, the short-term nature of the project, and the use of best management practices the amount of increased soil disturbance and erosion is expected to be very minor.
Air Resources	Due to the nature of the activities specified in the proposed action there could be a reduction in Air quality within the project area and adjacent areas would be short duration.
Surface Water Resources	No direct ignition in riparian areas will take place.
Vegetation	Increase the ecological resilience of ecosystems to fire and other disturbance. Increase the herbaceous perennials through competitive release from shrubs and trees, and reducing woody fuel loads to minimize risk of high severity fires.
Rare Plants	There is potential habitat but no individuals located in the project area. The project will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species.
Noxious Weeds	
Public Access/ Recreational Uses	Closure of the forest roads that access the project during the implementation would result in a short-term loss of access.
Cultural Resources	Cultural resource surveys have been initiated. Historic and prehistoric sites have been found in the area. The project will not be implemented until SHPO concurrence is received. Mitigation

SUMMARY OF THE POTENTIAL AFFECTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION	
	measures that are developed through the concurrence process will be implemented.
Wildlife (i.e. sage grouse)	<p>Wildlife (i.e. sage grouse)</p> <p>This project may impact individuals but is not likely to contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability for sage grouse and pygmy rabbit.</p> <p>Long-term habitat would increase and more forage would be available for Management Indicator Species with the removal of pinyon pine and juniper.</p> <p>Habitat would be lost in the short- term, but that loss would be outweighed by the improvement of thousands of acres of habitat, and an increase in sagebrush habitat for the sagebrush dependent species.</p> <p>Migratory birds may be displaced during implementation however; it will be short in duration and not have a significant negative impact.</p>
Sensitive Wildlife Species	There are sensitive species and/or habitat located in the project area and it was determined that implementation may impact individuals however; the project will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species.
Inventoried Roadless Area	No new road construction and travel will be restricted to existing roads. This project is within 8 IRA's.

ALTERNATIVES

Two alternatives including the proposed action and no action have been identified to date.

- **NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE** - Under this alternative, the project would not be authorized. No disturbance would occur.

COMMENT PROCESS

The Forest Service encourages comments on this proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision. Comments will help complete the preparation of the environmental document on the proposed action. The environmental document will be used to determine whether to prepare an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact. If there is no potential for significant impacts, the environmental document and decision, will be sent to those who commented. If the EA concludes that there is the potential for significant impacts then an environmental impact statement would be prepared.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following the publication of this notice in *Battle Mountain Bugle*.

Comments may be submitted to: District Ranger, Austin and Tonopah Ranger Districts, P.O. Box 130, 210 Midas Canyon Road, Austin, NV 89310, or faxed to 775-964-1451. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Acrobat (.pdf) and Word (.doc) to comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-austin-tonopah@fs.fed.us. Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

APPEAL ELIGIBILITY

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Those who provide comments or other expression of interest during this comment period are eligible to appeal the decision under the regulations. Individuals and

organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must provide the information identified in 36 CFR 215.11(a), including:

- Name and Address.
- Title of the Proposed Action.
- Specific substantive comments (36 CFR 215.2) on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.
- Signature or other verification of identity upon request; identification of the individual or organization who authored the comments(s) is necessary for appeal eligibility.
- For multiple names or multiple organizations, a signature must be provided for the individual authorized to represent each organization, or for each individual that wishes to have appeal eligibility.
- Individual members of organizations must submit their own substantive comments to meet the requirements of appeal eligibility as an individual, comments received on behalf of an organization are considered as those of the organization only.

Responsible Official

The responsible official for this project is Steven Williams, District Ranger, Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts, 100 Midas Canyon Road, P.O. Box 130, Austin, Nevada 89310. The telephone number is (775) 964-2671.

Contact Person

For further information regarding this proposal please contact Carol Carlock (Fuels Specialist) at (775) 289-3031 or Steve Williams at (775) 964-2671.