

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FIRE AND FUELS RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT
FOR
NEW MEXICO AND TEXAS
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), New Mexico State Office has analyzed a proposal to amend nine Resource Management Plans (RMPs) in New Mexico and Texas. The nine RMPs are the Carlsbad, Farmington, Mimbres, Rio Puerco, Roswell, Socorro, Taos, Texas, and White Sands RMPs. The proposed Statewide RMP amendment, including desired future conditions, land-use allocations, and management actions (Best Management Practices), is described and analyzed in the attached Environmental Assessment (EA).

This finding is based, in part, on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and to the intensity of the impacts described in the EA or articulated in the letters of comment.

CONTEXT

From its inception, the proposed Plan Amendment was designed to preclude significant adverse environmental impacts. The proposed Plan Amendment is also designed to preclude actions that will jeopardize species listed under the Endangered Species Act, and to minimize adverse impacts to listed or special status species. While the appearance of the landscape and vegetation that may be treated as a result of the plan amendment will be changed in the short term, the landscape and its overall characteristics will not be adversely affected. Treatments will be incremental where necessary to minimize the short-term visual impact while accomplishing the short-and long-term fuel hazard reduction objectives. In the longer term, the landscape and its vegetation will begin to appear more as they were before the effective fire exclusion efforts of the last 80-100 years. Vegetation will be more vigorous, healthy, and resilient. It will be less susceptible to high-severity wildfire because treatments allowed under the proposed Plan Amendment will change vegetation/fuel properties (density and structure) in a manner that will reduce the potential for high-intensity and high-severity wildfire. Property and resource values will be more defensible when wildfire occurs.

INTENSITY

We have considered the potential intensity/severity of the impacts anticipated from this proposed Plan Amendment relative to each of the ten areas suggested for consideration by the CEQ. With regard to each:

1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects. The EA has considered both potential beneficial and adverse impacts (Chapter 4). Vegetation and habitats will be changed; however, the overall

scope and scale of change, while large, is restricted in terms of adverse effects. Resource and property values will be better protected by actions resulting from this proposed Plan Amendment. None of the individual or cumulative effects have been identified as being significant. The potential adverse effects would be limited to acceptable levels by Standard Operating Procedures and implementation of listed Best Management Practices. Potential soils and water impacts have, for example, been mitigated by extensive restrictions on the use of heavy equipment to limit potential soil disturbance. Beneficial effects depicted in the analysis far outweigh potential adverse effects from implementing the proposed Plan Amendment.

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.* No aspect of the Proposed Action has been identified as having the potential to impact public health or safety in a substantial and adverse way. Rather, the overall safety for the general public and potential fire hazard conditions facing fire personnel would be greatly improved on approximately 13.4 million acres of public land due to the reduction of hazardous fuels build-up over time and overall reduced potential for destructive wildland fire. The actions selected were designed to increase firefighter and public safety, and decrease the costs of fire suppression efforts. They were also designed to decrease the continued damage from no action that would occur to facilities and structures and water quality on approximately 13.4 million acres of public land. Hazardous fuel loads would be reduced, thereby allowing direct suppression methods by firefighters. The implementation of this project would reduce the risk of a wildland fire reaching catastrophic levels and crossing boundaries onto private land or land administered by other agencies.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity of historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.* The proposed Plan Amendment will allow actions that will change existing conditions, but will also protect and enhance historic, cultural, and natural resource values in both the short and the long term. The proposed Plan Amendment would not adversely affect any Special Designation Areas, particularly when compared to the No Action Alternative (see EA, Chapter 4). As the Desired Future Conditions are achieved, improvements in species biodiversity, plant composition, structure, and productivity, plant health and vigor, and wildlife habitat would improve ecosystem health throughout Special Designation Areas (National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern).

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.* No appreciable controversy has been identified over the effects of the proposed Plan Amendment. In fact, two of the five public comments received suggested that wildland fire use should be increased over the level allowed in the proposed Plan Amendment. No controversy or significant concerns were identified during public comment or agency reviews and therefore none were disclosed in the EA (see Chapter 1 of the EA).

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.* The analysis has not shown that there would be any unique or unknown risks to the human environment. Vegetation and fuel reduction

treatments have been pursued and accomplished for many years in the vegetation types typical of the planning area. The BLM has considerable experience with these types of projects and actions, and their effects are not uncertain, therefore a unique or unknown risk is not being taken by implementing the proposed Plan Amendment.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. There has been no indication that this proposed Plan Amendment will establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The RMP amendment is a response to, and is consistent with, recent Congressional legislation, current Federal and BLM fire management policies, and therefore is not precedent setting or a unique action.

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Cumulative effects of the Proposed Action were analyzed in conjunction with anticipated fire management activities by other Federal, State, and county agencies on adjacent lands. The EA discloses that over the long term, the Proposed Action would improve environmental conditions, particularly when compared to continuing current fire management practices under the No Action Alternative. No significant cumulative effects have been identified in the analysis or the public comments. Maintaining a mosaic of habitats across the landscape and across administrative boundaries would minimize any cumulative effects to fish and wildlife resources.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources. The planning area includes properties listed or eligible for being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Specific consideration will be given to these properties in the design of projects allowed under the proposed Plan Amendment to ensure that these properties are protected. Cultural sites will be protected according to the project-specific design features for projects allowed under the proposed Plan Amendment.

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Within the project area, federally listed (threatened and endangered), proposed and candidate species inhabit public land and/or adjacent Federal, State, Tribal, or private lands that could be affected by the proposed fire management activities (as listed in Appendix C of the EA). A Biological Evaluation (BE) was prepared and submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) that provided detailed analysis of all federally listed (threatened and endangered), proposed and candidate species, as well as designated or proposed critical habitat, that may be affected by the proposed action (Multiple Treatment Alternative). Although the Proposed Action has the potential to affect some species, conservation measures were developed to reduce or eliminate adverse effects, detailed in Appendix C of the EA. Based on the BE, the BLM made a determination of “No Effect” or “May Affect-Not Likely to Adversely Affect” for all federally listed (threatened and endangered), proposed and candidate species, as well as designated or proposed critical habitat (Table 1

Chapter 4). The FWS, as part of the informal consultation process, reviewed and concurred with all BLM "May Affect-Not Likely to Adversely Affect" determinations.

10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposal is consistent with applicable State and Federal laws, Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, and BLM Fire Management and Planning Policy (see EA, Chapter 1).

DETERMINATION

On the basis of the information contained in the attached EA, public involvement throughout the development of the EA level analysis process, and all other information available as summarized above, it is my determination that the proposed amendment is not a major Federal Action and will have no significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or supplement to an existing EIS is unnecessary and will not be prepared.



Linda S. C. Rundell
State Director, New Mexico



Date