

Diagonal/Electric Sagebrush Improvement

Spanish Fork Ranger District

Uinta National Forest

Purpose:

To maintain and improve grass/forb species composition and diversity, age class distribution of sage brush and to reduce hazardous fuels in the Diagonal/Electric Area.

Need:

Sage-steppe and sage grouse habitat in the Vernon area is becoming increasingly degraded. Naturally occurring vegetative mosaics within the landscape have diminished due to fire suppression. The majority of the proposed area is a continuous sagebrush population consisting of a single age class (old and decadent). The understory component (grasses and forbs) of the habitat is also lacking.

Sage grouse populations in the area have decreased from their historical numbers. Sage grouse have been petitioned to be listed as an endangered species. The Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to list the species because of plans for habitat enhancement projects by working groups and government agencies. Members of the West Desert Area Resource Management Working Group feel this would be an excellent project to help sage grouse in this area. The proposed project lies within one of the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD) conservation focus areas. Sagebrush canopy cover is continuous with very few openings which could only be used by sage grouse for winter habitat. There is a need for more nesting and brood-rearing habitat. There is also a lack of forbs in the understory. Forbs are a major component of the sage grouse diet.

User-created roads/trails are common in the area and are impacting the vegetation and wildlife in the area.

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). This result 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. There is potential for Wildland Urban Interface fires as homes are located within one mile of the proposed project area. The fire hazard potential for the area is mostly high with small areas of moderate based on the BLM statewide fire hazard potential.

Proposed Action

The Spanish Fork Ranger District in coordination with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources proposes to enhance sage-steppe/sage grouse habitat in the Vernon Management Area. The proposed area is located south of Vernon, Utah in T9S R6W Sections 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 SLM, Tooele County, Utah. The proposed area is along the Forest Service/Private land boundary. The treatment is proposed to take place in the fall of 2008.

Approximately 2,500 acres would be affected by the treatment with approximately 950 acres of hazardous fuels (sagebrush) treated with a 24 foot Dixie Harrow. Harrow treatments would consist of a combination of one-way and two-way harrow treatments. Treatments will occur in a mosaic pattern to create as much edge effect as possible. Treatments would parallel lowlands. This would open up the sage brush canopy and create a mixed age class of sagebrush. This treatment will also release the understory grasses and forbs that are currently suppressed by the thick sage brush canopy. Any user-created roads/trails would be harrowed and seeded as well. Treatments would occur during the fall.

The treated area would be seeded with native grasses and a variety of forbs desirable to sage grouse and which are adapted to the ecosystem. Native seed would be used as much as feasibly possible. Since forbs are a major component of the sage grouse diet, the introduction of some non-native nitrogen-fixing forbs will be necessary due to the high cost and lack of availability of native forbs. The proposed seed mix is:

Seed Mix

Western Wheatgrass 'Arriba'
Bluebunch WG 'Goldar'
Great Basin Wildrye 'Trailhead'
Needle and Threadgrass--Beaver, UT
Indian Ricegrass 'Rimrock'
Rocky Mountain Beeplant
Alfalfa 'Spredor 4'
Sainfoin 'Eski'
Small Burnet 'Delar'
Western Yarrow 'SID Columbia'
Blue Flax

The project area will be rested from livestock grazing for a minimum of two growing seasons to allow for seedling establishment.

This project is expected to be categorically excluded following FSH 1909.15 31.2(10). The mechanical treatment will not exceed 1,000 acres. It will be conducted in a manner consistent with agency and departmental procedures and land resource plans. It will not be in a wilderness area. It is in a fire condition class of 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Groups I, II, III. No pesticides will be used and no new roads will be constructed. There will not be any sale of vegetative material. A decision memo will be issued. This project is subject to appeal according to Earth Island vs. Ruthenbeck.