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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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Instruction Memorandum No. 2013-128

Expires: 09/30/2014

To: State Directors and Center Directors

From: Principal Deputy Director

Subject: Sage-Grouse Conservation in Fire Operations and Fuels Management

Program Areas: Wildlife, Special Status Species, Fire Operations, Fire Planning, Range, Forestry, ESR, Riparian, Plant Conservation and Fuels Management.

Purpose: This Instruction Memorandum (IM) establishes required actions for the fire operations and fuels management functions related to sage-grouse conservation. It also describes the availability of maps which delineate Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) and Gunnison Sage-Grouse (GUSG) habitats.

Policy/Action: This IM supersedes Washington Office IM No. 2011-138 (June 13, 2011) and Fire and Aviation IM No. 2012-017 (May 14, 2012). Washington Office IM No. 2012-043, Greater Sage-Grouse Interim Management, Policies and Procedures, remains unchanged.

Firefighter and public safety is the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) number one fire management priority. Conserving sagebrush habitat is a high priority within the fire management program, and maintaining and restoring sagebrush landscapes on public lands is a primary means of conserving sage-grouse habitat. The BLM's goal is to limit the damage from unwanted wildfires in sagebrush habitat through comprehensive planning before a fire, prompt action during a fire, and effective rehabilitation following a fire. Consequently, offices will place a high priority and take appropriate action to minimize the size and adverse effects of unwanted wildfires in sage-grouse habitat. In addition, offices will place a high priority on planning and implementing fuels treatments that will reduce the start and spread of unwanted wildfires in sage-grouse habitat.

It is the policy of BLM to manage sage-grouse seasonal habitats and maintain habitat connectivity to support stable or increasing sage-grouse populations. Sage-grouse conservation requires an understanding of the location and quality of habitats. Unique habitat categories have been established for both GRSG and GUSG. Preliminary priority habitat (PPH) and preliminary general habitat (PGH) are GRSG habitat delineations. The locations and definitions of these habitat categories have been collaboratively developed between BLM biologists, state fish and wildlife agencies, and other partners. On January 11, 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) published a proposal to list GUSG as endangered and to designate critical habitat (CH) under the Endangered Species Act. This proposed CH for GUSG has been further delineated as proposed occupied habitat (POH) and proposed unoccupied habitat (PUH). The interpretation of each habitat type for both GRSG and GUSG are provided below:

Greater Sage-Grouse

Preliminary Priority Habitat (PPH): Areas offering the highest quality GRSG habitat, based upon bird density, lek location, habitat potential, community composition, intactness, or other variables. As such, these polygons should be the highest priorities for conservation and protection during fire operations and fuels management decision making. The PPH will be viewed as more valuable than PGH when priorities are established.

Preliminary General Habitat (PGH): Areas of relatively intact sagebrush communities which provide current or future habitat requirements for GRSG. When suppression resources are widely available, maximum efforts should be placed on limiting fire growth in these polygons.

Maps depicting PPH and PGH have not changed since 2012. Though portions of PPH and PGH were affected by fires and other disturbances in the past year, the designations are still valid until such time as they are changed through the land use planning process. Maps illustrating PPH and PGH are available at the range-wide, state, and district scales.

Gunnison Sage-Grouse

Proposed Occupied Habitat (POH): Areas of suitable habitat known to be used by GUSG within 10 years of completion of the Rangewide Conservation Plan (RCP). As such, these polygons should be the highest priorities for conservation and protection during fire operations and fuels management decision making. The GUSG POH will be viewed as more valuable than GUSG PUH when priorities are established.

Proposed Unoccupied Habitat (PUH): Unoccupied GUSG habitat which is either: 1) currently suitable but not contiguous with occupied habitat, or 2) capable of supporting sagebrush communities based on soils or other site characteristics. When suppression resources are widely available, maximum efforts should be placed on limiting fire growth in these polygons.

Because GUSG has been proposed for listing, the BLM is required to confer with the FWS on any agency action which is likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any species proposed for listing or result in the destruction or adverse modification of proposed critical habitat. Pending state-specific guidance for GUSG from Colorado and/or Utah, field units should closely coordinate with their respective state office when fuels treatments are contemplated in GUSG habitat to ensure legal requirements are satisfied.

