Secretary Order 3336 - The Final Report: An Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy

Appendix A - Actions, Section 7(b) iii – Fuels, Action Item 3

BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR FUELS TREATMENTS IN SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT

**BLM and USFS**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) issued Records of Decisions (RODS) that finalize or amend 98 land use plans for protecting greater sage-grouse on BLM or USFS lands in 10 states across the West: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The final land use plans or plan amendments are attached to the RODs and have become effective at the RODs’ signing. The plans seek to conserve important sagebrush habitat, address threats to the greater sage-grouse, and support sustainable economic development across the West.

The multiple RODs reflect the differences between the western and eastern portions of the range acknowledged from the beginning of the BLM-USFS Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation strategy. Because of differences in legal authorities between the BLM and the Forest Service, each agency created and signed its own regional RODs. As a result, there are four RODs: one from each agency for the Great Basin region and one from each agency for the Rocky Mountain region.

Two BLM RODs and associated Resource Management Plans and Amendments approve GRSG habitat management direction for conservation measures that avoid and minimize additional disturbance in GRSG habitat management areas. Moreover, they target restoration of and improvements to the most important areas of habitat. Links to the BLM RODs, associated resource management plans and amendments, conservation plans and other related information are available at: <http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/sagegrouse/documents_and_resources.html>

Two US Forest Service RODs and associated Land Management Plan Amendments approve the desired conditions, standards, and guidelines in the land management plan amendments that address what can and can’t occur on National Forest System lands in the Great Basin and Rocky Mountain regions in greater sage-grouse habitat. The amendments seek to reduce the disturbances occurring in greater sage-grouse habitat and for the disturbances that do occur, limit the duration, timing, and location of activities to best protect the greater sage-grouse during all of its life stages. The Forest Service RODs with associated resource management plan amendments are available at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/r4/>.

**Best Management Practices, Required Design Features, Standards and Guidelines for Fuels Treatments**

**Best Management Practices (BMPs):** BMPs are measures that have been developed by agency, industry, scientific, and/or working groups as voluntary methods for reducing environmental impacts associated with certain classes of activity. BLM typically uses these measures as guidelines or “project design features” during implementation planning at the activity and/or project-specific levels. Use of Best Management Practices is not mandatory, since individual measures may not be appropriate for use in every situation.

Specific fuels management BMPs are identified in eight of the 16 BLM plan amendments, or plans. The BMPs identified in the plans or amendments should be used when planning and implementing fuels management projects in GRSG habitat.

Attachment 1, Table 1 identifies which BLM plan and plan amendments provide specific fuels treatment BMPs, specific BMP locations within the plan or amendments and links to where they can be found.

In those areas of GRSG habitat where BMPs have not been identified by plans or amendments, the following general BMPs should be applied when planning and implementing fuels treatments:

* Design fuels management projects in priority sage-grouse habitat to strategically and effectively reduce wildfire threats in the greatest area. This may require fuels treatments implemented in a more linear versus block design.
* Where applicable, design fuels treatment objective to protect existing sagebrush ecosystems, modify fire behavior, restore native plants, and create landscape patterns that most benefit sage-grouse habitat.
* Provide training to fuels treatment personnel on sage-grouse biology, habitat requirements, and identification of areas utilized locally.
* Use prescribed fire prescriptions that minimize undesirable effects on vegetation or soils (e.g., minimize mortality of desirable perennial plant species and reduce risk of hydrophobicity).
* Ensure proposed sagebrush treatments are planned with interdisciplinary input from the BLM, and/or state wildlife agency biologists and that treatment acreage is conservative in the context of surrounding sage-grouse seasonal habitats and landscape.
* Where appropriate, ensure that treatments are configured in a manner (e.g., strips) that promotes use by sage-grouse.
* Where applicable, incorporate roads and natural fuel breaks into fuel break design.
* Power-wash all vehicles and equipment involved in fuels management activities prior to entering the area to minimize the introduction of undesirable and/or invasive plant species.
* Ensure NEPA alternatives address Secretarial Orders 3206 and 3335 pertaining to Indian Tribal rights.

**Required Design Features (RDFs):** BLM Conservation measures are usually referred to as *BMPs* or *recommended management practices*. Within most of the BLM GRSG RODs and associated amendments or plans conservation measures are identified as required design features (RDFs).

