



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

# Decision Notice

## Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction Project Healthy Forest Initiative-Fuels Reduction 2003

August 2003



Forest  
Service

Fillmore Ranger District  
Fishlake National Forest  
Millard County, Utah



Mature pinyon-juniper and mountain brush adjacent to a residence in the wildland urban interface zone

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## Background

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This notice documents my decision for the Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction project on the Fillmore Ranger District of the Fishlake National Forest. The project will reduce hazardous fuels along the west side of the Pahvant Mountain Range (Pahvant Front), in the vicinity of Scipio, Holden, Fillmore and Meadow, Utah. The purpose of the treatments is to change fire behavior conditions near these communities to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically intense and severe wildfire and secondary effects, such as flooding, to these communities and the environment while providing for firefighter safety. The purpose and need for the project is discussed in detail in the Environmental Assessment (EA) on pages 1-3. The EA documents the analysis of the proposed action to meet this need.

The **Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction Project** is one of the demonstration projects for the President's Healthy Forests Initiative. This initiative calls for administrative improvements to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency and better results in projects that reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and restore forest health.

## Decision Framework

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Given the project's purpose and need, my decision will address the following questions:

1. Will my decision provide for public and firefighter safety?
2. Will my decision result in a reduction of fire behavior through fuels reduction in the wildland urban interface areas of Scipio, Holden, Fillmore and Meadow, Utah?
3. Will my decision conserve Inventoried Roadless Areas, soils, water-related values at risk, heritage resources, threatened, endangered and sensitive species, management indicator species, migratory birds, air quality and vegetation?

My decision only applies to proposed treatments on National Forest System lands. The BLM will issue a separate "Decision Record" for BLM lands. The proposed action does not require an amendment to the Fishlake National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 1986).

## My Decision

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Based upon my review of the EA, Finding of No Significant Impact, and associated analysis reports for the proposed project, I have decided to implement Alternative 2, the Proposed Action (see EA, pages 4-6). Implementation of the proposed action will reduce hazardous fuels on approximately 7,300 acres of National Forest Service System lands along the Pahvant Front.

## Reasons for My Decision

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My decision to implement the Proposed Action is based on its effectiveness in changing fuel and fire behavior conditions around the communities of Scipio, Holden, Fillmore and Meadow. The reduction of sagebrush/grasslands, pinyon-juniper, and Gambel oak vegetative fuels within the treatment areas will reduce fuel heights and fuel loads, which will result in decreased flame

lengths and fireline intensities. The change in fuels and fire behavior conditions will reduce the risk of uncharacteristically intense and severe wildfire and secondary effects, such as flooding, to these communities and the environment. It will also provide for public and firefighter safety in areas near these communities, and lower probability of property and resource damage (see EA, pages 9-12).

My decision to implement the Proposed Action is also based on an evaluation of environmental impacts as discussed in the EA (see pages 9-12) and associated analysis reports. In my best judgment The Proposed Action, along with all project design specifications, will provide the best opportunity to:

1. Provide for public and firefighter safety related to wildland fire (see EA page 9)
2. Reduce fire behavior by removing fuels. Removing overgrown vegetation by reducing fuel heights and fuel loads will reduce the potential for fires to move into or through the wildland urban interface.
3. Conserve Inventoried Roadless Areas, soils, water-related values at risk, heritage resources, threatened, endangered and sensitive species, management indicator species, migratory birds, air quality and vegetation.

Although the use of prescribed fire does involve some level of risk, the specific climatic and vegetative conditions under which burning will occur will minimize the potential for damage. Prior to implementation of prescribed burn activities, a prescribed fire burn plan will be completed which will specify the weather and vegetative conditions under which prescribed burning will occur (see EA page 6, project design specification #10). Conditions such as temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, and plant moisture content, will be constantly monitored prior to the planned burn period, as well as throughout prescribed burn activities in order to ensure safe burning conditions.

## **Other Alternatives Considered**

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The interdisciplinary team initially considered a proposal to reduce fuels on approximately 40,000 acres throughout the analysis area. During a preliminary evaluation of resource conditions, concerns were raised about potential adverse impacts to fragile North Horn soils, Forest Service aquatic management indicator species (MIS), and sensitive fisheries. The areas of concern were eliminated from further consideration for treatment.

The original proposed action that was included in the legal notice and public scoping letter on February 13, 2003, proposed approximately 16,000 acres of fuels reduction activities. Shortly thereafter, it came to our attention there was a possibility that potential Mexican spotted owl (MSO) habitat occurred in some of the proposed treatment units. Treatment unit boundaries were then modified to eliminate proposed treatments within potential MSO habitat in the Wild Goose, Pioneer, Horse Hollow and Meadow treatment units. This resulted in approximately 14,300 acres proposed for treatment, as described in this EA. Shortly after project boundaries were modified, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared that potential MSO habitat did not exist within the project area, nor anywhere within Millard County. By that time, however, the agencies had already completed the environmental analyses based on the modified treatment unit boundaries.

As a result of public involvement efforts, one commenter suggested that long-term or permanent suspension of livestock grazing be considered as an alternative. Currently there is no evidence that elimination of grazing would reduce fuels and fire behavior, and the commenter has not provided any information to establish such. For these reasons, long-term or permanent suspension of current livestock grazing was not considered a reasonable alternative to achieving the purpose and need (see Response to Public Scoping document, located in the project planning record, and Appendix A, response to comment #5). No unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources were identified that warranted consideration of additional alternatives; therefore, no other alternatives were identified.