Fuels and Vegetation Management Emphasis and Opportunities

Fire data summarized over the last 20 years reveals that large scale habitat loss occurs during periods of multiple ignitions and extreme fire weather conditions. During these periods, safe and effective initial attack is greatly enhanced by the presence of anchor points. These anchor points frequently include fuel

breaks created by mowing, disking, grading, prescribed burning, or other treatments. Such fuel breaks present the primary opportunity for successful containment of wildfires during these periods. When viewed at a landscape scale, fuel breaks, in conjunction with vegetation treatments and terrain features, divide fuel continuity on landscapes into discreet sections, which can be used for containing fire growth. While all partners involved in the conservation of sage-grouse habitat recognize the concerns of, and potential increase of habitat fragmentation, key strategic efforts can reduce the scope and scale of that fragmentation. Methods of reducing the scope and scale of the habitat fragmentation include focused, methodical applications or maintenance of vegetation treatment projects to serve as additional anchor points or control lines for the containment of wildfires.

To that end, we encourage each office with large blocks of GRSG or GUSG habitat in high frequency fire areas to develop a fuels continuity strategy which considers: an up-to-date fuels profile, objectives and management direction in their respective land use plan, current and potential habitat fragmentation, sagebrush and sage-grouse ecological factors, and active vegetation management steps to provide critical breaks in fuel continuity, where appropriate. When locally designing this strategy, interdisciplinary teams need to incorporate a comparative risk analysis that accounts for concerns relating to the risk of increased habitat fragmentation from a proposed action versus the risk of large scale fragmentation posed by wildfires if the action is not taken. Ideally, these strategies should be developed as a part of the ongoing resource management plan (RMP) revisions and amendments for sage-grouse.

For more immediate opportunities, where supported by National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analyses, we suggest short-term fuels treatment efforts focus on site-specific elements at the unit level and consider the recommendations listed below:

Design treatments to provide a break in fuel continuity in large, at-risk, expanses of continuous sagebrush. Use local knowledge of fire occurrence, spread patterns, and habitat values at risk to determine the proper placement and size of the fuel break.

Use existing agreements with local, county, and state road departments to improve and maintain existing fuel breaks during routine road maintenance. Examples include: blading, mowing, disking, grading, and spraying roadside vegetation.

Form partnerships with linear right-of-way holders to maintain fuel breaks, which reduce fuel continuity and serve to protect at-risk landscapes.

Use existing NEPA documentation and authorities, where possible, when conducting road right-of-way maintenance. In many instances, existing authorizations for roads or linear rights-of-way contain

provisions for maintenance activities that could be implemented and incorporated into a vegetation and habitat protection strategy without requiring additional NEPA analysis. Document this with a Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA).

Enter into agreements with road departments which may help fund the construction and maintenance of fuel breaks adjacent to roads, as funding permits.

Spatially depict the locations of existing and planned fuel breaks in a landscape fuel break map and label each vegetation polygon for reference (see Attachment 4 as an example). Offices will make these maps available to suppression resources for use in fire operations.

Required Actions for Fire Operations and Fuels Management Functions

Offices will:

Make all decisions based upon sound operational risk management principles.

Incorporate fire operations and fuel management strategies, as appropriate, into ongoing RMP revisions and amendments. Recognize direct attack as the best strategy to limit the overall amount of sage-grouse habitat burned or disturbed; however, there may be instances where indirect attack methods may result in fewer acres burned.

Rely on incident commanders (IC) to make all tactical fireline decisions. The ICs will develop strategies and tactics which have the highest probability of success related to operational factors.

Print and display current sage-grouse maps in dispatch centers and other fire operations locations.

Continue the use of detailed local data, illustrating lek locations or more refined habitat features as available.

Update local suppression toolboxes with current maps in engines, with crews, and with other initial attack resources.

Emphasize awareness and appropriate uses of sage-grouse related resources during pre-season orientation meetings (all BLM units, not just those with habitat).

Follow all best management practices (BMP) outlined in Attachments 1, 2, and 3.

Use updated guidance, as appropriate, when revising and updating land use and fire management plans to address sage-grouse management, recognizing that firefighter and public safety is the BLM's number one fire management priority.

The Fire Planning and Fuels Management Division (FA-600) hosts a webpage containing up-to-date maps, instruction memoranda, conservation measures, BMPs, and spatial data specific to fire operations and fuels management/sage-grouse interactions. These resources can be accessed at: <http://web.blm.gov/internal/fire/fpfm/sg/index.html>. Additional BLM sage-grouse information can be found at: http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/fish__wildlife_and/sage-grouse-conservation.html.

Timeframe: This IM is effective immediately.