Unlike BMPs, RDFs are required for certain activities in all GRSG habitats. RDFs have been identified for planning and implementing fuels treatments in GRSG. Some RDFs may not apply to some fuels projects and/or may require slight variations (e.g., a larger or smaller protective area). All variations in RDFs require that at least one of the following be demonstrated in the NEPA analysis associated with the fuels project:

1. A specific fuels RDF is documented to not be applicable to the site-specific conditions of the project/activity (e.g. due to site limitations or engineering considerations). Economic considerations, such as increased costs, do not necessarily require that an RDF be varied or rendered inapplicable;
2. An alternative RDF is determined to provide equal or better protection for GRSG or its habitat;
3. A specific RDF will provide no additional protection to GRSG or its habitat.

Two RODs and associated plans do not identify RDFs (they do identify BMPs). Some plan amendments and plans, identify both general RDFs along with specific program RDFs.

Attachment 1, Table 1 identifies those plans or amendments with or without RDFs, specific RDF locations within the amendments or plan documents and links to where they can be found.

**Standards and Guidelines:** Within the USFS RODs and associated plan amendments, Standards and Guidelines for fuels management are identified to address actions that can and cannot occur. These Standards and Guidelines are similar to BMPs and RDFs. The direction found in Standards and guidelines are to be applied consistently with applicable valid existing rights, laws, and regulations.

Standard– A mandatory constraint on project and activity decision-making established to help achieve or maintain the desired condition or conditions; to avoid or mitigate undesirable effects; or to meet applicable legal requirements. Standards are similar to RDFs.

Guideline– A constraint on project and activity decision making that allows for departure from its terms so long as the purpose of the guideline is met. Guidelines are established to help achieve or maintain a desired condition or conditions; to avoid or mitigate undesirable effects; or to meet applicable legal requirements. Guidelines are similar to BMPs.

Attachment 1, Table 2 identifies location and links to Standards and Guidelines for specific USFS amendments.

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance on a variety of fuels treatments in sage-grouse habitats that are guided by criteria and conservation measures identified in the: 1) *NRCS Conservation Practice Standards and Specifications*, and 2) *Conference Report for the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative* (USFWS 2010).

Conservation Practice standards provide the minimum criteria and additional considerations when planning vegetative, structural, or management actions addressing natural resource concerns. While minimum conservation practice standards are established at the national level, states may include additional requirements that are more restrictive to address local conditions. Typical practices used for fuels treatments include: Brush Management (314), Firebreak (394), Fuel Break (383), Woody Residue Treatment (384), Prescribed Burning (338), and Herbaceous Weed Control (315). Specifications build on the practice standard minimum requirements by providing additional site-specific details that must be adhered to during design, implementation, maintenance, and monitoring. Each state may have unique specifications to address local conditions, partner guidelines, laws/regulations, etc. Furthermore, emerging science on the nuances of fuels treatment design and implementation that increase efficacy for the intended purpose is regularly being integrated into practice specifications.

In 2010, NRCS conferenced with USFWS on commonly applied Conservation Practices in sage-grouse range to reduce potential adverse effects of actions in sage-grouse habitat (USFWS 2010). The Conference Report evaluated conservation practices to identify potential adverse effects that may occur as a result of practice implementation. A suite of "Conservation Measures" were developed to ameliorate, minimize, or abate potentially detrimental effects associated with each Conservation Practice. NRCS now incorporates the Conference Report measures into practice planning and implementation when working in sage-grouse habitats. Several conservation measures require NRCS to coordinate further with State Wildlife Agencies for local recommendations as well.

Attachment 1, Table 3 provides information and links to *the NRCS Conservation Practice Standards and Specifications*, and the *Conference Report for the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative*.

**States Conservation Measures, Recommendations, Strategies, Goals and Objectives, and Related Information**

In December of 2011 Secretary Salazar invited the states impacted by a potential sage-grouse listing to develop state-specific regulatory mechanisms to conserve the species which could be considered as an alternative in the BLM and USFS LUP revision process. These State Plans represent the best available scientific information, as well as stakeholder input, to develop sage-grouse conservation plans specific to affected states and consistent with their mission, goals and land management statutes. Most of these plans are meant to be “working documents” that will be updated as new science emerges and lessons are learned through implementation of the various State Plans, and through an adaptive management framework. Some plans build on BMPs, RDFs, Standards and Guidelines identified in BLM and USFS documents.

Attachment 1, Table 4 provides information on each state’s approach to Sage-Grouse conservation actions and activities and provides a link to the various plans identifying recommendations, goals, objectives, strategies, and actions related to Sage-Grouse conservation.