### **No Action**

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered the no action alternative. If no action were taken, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. The proposed fuels reduction activities would not occur in the proposed treatment units at this time. The project area would remain as described in the EA Existing Condition section (pages 1-2), and current trends would continue. The pinyon-juniper, sagebrush/grass/forb, and Gambel oak vegetation would continue to grow more densely, accumulating more dead fuels. The result would be uncharacteristically intense and severe wildfires, when they occurred. Resistance to fire control would increase, while the ability to provide for public and firefighter safety and structure protection would continue to decrease (see EA page 3 and 9). In addition, this alternative would not improve conservation of Inventoried Roadless Areas, soils, water-related values at risk, heritage resources, threatened, endangered and sensitive species, management indicator species, migratory birds, air quality and vegetation (see EA pages 10-13).

### **Public Involvement**

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The proposal was described in the Fishlake National Forest's winter, spring and summer 2003 Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions, which is mailed four times a year to approximately 140 individuals, organizations and agencies. A scoping notice was published in the *Richfield Reaper* on March 12, 2003 and the *Millard County Chronicle Progress* on March 13, 2003. Scoping notices were mailed to approximately 120 individuals, organizations and agencies on February 13, 2003. A public meeting was held in Fillmore on February 20, 2003. Meeting announcement flyers were placed in businesses and post offices from Scipio to Cove Fort. Flyers were submitted to radio stations KMTI (Manti) and KNAK (Delta). Responses to public scoping comments are included in the project planning record.

I determined the issues evaluated in the EA to be the key issues related to the proposed action, based on scoping with the public and agency specialists. I considered effects to the following key issues: inventoried roadless areas, soils, water-related values at risk, heritage resources, threatened, endangered and sensitive plants and wildlife, management indicator species, migratory birds, air quality, and vegetation. Project design specifications were created or modified in order to address these concerns.

On June 24, 2003 the completed EA, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Response to Public Scoping Comments document were mailed to interested parties along with a cover letter

requesting comment. A public notice inviting comment on the proposed action was published in the *Richfield Reaper* on June 25, 2003, and in the *Millard County Chronicle Progress* on June 26, 2003. Three comment letters were received. Responses to these comments are contained in Appendix A – Response to Comments Received from Public Review of the Environmental Assessment and FONSI, included as an attachment to this Decision Notice.

## **Finding of No Significant Impact** \_\_\_\_\_

The context and setting of this project is localized with implications to the immediate treatment areas only. The people most affected by the treatments will be local residents. This action is a continuation of fuels projects that have occurred for many years on lands administered by the Fishlake National Forest. After considering the environmental effects described in the EA and the entirety of the project planning record, I have determined that these actions would not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, considering the context and intensity of impacts. Thus, an environmental impact statement (EIS) will not be prepared. A detailed finding of no significant impact (FONSI) is discussed in the attached FONSI document.

## **Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations** \_\_\_\_\_

My decision is consistent with all laws, regulations, and agency policy. The project meets the requirements of the National Forest Management Act, Clear Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and other Executive Orders, as discussed below.

### **National Forest Management Act**

The National Forest Management Act and accompanying regulations require several specific findings be documented at the project level. I reviewed the selected alternative and make the following findings:

Consistency with Forest Plan: This decision to reduce hazardous fuels is consistent with the Forest Plan’s long-term goals and objectives and tiers to the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Forest Plan (1986), as amended. Specifically, this proposal is consistent with the Fishlake Forest Plan Management Direction (Chapter IV, pages IV-1 to IV-160), and the objectives listed in the EA on page 2. In addition, the Proposed Action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan, as amended by the Utah Fire Amendment (USDA, 2000). Pertinent goals and objectives include, “Ecosystems are restored and maintained, consistent with land uses and historic fire regimes, through wildland fire use and prescribed fire” (Utah Fire Amendment pg. A-40). This alternative is also consistent with Forest Plan management area direction, which is primarily intensive range resource management.

Sensitive Species: The Biological Evaluation determined the project “may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species” for northern goshawk, spotted bat, western big-eared bat, peregrine falcon, flammulated owl, and three-toed woodpecker. No suitable habitat for other sensitive species occurs in the project area (see EA, pages 11-12; EA Appendix B; and Biological Evaluation, pages 3-8, 18-22).

**Management Indicator Species:** The Wildlife Report determined the project may affect individuals or habitat, but would not adversely affect population numbers or species viability for Management Indicator Species (MIS) (see EA, page 12 and Wildlife Report, pages 49-50 [aquatic MIS], and pages 39-48 and 52-55 [terrestrial MIS]).

**Clean Air Act:** Emissions anticipated from the implementation of the selected alternative will be of short duration and will not exceed National ambient air quality standards because weather conditions must meet a present prescription in order to safely implement prescribed burns, enhance efficient fuel consumption and effectively disperse smoke (see EA, page 13 and Air Quality Report, pages 1 and 6).

**Clean Water Act:** No Water Quality Listed Stream segments (303.d water quality impaired streams) occur in the Pahvant project area. Beneficial uses will not be degraded by implementation of the proposed action. Project activities are expected to meet all applicable State of Utah water quality standards (see EA, page 10 and Hydrology Report, page 41).