Budget Impact: For this fiscal year, minimal costs will be incurred as offices comply with requirements to update resources, complete training, and ensure awareness of sage-grouse in fire operations and fuels management functions. There will be a moderate budget impact associated with mid- and longer term efforts to incorporate fuels continuity strategies in RMP revisions and amendments.

Background: Sage-grouse habitat maps, BMPs, and supporting resources have been developed for field use since 2011. In addition, the use of locally developed maps, which typically contain the highest resolution, is encouraged as a complimentary data source. This IM provides updated fire management guidance that reflects on-the-ground experience gained during the 2012 fire season in which nearly one million acres of PGH and two million acres of PPH were burned by wildfires. This experience showed that, operationally, ICs must carefully assess the wildfire situation and local conditions to develop the best strategies and tactical approaches to meet objectives. Experience from 2012 also showed that linear fuel breaks often offered the best anchor point for suppression resources during initial attack (IA). Offices find their greatest opportunities for IA success when landscapes have clean breaks in fuel continuity such as recent vegetation disturbance and fuels treatment projects. When available, fuel breaks can minimize overall acreage burned by allowing fire management resources to engage and contain fires in smaller sections of flammable vegetation.

Manual/Handbook Sections Affected: None.

Coordination: This IM has been coordinated between Fire and Aviation (FA100), Fire Operations (FA300), Fire Planning and Fuels Management (FA600), and Renewable Resources and Planning (AD200).

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Signed by:

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Acting, Principal Deputy Director Authenticated by:

Robert M. Williams

Division of IRM Governance, WO-560

3 Attachments:

1 - Fire Operations Best Management Practices for Sage-Grouse Conservation (1 p)

2 - Fuels Management Best Management Practices for Sage-Grouse Conservation (2 pp)

3 - Local Unit Fire Program Conservation Efforts Related to Sage-Grouse (2 pp)

4 – Big Desert Roads Fuel Breaks and Zones Map (1 p)

Fire Operations Best Management Practices for Sage-Grouse Conservation

1. Compile district-level information into state-wide sage-grouse tool boxes. Tool boxes will contain maps, listing of resource advisors, contact information, local guidance, and other relevant information for each district, which will be aggregated into a state-wide document.
2. Provide localized maps to dispatch offices and extended attack incident commanders for use in prioritizing wildfire suppression resources and designing suppression tactics.
3. Assign a resource advisor with sage-grouse expertise, or who has access to sage-grouse expertise, to all extended attack fires in or near sage-grouse habitat areas. Prior to the fire season, provide training to sage-grouse resource advisors on wildfire suppression organization, objectives, tactics, and procedures to develop a cadre of qualified individuals.
4. On critical fire weather days, pre-position additional fire suppression resources to optimize a quick and efficient response in sage-grouse habitat areas.
5. As appropriate, utilize existing fuel breaks, such as roads or discrete changes in fuel type, as control lines in order to minimize fire spread.
6. During periods of multiple fires, ensure line officers are involved in setting priorities.
7. To the extent possible, locate wildfire suppression facilities (i.e., base camps, spike camps, drop points, staging areas, heli-bases, etc.) in areas where physical disturbance to sage-grouse habitat can be minimized. These include disturbed areas, grasslands, near roads/trails or in other areas where there is existing disturbance or minimal sagebrush cover.
8. Power-wash all firefighting vehicles, to the extent possible, including engines, water tenders, personnel vehicles, and all-terrain vehicles (ATV) prior to deploying in or near sage-grouse habitat areas to minimize noxious weed spread.
9. Minimize unnecessary cross-country vehicle travel during fire operations in sage-grouse habitat.
10. Minimize burnout operations in key sage-grouse habitat areas by constructing direct fireline whenever safe and practical to do so.
11. Utilize retardant, mechanized equipment, and other available resources to minimize burned acreage during initial attack.
12. As safety allows, conduct mop-up where the black adjoins unburned islands, dog legs, or other habitat features to minimize sagebrush loss.
13. Adequately document fire operation activities in sage-grouse habitat for potential follow-up coordination activities.

