

**DECISION MEMO  
SHARPS VALLEY HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT**

USDA Forest Service - Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest  
Spanish Fork Ranger District  
Tooele County, Utah

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Spanish Fork Ranger District of the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest has completed an analysis of the Sharps Valley Habitat Improvement Project. Sharps Valley is located within the Vernon Management Unit as outlined within the Uinta National Forest 2003 Land and Resource Management Plan. This project was designed in cooperation with the Utah Department of Wildlife Resources, as the area lies within sage-grouse winter habitat and mule deer winter range.

### **A. Project Location**

The proposed area of treatment is located approximately 5 miles southeast of the town of Vernon in T9S, R4W, 30 and 31, and T9S, R5W, Sections 25 and 36 in Tooele County, Utah (see attached map). The treatment area is accessible from existing roads and no new roads will be created. The work will be completed over the next two to five years.

### **B. Purpose and Need**

#### **1. Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to maintain previous chainings, improve wildlife habitat and watershed conditions, close non-system road/trails, correct an errata to the 2008 travel map, lock one gate, sign an administrative use road, and reduce hazardous fuels.

#### **2. Need**

Pinyon-junipers are invading the sagebrush/grassland steppe habitat areas that were previously chained in the 1970's. The invasion of pinyon-junipers is limiting resources (water, light and nutrients) available to the understory vegetation. The increase in pinyon-junipers causes a decrease in understory vegetation, which can cause an increase in soil erosion and results in poor wildlife habitat. The entire project area is important mule deer winter range. The northwest portion of the project area also contains 364 acres of sage-grouse winter range. Other areas have thick invasive mature Pinyon-Juniper.

Forest Service (FS) Roads 695 and 691 extend north from FS Road 038 and connect in approximately 0.35 miles. The western road (695) is not used and obscured by vegetation. The map shows road 691 ending just south of FS Road 690, when in fact it connects to FS Road 690. This 0.1 mile was inadvertently omitted from the Forest Service travel map.

The desired condition for pinyon-juniper in the *Vernon Ecosystem Management Plan for Vegetation* (May 1996) is to maintain greater than 85 percent of potential

ground cover on pinyon-juniper sites and to remove pinyon-juniper on sites with less than 30 percent slope. Pinyon-Juniper invasion in the old chaining is outside of the range of natural variability of the ecosystem. Removing pinyon-juniper will help maintain at least 85 percent of potential ground cover on these project sites for long term watershed health needs. This desired condition for pinyon-juniper was developed to mimic conditions created by past fire regimes and is within the range of natural variability for the Vernon Ecosystem.

The Landscape Natural Fire Regime Group is III- infrequent, mixed & surface (less than 75% of the dominant overstory vegetation replaced). The Fire Regime Condition Class is 2- Moderate. Fire regimes have been moderately altered from their natural (historical) range. Risk of losing key ecosystem components is moderate. Fire frequencies have departed from natural frequencies by one or more return intervals (either increased or decreased). These results in moderate changes to one or more of the following: fire size, intensity and severity, and landscape patterns. Vegetation and fuel attributes have been moderately altered from their natural (historical) range.

### **C. Proposed Action**

1. Bullhog approximately 380 acres of pinyon-juniper. Approximately twenty percent of the pinyon-juniper will be retained as small (5 acres or less) islands along natural contours.
2. Lop and scatter approximately 670 acres of pinyon and juniper trees with a base of 8 inches or larger. Pinyon pines will be retained in the section south of road 690 and north of the fence-line found directly south of FS road 038 (see map).
3. Approximately 2.4 miles of non-system roads will be either blocked with boulders or treated using a bulldozer to make them impassable.
4. Lock gate at the end of Forest Service Road 677. Forest Service Roads 692 and 693 converge into an administrative use road. This road will be signed "For Administrative Use Only".
5. Remove FS Road 695 from the system.
6. Correct the FS travel map by writing an errata for the Forest travel map showing that the existing 0.1 mile segment connecting FS Road 691 to FS Road 690 was an error of omission.

## **II. DECISION**

### **A. Description of Decision**

My decision is to implement numbers 1 through 6 of the proposed action.

**B. Purpose of the Decision**

The purpose of this project is to maintain previous chainings, improve wildlife habitat and watershed conditions, close non-system road/trails, correct an errata to the 2008 travel map, install 2 gates, and reduce hazardous fuels.

**III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

An interdisciplinary team (IDT) of Forest Service specialists reviewed this project. Input from this team was incorporated in the design of the proposed action and the specialist reports are contained in the project file. A request for comments was published in the *Provo Daily Herald* on July 9, 2009, letters were mailed to interested parties on June 30, 2009 and the project was posted in the Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions. One letter was received. Their comments were considered in the analysis of the project.

**IV. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION**

Proposed actions may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or listed in 36 CFR 220.6 (d) or (e), and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effects.

**A. Category of Exclusion**

This project fits within the category listed in 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."

For projects that are categorically excluded, there is no need to repeat a detailed analysis of effects to all resources. In promulgating the categories, the Forest Service has concluded that projects that fit those categories do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Thus, once the analysis establishes that this project has no extraordinary circumstances and fits into a category, the responsible official can reach the conclusion that there will be no significant effects to the environment without further analysis.

**B. Extraordinary Circumstances**

The federal regulations at 36 CFR 220.6 (b) list the following resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances related to a proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS:

1. *Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species*

The proposed action will have no effect on the western yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*) which was classified as a candidate for listing under the ESA in 2001. The western yellow-billed cuckoo is not present on the Vernon Management Area due to lack of suitable habitat (Project record: Biological Assessment).