**Endangered Species Act:** Threatened and endangered plants do not occur in the Pahvant project area. No designated critical habitat for any threatened or endangered species occurs in the project area. The project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the bald eagle and western yellow-billed cuckoo (see EA, page 11; EA Appendix B; and Biological Assessment, pages 2-3, 12-13). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concurred with these determinations.

**National Historic Preservation Act:** The Heritage Resources Protection Plan includes mitigation measures to be applied during project implementation. These measures would prevent adverse effects to heritage resources eligible to the National Register of Historic Places, and the State Historic Preservation Office has concurred with these mitigation measures (see EA, page 11, and Heritage Resource Protection Plan, pages 10-11, 13-14).

**Executive Order 11988:** No flood plains or wetlands occur in the Pahvant project area (see EA, page 10 and Hydrology Report, page 41).

**Executive Order 12898:** Based on public comment and effects analysis, implementation of the selected alternative is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to minority or low-income populations.

**Executive Order 13186 (Migratory Bird Treaty Act):** There would be no intentional take of migratory birds, their parts, nests, eggs, and nestlings. However it is possible that if the treatments were done during the spring or early summer months there could be an unintentional disturbance or loss of individuals. The proposed action may affect individual migratory bird species, but would not adversely affect population numbers or viability of these species (see EA, page 12; Wildlife Report, pages 50-52; and Appendix A, response to comment #7).

## **Implementation Date**

If no appeal is filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of this decision may begin on, but not before, the 5<sup>th</sup> business day following the close of the appeal-filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

## Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities \_\_\_\_\_

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.11. Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.13, individuals or organizations that submitted substantive comments during the comment period may appeal this decision. Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14, as published in the Federal Register on June 4, 2003:

1. It is the appellant's responsibility to provide sufficient project- or activity specific evidence and rationale, focusing on the decision, to show why the Responsible Official's decision should be reversed (paragraph (b)(6-9).
2. The appeal must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer Sec. 215.8 in writing. At a minimum, an appeal must include the following:
  - a. Appellant's name and address (Sec. 215.2), with a telephone number, if available;
  - b. Signature or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for electronic mail may be filed with the appeal);
  - c. When multiple names are listed on an appeal, identification of the lead appellant (Sec. 215.2) and verification of the identity of the lead appellant upon request;
  - d. The name of the project or activity for which the decision was made, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the date of the decision;
  - e. The regulation under which the appeal is being filed, when there is an option to appeal under either this part or part 251, subpart C (Sec. 215.11[d]);
  - f. Any specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks and rationale for those changes;
  - g. Any portion(s) of the decision with which the appellant disagrees, and explanation for the disagreement;
  - h. Why the appellant believes the Responsible Official's decision failed to consider the substantive comments; and
  - i. How the appellant believes the decision specifically violates law, regulation, or policy.
3. The Appeal Deciding Officer shall not process an appeal when one or more of the following applies:
  - a. An appellant's identity is not provided or cannot be determined from the signature (written or electronically scanned) and a reasonable means of contact is not provided;
  - b. The appellant has not provided a reasonable means of contact;
  - c. The decision cannot be identified;
  - d. The appeal is illegible for any reason, including those submitted electronically in a format different from that specified in the legal notice.

Appeals should be submitted to:

**USDA Forest Service, Intermountain Region**  
**Attn: Appeal Deciding Officer**  
**324 25<sup>th</sup> Street**  
**Ogden, UT 84401**  
**phone: (435) 896-9233**  
**fax: (801) 625-5277**  
**e-mail: [appeals-intermtn-regional-office@fs.fed.us](mailto:appeals-intermtn-regional-office@fs.fed.us)**

E-mailed appeals must be submitted in MS Word (\*.doc) or rich text format (\*.rtf). Appeals may also be delivered to the above address, during regular business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m, Monday-Friday, excluding federal holidays. Appeals must be filed within 45 days of the date of the legal notice of this decision in the *Richfield Reaper*.

## Contact

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For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Diane Freeman, Team Leader, 115 East 900 North, Richfield, UT 84701 or call (435) 896-9233.

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**ROBERT S. GARDNER**  
District Ranger  
Fillmore Ranger District

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Date

## APPENDIX A

### Response to Comments Received from Public Review of the Environmental Assessment and FONSI

## Response to Comments Received from Public Review of the Environmental Assessment and FONSI

### Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction Project

Commenters: Utah Environmental Congress (UEC), letter on July 1, 2003  
Utah Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, letter on July 11, 2003  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), letter on July 14, 2003

- 1. Comment: Both the Forest Service and BLM readily acknowledge the determination to issue FONSI was already made and the EA was merely written to support conclusions already reached by both agencies. This is a clear violation of the mandate of both the APA and NEPA, and necessitates reinitiating the environmental review process to ensure the fairness and accuracy of the documents provided for public review and consideration. (UEC letter, page 1-2)**

Response: The cover letter that accompanied the EA and FONSI stated, "The effects analysis in the EA is focused on supporting our determination that there would be no significant impacts resulting from the proposed action. While in the past we have included more details of the environmental analysis in the EA, the Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction Project EA is focused more on supporting the FONSI, which meets the requirements of our laws and regulations<sup>1</sup>." Unfortunately, this statement has been misread as meaning that a determination to issue a FONSI was previously made and the EA was merely written to support conclusions already reached by the agencies.