Fuels Management Best Management Practices for Sage-Grouse Conservation

1. Where applicable, design fuels treatment objectives to protect existing sagebrush ecosystems, modify fire behavior, restore native plants, and create landscape patterns which most benefit sage-grouse habitat.
2. Provide training to fuels treatment personnel on sage-grouse biology, habitat requirements, and identification of areas utilized locally.
3. Use burning prescriptions which minimize undesirable effects on vegetation or soils (e.g., minimize mortality of desirable perennial plant species and reduce risk of annual grass invasion).
4. Ensure proposed sagebrush treatments are planned with full interdisciplinary input pursuant to NEPA and coordination with state fish and wildlife agencies, and that treatment acreage is conservative in the context of surrounding sage-grouse seasonal habitats and landscape.
5. Where appropriate, ensure that treatments are configured in a manner that promotes use by sage-grouse.
6. Where applicable, incorporate roads and natural fuel breaks into fuel break design.
7. 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.
8. Design vegetation treatments in areas of high fire frequency which facilitate firefighter safety, reduce the potential acres burned, and reduce the fire risk to sage-grouse habitat. Additionally, develop maps for sage-grouse habitat which spatially display current fuels treatment opportunities for suppression resources.
9. Give priority for implementing specific sage-grouse habitat restoration projects in annual grasslands, first to sites which are adjacent to or surrounded by preliminary priority habitat (PPH) or that reestablish continuity between priority habitats. Annual grasslands are a second priority for restoration when the sites are not adjacent to PPH, but within two miles of PPH. The third priority for annual grassland habitat restoration projects are sites beyond two miles of PPH. The intent is to focus restoration outward from existing, intact habitat.
10. As funding and logistics permit, restore annual grasslands to a species composition characterized by perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs or one of that referenced in land use planning documentation.
11. Emphasize the use of native plant species, recognizing that non-native species may be necessary depending on the availability of native seed and prevailing site conditions.
12. Remove standing and encroaching trees within at least 100 meters of occupied sage-grouse leks and other habitats (e.g., nesting, wintering and brood rearing) to reduce the availability of perch sites for avian predators, as resources permit.
13. Protect wildland areas from wildfire originating on private lands, infrastructure corridors, and recreational areas.

14. Reduce the risk of vehicle- or human-caused wildfires and the spread of invasive species by planting perennial vegetation (e.g., green-strips) paralleling road rights-of-way.
15. Strategically place and maintain pre-treated strips/areas (e.g., mowing, herbicide application, etc.) to aid in controlling wildfire, should wildfire occur near PPH or important restoration areas (such as where investments in restoration have already been made).

Local Unit Fire Program Conservation Efforts Related to Sage-Grouse

Many local units with sage-grouse habitats have established protocols that address sage-grouse and fire suppression activities. Examples of these protocols are:

Preseason:

- Ensuring that land use plans, resource management plans, and fire management plans are current and include guidance for management of sage-grouse and sage-grouse habitat.
- Conducting informational meetings and workshops with federal, state, and local cooperators to share sage-grouse information such as location of habitats, best management practices (BMP) for suppression activities in habitat areas, rehabilitation priorities in habitat areas, etc.
- Ensure Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Multi-Area Coordination (MAC) representatives at all levels (local, geographic, and national) understand sage-grouse issues and that it is a high agency priority.

Initial Attack:

- Ensuring that interagency fire managers update pre-planned responses within the dispatch zone to align the initial attack response with protection priorities and resource values.
- Encouraging dispatch centers to utilize Geographical Information System (GIS) maps in Wildland Fire Computer Aided Dispatch System (WildCAD) to determine if new starts are within sage-grouse habitat or in close proximity to other identified values or assets, and relay that information to responders.
- Briefing all local initial attack crews on awareness of sage-grouse habitat during response and suppression, and ensuring they review and are familiar with best management practices (BMP).
- Ensuring out-of-area resources (severity crews, overhead, etc.) receive a full briefing, which includes (among other things) awareness of sage-grouse habitat during response and suppression, and ensuring they review and are familiar with the sage-grouse suppression BMPs.

Extended Attack:

