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Rough Creek Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Project

Scoping Document

Bridgeport Ranger District

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest

Lyon and Mineral Counties, Nevada

**T7N R26E Sec. 34-36; T7N R27E Sec. 31; T6N R26E Sec. 1-3, 11, 13,
23-25; T6N R27E Sections 5-10, 13-36; T5N R27E Section 1**

Responsible Official:

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District Ranger**

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Rough Creek Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Project

Scoping Document

The US Forest Service, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Bridgeport Ranger District is planning a project to improve bi-state sage-grouse habitat. This scoping document describes the purpose and need for the project, the project location, and a preliminary treatment proposal so that you can provide comments and help to improve the project. Instructions on how to comment and who to contact for more information are at the end of this document.

The responsible official for the Rough Creek Project is Jeremy Marshall, Bridgeport District Ranger. Federal regulations allow the US Forest Service to exclude from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA) or environmental impact statement (EIS) categories of actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment, based on the agency's experience and knowledge. Unless extraordinary circumstances are found to exist, the proposed action falls under the category listed at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6): *"Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction."*

Purpose and Need for the Project

The purpose of the Rough Creek project is to improve habitat conditions for bi-state sage-grouse, a sensitive species on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and in the Forest Service Intermountain Region. Consistent with the revised 1986 Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan¹, including the 2016 Greater Sage-grouse Bi-state Distinct Population Segment Forest Plan Amendment² and conservation strategies defined in the Bi-State Sage-Grouse Action Plan³, the project is designed to:

- Maintain, improve, or restore habitat quality for bi-state sage-grouse and other sagebrush-obligate and sagebrush-associated species by:
 - Reducing piñon-juniper expansion into sagebrush ecosystems and riparian areas,
 - Reducing piñon-juniper stand conversion from Phase 1 (areas where scattered trees are present but shrubs and herbaceous plants dominate the vegetation) to Phase 2 (areas where trees co-dominate the vegetation with shrubs and herbaceous plants in the understory) and from Phase 2 to Phase 3 (areas where are the dominant vegetation and little to no shrubs or herbaceous plants exist in the understory)⁴,

¹ 1986 Toiyabe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan available at: http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5143054.pdf

² Greater Sage-grouse Bi-state Distinct Population Segment Forest Plan Amendment Record of Decision available at: http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa_project_exp.php?project=40683

³ 2012 Bi-State Action Plan: Past, Present, and Future Actions for Conservation of the Greater Sage-grouse Bi-state Distinct Population Segment, available at:

http://www.ndow.org/uploadedFiles/ndoworg/Content/Nevada_Wildlife/Sage_Grouse/Bi-State-Action-Plan.pdf

⁴ Miller, RF, RJ Tausch, ED McArthur, DD Johnson, and SC Sanderson. 2008. Age structure and expansion of pinon-juniper woodlands: A regional perspective in the Intermountain West. Available at: http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_rp069.pdf

- Increasing sagebrush habitat connectivity,
- Reducing availability of perches for sage-grouse predators, and
- Reducing the risk of wildfire.

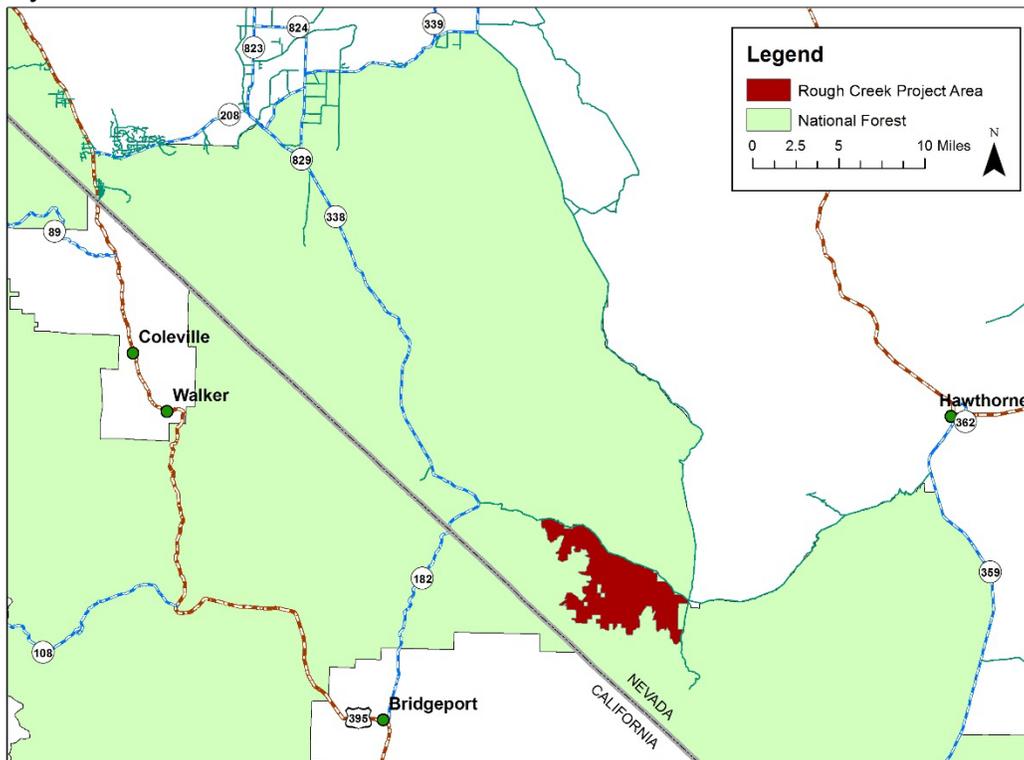
The project is needed because piñon and juniper trees in the project area are expanding into nesting, brood-rearing, and winter habitat for the sage-grouse and decreasing sage-grouse habitat quality and availability. Piñon and juniper trees present in sagebrush ecosystems serve as perches for predators like eagles and ravens to hunt for food, including sage-grouse. As a result, sage-grouse prefer not to breed, nest, or raise their chicks in areas where piñon and juniper trees are present. Piñon and juniper expansion also leads to increases in woody fuels, decreases in species diversity, reduction in sagebrush ecosystem seed banks, decreases in water availability, and increases in soil erosion.