The footnote attached to the statement in question refers the reader to the President's Council On Environmental Quality (CEQ) memo under the Healthy Forest Initiative, along with the website for viewing this memo. The CEQ memo reminds us that the EA should be a "concise public document", and the description of environmental impacts should "concentrate on whether the action would significantly affect the quality of the human environment" and "should provide enough information to support a determination to either prepare an environmental impact statement or find no significant impact."<sup>1</sup>

A finding of no significant impact can only be arrived at upon complete and thorough review of all completed environmental analyses that evaluate the impacts of the proposed action. The Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction EA incorporates by reference the detailed discussions and evaluations included in each of the resource specialist reports and other supporting documents (see EA Introduction and Background, page 1). In particular, the EA is focused on disclosing and summarizing key information that is relevant to a determination of significance, based on a complete and thorough review of all completed environmental analyses. The EA and the entirety of the project planning record provided the information that was necessary to determine that the impacts of the proposed action are not expected to be significant; therefore, the EA *supports the determination* that the proposed action would not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment.

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/guidanceforenvironmental\\_assessmentsofforest\\_healthprojects\\_memo.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/guidanceforenvironmental_assessmentsofforest_healthprojects_memo.pdf)

The FONSI that accompanied the EA during the public comment period was unsigned in order to provide the public an opportunity to identify any significant impacts that may have been overlooked during the environmental analysis process. The public did not identify any significant impacts. The environmental analysis documents provided for public review have documented a comprehensive or “hard look” at effects, and do not require any changes as a result of public review; therefore, reinitiating environmental review is unnecessary.

**2. Comment: The effects analysis limits itself to the impacts to plants within the project area rather than the cumulative effects area. Had the BLM and Forest Service included the entire west side of the Pahvant Range, TES plants or suitable habitat would have been found and impacts could well have resulted. (UEC letter, page 2)**

Response: Threatened, endangered and sensitive (TES) plants and suitable TES plant habitat do not occur in the treatment units, nor anywhere on the west side of the Pahvant Mountain Range (see Biological Assessment, pages 2-3; Biological Evaluation, pages 2-8; and BLM TES Plant Clearance Report, Appendix B of EA); therefore, there would be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to TES plants.

**3. Comment: A list of TES plants of concern was provided by the UEC in its comments of March 10, 2003, but no effort was made to deal with any of them specifically. (UEC letter, page 2)**

Response: The plants referred to in this comment include: *Cryptantha compacta*, *Aster kingii* var. *barnebyana*, *Epilobium nevadense*, *Cuscuta warneri*, *Penstemon angustifolius* var. *dulcis*, *Gutierrezia petradoria*, *Penstemon wardii*, *Penstemon nanus*, *Spaheralcea caespitosa*, *Sclerocactus pubispinus*. Of these, the following are listed as Sensitive species by the Regional Forester of the Forest Service Intermountain Region: *Aster kingii* var. *barnebyana*, *Epilobium nevadense*, and *Penstemon wardii*. These species are not known to occur, nor have suitable habitat within the project area; therefore, there would be no effects to these species (see Biological Evaluation, pages 2-8).

*Cryptantha compacta*, *Cuscuta warneri*, *Penstemon angustifolius* var. *dulcis*, *Spaheralcea caespitosa* are considered sensitive species by the BLM; however they do not occur, nor have suitable habitat within the project area. Furthermore, no other threatened and endangered plant species occur on BLM land within the project area nor within the jurisdiction of the Fillmore Field Office, which covers the entire west side of the Pahvant Mountain Range (see BLM TES Plant Clearance Report, Appendix B of EA).

*Sclerocactus pubispinus* was formerly listed as a Forest Service sensitive species; however, it was delisted on April 24, 1994, and currently has no federal status as a TES species. *Gutierrezia petradoria* and *Penstemon nanus* are not currently listed as TES species by the BLM or Forest Service. The BLM and Forest Service are not required to evaluate the effects of proposed projects to species that are not considered TES or Forest Service Management Indicator Species (MIS).

**4. Comment: Only the impacts to MIS within the 14,329 acres of land proposed for treatment are considered. The cumulative effects analysis merely lists past, present and reasonably foreseeable activities in the area but provides no population status or trend data for any of the MIS or TES resources contained within the nearly 300,000 acres making up the western Pahvant Range. (UEC letter, page 2)**

Response: As directed by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), an EA is a concise document, and should not contain long descriptions or detailed data, which the agency may have gathered. Rather, it should contain a brief discussion of the environmental impacts. To avoid undue length, the EA may incorporate by reference background data to support its concise discussion of the proposal and relevant issues. While the regulations do not contain page limits for EAs, the CEQ has generally advised agencies to keep the length of EAs to not more than approximately 10-15 pages. (CEQ Most-Asked Questions, Federal Register vol. 46, no. 55, pages 18026-18038, 3/23/81)

Language has been added to the EA to clarify the fact that resource specialist reports were incorporated by reference into the EA. A sentence has been added at the end of the third paragraph under the EA "Introduction and Background" (page 1), which reads, "The findings contained within those resource specialist reports are incorporated by reference into this EA." Similar language was added to the EA "Effects Summary" (page 9). The following statement was added to the introductory paragraph of the effects summary, "Detailed discussions of the affected environment and analyses of potential effects, including cumulative effects, are located in the resource specialist reports and other supporting documentation, which are hereby incorporated by reference."