The proposed action will have no effect on the Ute ladies'-tresses orchid (*Spiranthes diluvialis*) because the project area is too far from existing known Ute ladies'-tresses populations for there to be a strong chance of it being occupied (Project record: Biological Assessment, Botanist Report).

2. *Floodplains, wetlands of municipal watersheds*

Floodplains: This project's activities are not located within floodplains and will not have any direct or indirect impacts.

Wetlands: This project is not located in and will not have any direct or indirect impacts to wetlands.

Municipal Watersheds: This project is not located in and will not have any direct or indirect impacts to municipal watersheds

3. *Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas*

This project is not located in or near Wilderness or within a Wild or Scenic River corridor. No congressionally designated areas will be affected by this decision.

4. *Inventoried Roadless areas*

The Sharps Valley project area does not lie within any inventoried roadless areas. This decision will not affect inventoried roadless areas.

5. *Research Natural areas*

The project is not within any proposed, candidate or designated Research Natural Area (2003 Uinta Land Management Plan, Appendix E: Management Prescription Map).

*6. Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas*

This decision complies with the laws protecting Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision. No eligible archaeological sites were identified within the project area (Heritage Report).

No known American Indian plant collection or traditional uses occur within the treatment area. None of the activities proposed in this project would eliminate or restrict future opportunities to conduct such activities.

The proposed action will be of limited context and intensity and capable of producing little or no significant environmental effects (40 CFR 1508.4) individually or cumulatively on the quality of the human environment; is within a category listed in FSH 1909.15; and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action.

**V. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO THEIR LAWS OR REGULATIONS**

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations summarized below:

National Forest Management Act

This Act requires all projects and activities are consistent with the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This project and decision are consistent with the Forest Plan (Section VI of this document).

National Environmental Policy Act

This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The documentation of this decision supports compliance with this Act.

Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act requires that federal activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of any species federally listed or proposed as threatened or endangered or result in adverse modification to such species' designated critical habitat. As required by the Act, potential effects of this decision on listed species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Assessment.

Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670)

Only the sage grouse has the potential to occur within the project area. This project will improve wintering habitat for sage grouse. This project will not affect the viability of this species, nor contribute to any decline in the sage grouse population (Project record: Biological Evaluation).

The proposed action will have *no impact* on sensitive plant species (Project record: Botanists Report).

There are no aquatic species, fisheries or aquatic resources present within the Benmore Pastures (Project record: Fisheries Report).

#### Migratory Bird Treaty Act

This project and decision are consistent with the MBTA, Executive Order 13186, and the Forest Service/Fish and Wildlife Memorandum of Understanding (Project Record: Migratory Bird Report).

#### Clean Water Act

The proposed action will comply with the Clean Water Act (Project record: Hydrology Report).

#### Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision-making. Public involvement did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income populations. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

Implementation of this proposal is consistent with other Federal, State, and local laws for the protection of the environment.

## **VI. COMPLIANCE WITH THE FOREST PLAN**

My decision is consistent with the 2003 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Uinta National Forest. The management prescriptions for this area include (3.1) Aquatic, Terrestrial, and Hydrologic Resources, (3.3) Aquatic and Terrestrial Habitat, and (6.1) Non-forested Ecosystems.

This project is consistent with the following sub-goals of the Forest Plan:

**FW-Goal-2:** Biologically diverse, sustainable ecosystems maintain or enhance habitats for native flora and fauna, forest and rangeland health, watershed health, and water quality.

- Sub-goal 2-1: "The fuel management aspect of the fire management program is emphasized through application of hazard reduction activities."
- Sub-goal 2-6: "Ecosystems on the Forest provide and maintain viable and well-distributed populations of flora and fauna. New listings of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species as a result of Forest Service management activities are avoided."

- Sub-goal 2-8: "Ecosystem resilience is maintained by providing for a full range of seral stages and age classes (by cover type) that achieve a mosaic of habitat conditions and diversity to meet a variety of desired resource management objectives. Recruitment and sustainability of some early seral species and vegetation communities in the landscape are necessary to maintain ecosystem resilience to perturbations."
- Sub-goal 2-10: "Management actions maintain ecosystem health and encourage conditions that are within the historic range of variation."
- Sub-goal 2-23: "Areas identified as being of special concern for habitat such as big game winter range, big game natal areas .....are maintained and, where potential exists, improved or expanded."
- Sub-goal 2-25: "Maintain stable and upward conditions in big game winter range habitats and improve downward trend sites."

## **VII. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OF APPEAL**

This decision is subject to appeal under Forest Service regulations 36 CFR 215. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Appeals must be postmarked or received by the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of the publication of the legal notice in *The Provo Daily Herald*. The Appeal Deciding Officer is Brian Ferebee, Forest Supervisor. Appeals must be sent to: Appeal Deciding Officer, Intermountain Region USFS, 324 25th Street, Ogden, Utah 84401; or by fax to 801-625-5277; or by email to: [appeals-intermntn-regional-office@fs.fed.us](mailto:appeals-intermntn-regional-office@fs.fed.us). Emailed appeals must be submitted in rich text (rtf.) or Word (doc.). Documents in other formats (tiff, jpg etc) should be mailed in hardcopy. Appeals may also be hand delivered to the above address, during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday.

## **VIII. IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.10 (a) and (b), implementation of this project may begin 5 days after the close of the appeal filing period, if no appeal is filed. If an appeal is filed, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

## **IX. CONTACT PERSON**

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Karen Hartman of this office (801) 798-3571.

**X. SIGNATURE AND DATE**

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment, as it is within one of the categories listed in 36 CFR 220.6 (e), and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect. My conclusion is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. The best available science was utilized in rendering this decision (Project Record).

  
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DOUGLAS H. JONES  
District Ranger  
Spanish Fork Ranger District

9/28/09  
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Date