The Rough Creek project is a critical part of the Bi-State Action Plan, a comprehensive interagency strategy to provide for the long-term conservation of the bi-State sage-grouse and its habitat through the implementation of habitat improvement treatments, administrative actions, research, and monitoring. The project falls within the Mount Grant population management unit, with several active leks (breeding sites) located in or near the project area.

Project Location

The project is located on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Bridgeport Ranger District, in Lyon and Mineral Counties, Nevada. Access to the project area is via Highways 338 and 182 between Wellington, NV and Bridgeport, CA (Map 1). The project area includes approximately 15,900 acres of land; approximately 42% (6,668 acres) of the project area falls within three inventoried roadless areas (IRAs): Chinese Camp IRA (6,649 acres), Pine Grove South (10 acres), and Aurora Crater IRA (9 acres) (Map 2).

Map 1. Project location.



Project Treatment Proposal

The Forest Service proposes to remove piñon pine and juniper on up to 15,900 acres within the Rough Creek project area. Treatment methods would include (1) hand cutting with lopping and scattering, (2) mastication, and (3) hand cutting with piling and burning (Map 3). Treatments would occur only in Phase 1 and Phase 2 piñon-juniper expansion areas, and would not occur in Phase 3 or higher density areas, in rock outcrops, or in areas where little to no ground vegetation currently exists. Trees exhibiting characteristics of persistent woodlands would not be cut. There are many steep drainages within the project area. Trees would be cut at the margin of the drainage to remove potential perches from the sagebrush community. Within drainages, small trees may be removed from areas where there are understory grasses, shrubs, and herbaceous plants to limit further expansion of piñon pine and juniper and to improve habitat for a variety of wildlife. Other project activities may include allowing personal use fuelwood removal and seeding or planting native species.

Piñon-Juniper Treatments

Hand Cut, Lop, and Scatter: In areas where trees are not very dense on the landscape, hand crews would use chainsaws to cut down piñon and juniper trees within the treatment unit. Depending on the size of the trees, branches would be lopped (cut) off the trunk of the tree and scattered so all wood and branches are within 18 inches of the ground. Trees and branches would generally be left on site to decompose naturally. Approximately 13,400 acres would be treated using this method.