In addition, the first sentence of the first paragraph under "Cumulative Effects" (page 13) now reads, "Detailed discussions of cumulative effects are included in resource specialist reports, which are hereby incorporated by reference. Cumulative effects that are relevant to a determination of significance are summarized in the previous Effects Summary section." The Cumulative Effects section of the EA is intended to disclose 1) the cumulative effects areas used for resource analyses, and 2) a detailed description of the past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions that were considered in cumulative effects analyses.

The effects summary provided in the EA is based on complete and thorough evaluations of the potential direct, indirect and *cumulative* effects to federal threatened, endangered and sensitive (TES) species, and Forest Service management indicator species (MIS). A discussion of these analyses can be found on pages 39-49 and 52-55 of the Wildlife Report, pages 8-12 of the Biological Assessment (BA), and pages 13-18 of the Biological Evaluation (BE). The EA incorporates the Wildlife Report, BA and BE by reference, and discloses and summarizes direct, indirect and cumulative effects that are relevant to a determination of significance (see EA Effects Summary, pages 9-13). The wildlife cumulative effects area includes the entire Pahvant Mountain Range, as described in the Wildlife Report, BA, BE, and the EA (see page 13).

As discussed in the EA on pages 11-12, effects to some MIS and TES species would be improved or maintained on about 14,300 acres because that is the only area that would be treated under the proposed action.

Population status and trend data for MIS and TES species are discussed on pages 5-37 of the Wildlife Report, pages 7-8 of the BA, and page 13 of the BE. This data has been collected within the project area and also on a larger scale. For most species it would be technically and practically inappropriate to conduct population trend sampling at the scale of individual projects. Species found within project boundaries contribute to the total population trend but do not make up the entire population and trend. For this reason, it is not appropriate to determine population trend at a local level. Data that contributed to analysis of trends was acquired from organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and U.S. Geological Survey.

**5. Comment: The suggestion that livestock grazing on the Pahvant Range be considered in an attempt to reduce fuel loading and to at least partially restore historic fire regimes was not considered. (UEC letter, page 2-3)**

Response: During the public scoping period, the UEC suggested that long-term or permanent suspension of livestock grazing be considered as an alternative to the proposed action. This comment was previously addressed in the Response to Public Scoping Comments document (see page 2, comment #3), contained in the project planning record and available for public viewing on the project web page at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/rifc/pahvant/pahvant.htm>.

Our previous response acknowledged that historic heavy grazing and fire suppression efforts since the mid 1900's have led to the heavy vegetative fuels conditions that exist today. As stated in the Vegetation Report (see page 3), grazing by domestic livestock and wild ungulates (e.g. elk, deer) has, and will continue to impact all fire-adapted ecosystems by removing fine fuels (e.g. grass and forbs) and limiting the spread of fire.

While fire is a desired element within the ecosystems found along the Pahvant Front, and a wildland fire use plan is in place for much of this area, the conditions under which wildland fires burn are not always desirable. As discussed in the EA (see Existing Condition, page 2) and Fire and Fuels Specialist Report (see pages 12-13, 16-17), there have been numerous, large high severity wildland fires along the Pahvant Front. This situation is expected to continue in the near future. It is expected that some of the lightning fires would escape initial attack and grow to very large sizes. Fires would burn with more intensity, longer flame lengths and higher severity than would have been typical 150 years ago. The result would be uncharacteristically intense and severe fires. As a result, resistance to fire control would increase, while the ability to provide for public and firefighter safety and structure protection would continue to decrease.

Current vegetation conditions are the result of many years of fire exclusion and previous heavy grazing, and are far removed from historic conditions. The degree of degradation in many ecosystems as a result of past management is such that relying solely on natural processes will not have the desired effects. Furthermore, many ecological processes have

been modified in ways that make return to “natural” or historical conditions impossible. Eliminating grazing in this area today would not immediately result in the desired change in fuels and fire behavior, and could exacerbate existing conditions by allowing fine fuels to increase. The area would still require management action in order to reduce vegetative fuels and fire behavior to reduce the risk of uncharacteristically intense and severe wildfire and secondary effects, such as flooding, to communities and the environment while providing for firefighter safety. Under the current vegetative conditions, if livestock grazing were suspended fine fuels would increase, which would promote the rapid spread of fire.

For these reasons, long-term or permanent suspension of current livestock grazing was not considered a reasonable alternative to achieving the purpose and need. Furthermore, any proposed long-term or permanent change to grazing is outside the scope of the proposed action. The current Forest Plan and BLM Resource Management Plans have designated most of the project area to be managed with an emphasis on livestock grazing. The evaluation of any long-term or permanent changes would be appropriately addressed during revision of BLM allotment evaluations, Forest Service Allotment Management Plans (AMP) or land use plans. The Forest Service is currently revising the Fishlake Forest Plan and also has plans to update several AMPs along the Pahvant Front in the near future.

**6. Comment: The UEC is concerned about the potential use of heavy equipment to accomplish the objectives of this project within at least a portion of the project area. Channel 5 (KSL) recently reported on the use of what has been referred to as a “masticator” or “bull hog” on the Fishlake National Forest. To our knowledge the Fishlake National Forest has never considered the environmental consequences of such equipment in any of its analyses to date. The impacts of mechanical equipment are not considered. (UEC letter, page 3)**

Response: As stated in the Proposed Action (see *Richfield Reaper* legal notice on 2/12/03, *Millard County Chronicle Progress* legal notice on 2/13/03, scoping letter on 2/13/03, and EA page 4) vegetation to be cut would be cut by hand. Hand tools include axes, brush hooks, pruners, pulaskis and chainsaws; however, chainsaws are the tool of choice when cutting large amounts of vegetation by hand. The bull hog is a large piece of mechanized heavy equipment, and is not considered a hand tool. With regard to cutting vegetation by hand, the EA considers only the use of the hand tools listed above. The use of mechanized heavy equipment to remove vegetation is not part of the proposed action; therefore, effects of such equipment were not analyzed.

The KSL news clip featured both Forest Service and BLM personnel; however, Forest Service personnel were in uniform while BLM personnel were not, which may have caused viewers to believe the demonstration was occurring on National Forest System (NFS) lands. For clarification, the bull hog is owned by the BLM and the demonstration took place on BLM lands, not NFS lands.

- 7. Comment: Executive Order 13186 receives no attention within the EA. EO 13186 order requires the Forest Service to ensure that environmental analyses evaluate the effects of actions and agency plans on migratory birds, with emphasis on species of concern. EO 13186 also required the Forest Service and other agencies to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service within two years, which has since expired. (UEC letter, page 4)**

Response: The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) Executive Order includes several general goals for conserving migratory bird species. The Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) are developing an interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to outline how EO 13186 will be more fully implemented. The MOU has not yet been finalized. The FWS submitted comments during the project scoping period that provided general responsibilities related to the MBTA. Their comments affirm the responsibilities of federal agencies to comply with the MBTA, and to avoid or minimize unintentional take and taking actions to benefit migratory birds to the extent practicable.

The effects of the proposed action on migratory birds is discussed in the Wildlife Report (pages 50-52), and are summarized in the EA on page 12. Some bird species that are MIS birds are also migratory birds, including mountain bluebird, western bluebird, brewers sparrow, Lincoln sparrow, song sparrow, vesper sparrow, yellow warbler, and hairy woodpecker. Management Indicator Species (MIS) were identified to be representative of other species (Forest Plan II-28 through 31). MIS were selected to reflect the impacts of different management activities on wildlife. This concept can be applied to migratory birds. There are many migratory bird species that utilize the analysis area for a portion of the year. A complete list of bird species protected by the MBTA can be found in the project planning record.

In the long-term, the project would improve foraging habitat for many migratory birds. Prescribed burns would create patches or a mosaic of early seral plant species, which would benefit many bird species. The addition of early seral plant species would help create size, age, and species diversity important in maintaining functioning ecosystems and create or maintain habitat for a number of migratory birds.

There would be no intentional take of migratory birds, their parts, nests, eggs, and nestlings. However it is possible that if the treatments were done during the spring or early summer months there could be an unintentional disturbance or loss of individuals. The proposed action may affect individual migratory bird species, but would not adversely affect population numbers or viability of these species (see Wildlife Report, pages 50-52 and EA, page 12).

- 8. Comment: Treatment areas occur within and near historic pygmy rabbit habitat. Surveys should be done to assess whether or not this species occurs within the proposed treatment areas, and potential project benefits and impacts should be evaluated. (FWS letter, page 1)**

Response: The information used by FWS regarding pygmy rabbits was obtained from the Utah Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR). Keith Day, non-game wildlife biologist for the DWR for the Southern Region was contacted on July 28, 2003. He stated that the project area was thought to be historic pygmy rabbit habitat, but the species has not actually been located on the Pahvant Front. He further stated that the area should be considered “potential” habitat. This species is not currently listed as sensitive by the state of Utah wildlife, and is not officially considered a BLM sensitive species. Keith also stated that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently received a petition to list this species listed as threatened or endangered. He suggested it be treated as a state sensitive species since the DWR plans to include it on the sensitive species list that is currently being revised.

At this time the pygmy rabbit does not have special federal status. Surveys for this species would likely not be conducted due to other funding and staffing priorities related to MIS and TES survey and monitoring needs. Potential effects to the pygmy rabbit can be addressed via analyses for species occupying similar habitats, such as sage nester management indicator species (MIS). Management Indicator Species (MIS) were identified by the Forest Service to be representative of other species (Forest Plan II-28 through 31), and to reflect the impacts of different management activities on wildlife. This concept can be applied to the pygmy rabbit, which is associated with dense, tall stands of sagebrush. The effects of the proposed action have been disclosed for sage nesters (Wildlife Report pages 47-48), which occupy the same vegetative habitat type as the pygmy rabbit.

<b>PYGMY RABBIT HABITAT</b>	
Number of Acres of Potential Pygmy Rabbit Habitat in Analysis Area	* 70,573
Number of Acres of Potential Habitat Treated	1258-2515
Percentage of Potential Habitat Treated in Analysis Area	1.8-3.6%

\* Potential pygmy rabbit habitat consists of the sagebrush/grass/forb vegetation type.

An estimated 1.8-3.6% of potential pygmy rabbit habitat, within the sagebrush/grass/forb vegetation type, will be treated when compared to the analysis area. The treatment units are widely scattered within the 287,475-acre analysis area, leaving most sagebrush areas untreated and available for this species.

It was determined that the proposed action “may affect individuals or habitat, but would not adversely affect population numbers or species viability” of sage nesters (see Wildlife Report, page 45). It is expected the project would have a similar effects on the pygmy rabbit.