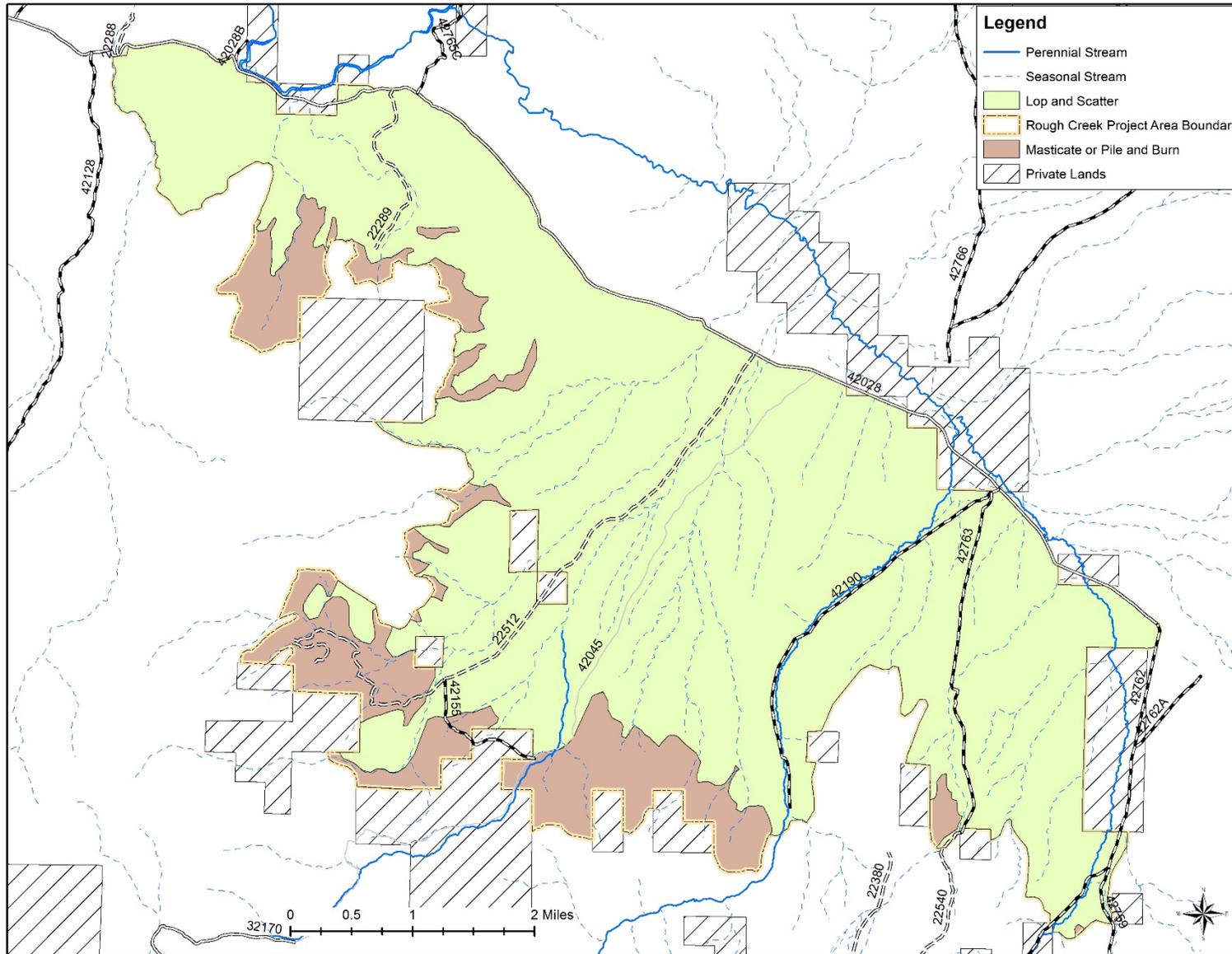
Mastication: In areas that are too dense with trees to lop and scatter, equipment would be used to cut and grind down trees. This equipment drives up to a tree and, using a specialized blade, “masticates” or chews up the standing tree. Equipment may be rubber-tired (wheeled) or tracked. Wood would be left on site to decompose naturally. Mastication would be used primarily in areas with slopes less than 30 percent because of equipment limitations. Approximately 2,500 acres would be treated using this method or hand cut, pile and burn, depending on slope and access.

Hand Cut, Pile and Burn: In areas where trees are too dense to lop and scatter and too steep to masticate, hand crews would use chainsaws to fell trees and then pile the trees and branches. The piles would be burned after they have cured and under favorable conditions for prescribed fire. Approximately 2,500 acres would be treated using this method or mastication, depending on slope and access.



Piñon and juniper expansion into sagebrush ecosystems leads to an increase in woody fuels, a decrease in species diversity, a decrease in water availability, an increase in soil erosion, and a decrease in habitat quality for sage-grouse.

Map 3. Proposed piñon-juniper treatments in the Rough Creek project area.





Most of the project area has sparse piñon and juniper trees, similar to the foreground of this photograph, that would be hand cut, lopped, and scattered on site. In some areas of denser trees that have a sagebrush understory, similar to some of the denser trees on the hillside in this photograph, piñon and juniper trees would either be masticated or cut, piled, and burned.

Other Project Activities

Personal Use Fuelwood Removal: In areas accessible by road, personal use fuelwood removal permits may be issued to remove cut trees.

Seeding or Planting Native Species: A native species mix appropriate for the site and collected locally, when possible, may be used if native species are not growing as desired following treatment, or in other parts of the project area with low native grass and herbaceous plant cover. Seeds would be certified “weed free” and seeding may occur through hand, mechanical, or aerial application. Planting of sagebrush may also occur.

How to Comment

The Forest is seeking comments to help improve this project. Comments would be most helpful if received by August 31, 2016. Comments can be submitted by mail, over the phone, in person, or by email.

Written comments should be submitted to the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Bridgeport Ranger District, Attn: Jeremy Marshall, HC62 Box 1000, Bridgeport CA 93517. Oral and hand-delivered comments must be provided at the Responsible Official’s office during normal business hours (8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays). Telephone comments can be submitted to the Responsible Official at 760-932-7070.

Electronic comments must be submitted to comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-bridgeport@fs.fed.us in an email message, or attached in portable document format (.pdf) or Word (.docx) format.

Comments, names, and contact information of those who comment will be part of the public record for this project. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, the District will not be able to send further project information to anonymous commenters.

For More Information

For more information, please contact Doug Clarke, interdisciplinary team leader, at dclarke@fs.fed.us or 775-778-6127.