**9. Comment: Project implementation should strive to provide a mosaic of habitats and connectivity to support pygmy rabbits and other native wildlife species. (FWS letter, page 1)**

Response: The proposed action is to treat the vegetation in a patchwork mosaic pattern by removing 40-80 percent of the vegetation, and retaining 20-60 percent of the vegetation. This

would create openings and foraging areas for many wildlife species including possibly pygmy rabbits, while also providing for hiding and thermal cover.

**10. Comment: We recommend the Forest Service coordinate with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources sensitive species biologist during project planning. (FWS letter, page 2)**

Response: The Forest Service initiated communication with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) during initial scoping for the project. Subsequent communications have occurred with Sean Kelly, local UDWR biologist, and Keith Day non-game biologist for the UDWR Southern Region.

Sean was contacted regarding his knowledge of any occurrences of TES species in the area and any mitigation measures that would be appropriate for the proposed action. He was supportive of the proposed action, and did not know of any special concerns related to TES species. Sean also provided information regarding 2003 aerial survey counts for deer and elk. Keith provided information regarding pygmy rabbits, as described in response to comments #8 and #11.

**11. Comment: Post-project monitoring should be included to determine success of habitat manipulations for pygmy rabbits. (FWS letter, page 2)**

Response: Monitoring activities can be divided into land use plan monitoring and project-specific monitoring. The three categories of Forest Plan monitoring include implementation, effectiveness and validation monitoring. Effectiveness and validation monitoring are not typically done as part of project implementation. This type of monitoring has been conducted at the regional and national levels for various types of activities. Implementation monitoring and any additional project-specific monitoring are however, important aspects of the project.

Routine implementation monitoring assesses whether the project was implemented as designed and whether or not it complies with land use plans. Planning for routine implementation monitoring began with the preliminary design of the Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction Project. Input by resource staff specialists, such as archaeologists, soil scientists, hydrologists, and biologists is regularly requested during this implementation monitoring process. These specialists provide technical advice when questions arise during project implementation.

The BLM and Fishlake National Forest conduct periodic monitoring, including reviews of macroinvertebrates, fisheries, wildlife, Management Indicator Species (Forest Service), noxious weeds, water quality and recreation use. These reviews may be coordinated with the State and other agencies. Results of this and other monitoring are typically summarized in a National Forest Annual Monitoring and Evaluation Report. This report provides information about how well the management direction of the Forest is being carried out, and measures the accomplishment of anticipated outputs, activities and effects.

Surveys for this species would likely not be conducted due to other funding and staffing priorities related to MIS and TES survey and monitoring needs.; however, monitoring is conducted for sage nester management indicator species (MIS), which occupy similar habitats as the pygmy rabbit.

**12. Comment: The final EA documentation should discuss the future vegetation communities created in treatment areas and the impacts, both positive and negative, to wildlife. (FWS letter, page 2)**

Response: Effects to threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive wildlife and Forest Service management indicator species (MIS) and their habitats is discussed in the Biological Evaluation (see pages 13-22), Biological Assessment (see pages 8-13), and Wildlife Report (see pages 41-58). These reports are included in the project planning record and can be viewed on the project web page at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/rifc/pahvant/pahvant.htm>. The EA includes a summary of effects on pages 9-13.

Approximately 14,300 acres of potential bald eagle winter foraging habitat would be maintained (no net gain or loss). Potential Western yellow-billed cuckoo habitat would not be affected because riparian habitat would not be treated. No designated critical habitat for threatened or endangered species occurs in the project area. It was determined the proposed action “may affect, not likely to adversely affect” the bald eagle and western yellow-billed cuckoo (BA pp. 12-13 and EA Appendix B). U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has concurred with these determinations (see letters of 5/5/03 and 5/28/03 in project planning record).

Approximately 14,300 acres of potential foraging habitat would be maintained or improved for the following sensitive species: spotted bat, peregrine falcon, western big-eared bat, northern goshawk, flammulated owl, and three-toed woodpecker. It was determined the proposed action “may impact individuals or habitat, but will not likely contribute to a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability to the population or species” for the sensitive species listed above (see BE pp. 18-22, EA Appendix B).

Approximately 14,300 acres of habitat would be maintained or improved for the following Forest Service management indicator species (MIS): elk, deer, cavity nesters, riparian dependant guild, sage nesters, and northern goshawk. It was determined the proposed action “may affect individuals or habitat, but would not adversely affect population numbers or species viability” for these MIS species or groups of species (see Wildlife Report, pages 39-48, and 52-55).

Approximately 14,300 acres of habitat would be maintained or improved for migratory birds. The proposed action may affect individual species, but would not adversely affect population numbers or viability of these species (see Wildlife Report, pages 37, 50-52).

**13. Comment: Native plant species should be used for any necessary seeding so as to avoid the potential risks associated with non-native seed, such as introducing potential noxious weeds. (FWS letter, page 2)**

Response: Native seed would be included in a seed mix as appropriate, and where available. If and when a seed purchase contract is issued, it would stipulate that noxious weeds would not be allowed in the seed mix. As stated in the project design specifications, only noxious weed-free seed mixes would be used for any necessary seeding (see EA page 6, #12).

**14. Comment: The final EA documentation should contain a list of species that may be used to seed the prescribed burn areas. (FWS letter, page 2)**

Response: The specific seed mix to be used would be specifically developed for the area to be seeded. Elevation, soil type, slope, aspect and pre-existing vegetation would all be considered as the mix is developed. Some species that have been previously used in reseeding activities in the area include: thickspike wheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, mountain brome grass, slender wheatgrass, hard fescue, sheep fescue, crested wheatgrass, alfalfa, and small burnet.

Other plant species that may be used for revegetation of treated areas include the following: antelope bitterbrush, cliffrose, globemallow, Rocky Mountain penstemon, beeplant, sunflower, Lewis flax, showy goldeneye and forage kochia, as appropriate.

**15. Comment: An invasive plant inventory should be incorporated into the final EA. (FWS letter, page 3)**

Response: A noxious weeds inventory map is included in the Vegetation Report (see Appendix A, Map 2), and is included in the project planning record. There are approximately 3,070 acres of noxious weeds identified on BLM and National Forest Service System lands within the 287,500-acre analysis area. These include musk thistle, white top, scotch thistle, yellow toadflax and leafy spurge. Herbicide treatments have been applied to these areas in the late spring and summer months, and the areas are monitored annually to determine areas of recurrence or spread. Noxious weed control is ongoing within the analysis area (see Vegetation Report, pages 5-6).

**16. Comment: The fuels reduction treatments should be evaluated with regard to the potential for increased spread of invasive species. (FWS letter, page 3)**

Response: Invasive plant species are capable of rapid expansion following disturbance; however, this has not been observed after past wildfires within the analysis area (see Vegetation Report, page 7). Following prescribed burn treatments, the treatment units would be evaluated to determine whether seeding is required to establish vegetation cover and to retard invasive species such as cheatgrass. Any noxious weeds found within the treated areas would be controlled in accordance with established guidelines.

**17. Comment: The project should describe measures to be taken to avoid and/or control invasive plant species. (FWS letter, page 3)**

Response: See response to comment #15.

**18. The Utah Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget provided comments on July 11, 2003 that were the same as the ones they provided during public scoping. These comments relate to alternative mechanical treatments, acreage and types of burns, emissions, regulatory requirements, air quality impacts, and modeling of pollutants to document compliance with NAAQs. (Utah Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget letter, page 1).**

Response: These comments were previously addressed in the “Response to Public Scoping Comments” document contained in the project planning record and available for viewing on the project web page at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/rifc/pahvant/pahvant.htm>.

The reader is referred to comment #15 on pages 6-9 of the Response to Public Scoping document for complete responses to the comments submitted by the Utah Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget.

**19. The proposed action that was provided during scoping included 16,000 acres proposed for treatment; however, the EA only evaluated effects on 13,329 acres. What is the analysis area, project area, and cumulative effects area for the purposes of this project?**

Response: The analysis area was the area identified in terms of the “purpose and need” for the proposed action (see EA Existing Condition page 1). As identified in the EA Existing Condition, the project analysis area is located along the west side of the Pahvant Mountain Range (Pahvant Front), in the vicinity of several communities. The general concern is that these communities are at an excessive risk of high severity wildfire, and there is a concern for public and firefighter safety. Over the last ten years there have been numerous, large, high severity wildfires along the Pahvant Front resulting in damage to homes, structures and resources. A complete discussion of the existing conditions and purpose and need for action are described in the Fire and Fuels Specialist Report (pages 12-13, 16-18), and is summarized in the EA on pages 1-3.

During project planning an interdisciplinary team worked to identify specific areas of proposed treatment within the analysis area, based on the purpose and need. The initial proposal was to treat approximately 40,000 acres throughout the analysis area. During preliminary evaluation of resource conditions, concerns were raised about potential adverse impacts to fragile North Horn soils, Forest Service aquatic management indicator species (MIS), and sensitive fisheries. Areas of concern were eliminated from further consideration for treatment.

The original proposed action that was included in the legal notice and public scoping letter on February 13, 2003, proposed approximately 16,000 acres of fuels reduction activities. Shortly thereafter, it came to our attention there was a possibility that potential Mexican spotted owl (MSO) habitat occurred in some of the proposed treatment units. Treatment unit boundaries were then modified to eliminate proposed treatments within potential MSO habitat in the Wild Goose, Pioneer, Horse Hollow and Meadow treatment units. This resulted in approximately 14,300 acres proposed for treatment, which is the area evaluated in the

Pahvant Interagency Fuels Reduction Project Environmental Assessment<sup>2</sup>. The specific areas proposed for treatment, which encompass approximately 14,300 acres, make up the project areas.

The analysis area also provided a logical area to evaluate cumulative effects for most resources. The EA states, “The analysis boundary for disclosing effects at the scale for this project is the west side of the Pahvant Mountain Range, which is approximately 287,500 acres in size” (see EA Effects Summary, page 9), and “The cumulative effects area for the project is the same as the project analysis area for most resources, with the exception of wildlife. The cumulative effects area for wildlife includes the entire Pahvant Mountain Range. The larger cumulative effects area for wildlife is based on the mobile nature of wildlife, particularly wide-ranging species such as the bald eagle, elk and deer” (See EA Cumulative Effects, page 13).

	Acreage
Analysis Area	287,500
Project Area	14,300
Cumulative Effects Area	287,500
Cumulative Effects Area for Wildlife	400,000

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<sup>2</sup> Shortly after project boundaries were modified, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared that potential MSO habitat did not exist within the project area, nor anywhere within Millard County. By that time, however, the agencies had already completed the environmental analyses based on the modified treatment unit boundaries.