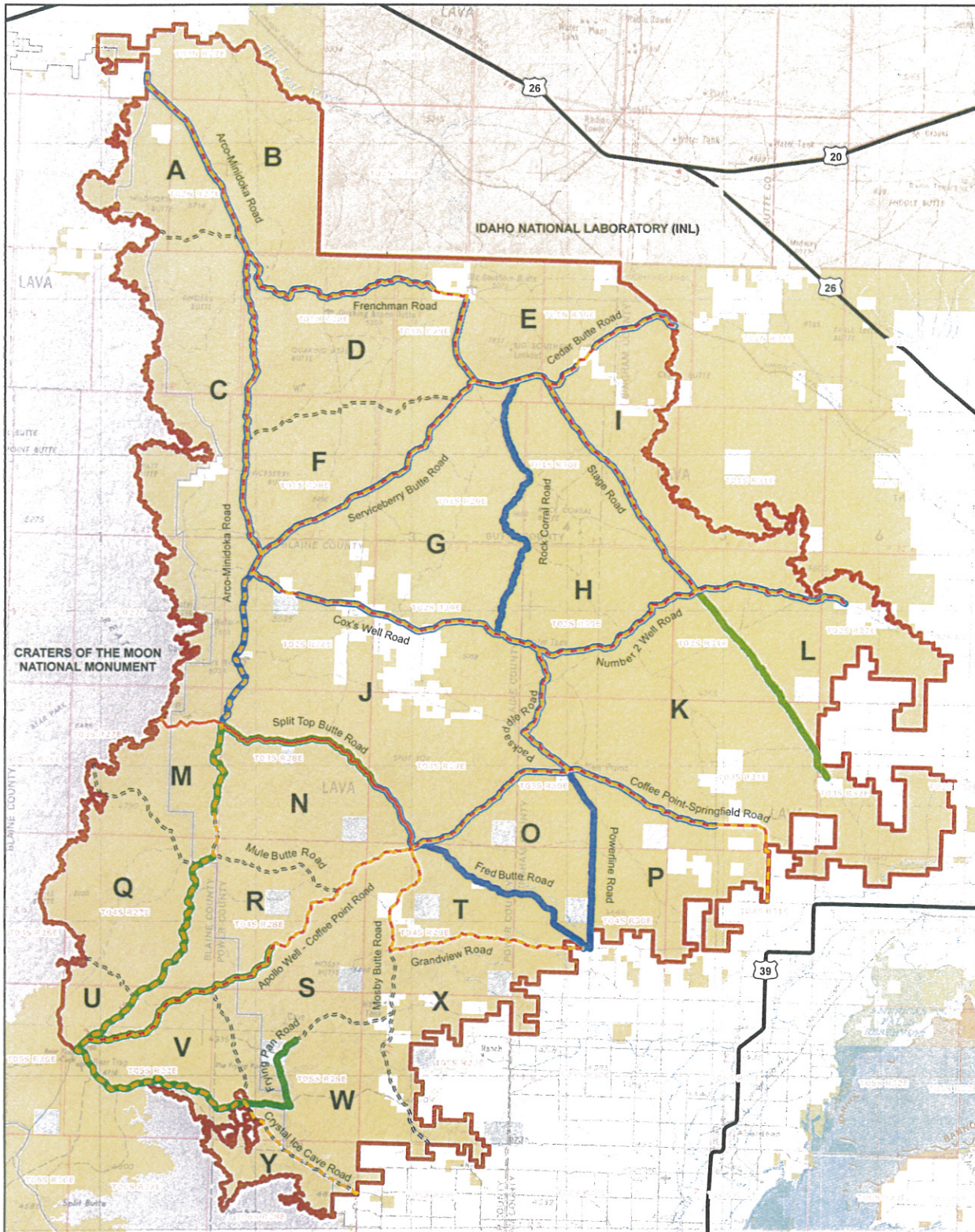
- Ensuring field or district officers and Resource Advisors (READ) are present to brief incoming incident management teams, which may be unfamiliar with sage-grouse issues.
- Ensuring READs are assigned to fires in the zone whenever fire suppression activities may affect resource values, including sage-grouse habitat.
- Ensuring READs are assigned to incidents as early as possible.
- Ensuring READs participate in annual READ workshops which address (among other things) sage-grouse concerns and BMPs.
- Ensuring READs have access to pre-built kits which include: hard copy and electronic resource information, GIS sage-grouse habitat data, fire suppression BMPs for sage-grouse, and rehabilitation guidelines.

- Ensuring sage-grouse issues are addressed throughout the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) process (particularly in decision documents), and specified in delegations of authority to Incident Management Teams (IMT) and Incident Commanders.
- Ensuring READs are assigned to large incidents managed by an IMT for the duration of the incident. Ensure that, per delegations of authority, READS are included in planning meetings, firefighter briefings, and provide input to the Incident Action Plan.

Post-Incident:

- Ensuring READs complete a READ Report upon demobilization of an incident. This report should summarize suppression actions, suppression damage, and damage caused by the fire itself. The READ Report should provide preliminary recommendations for stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration and vetted by the Emergency Stabilization Rehabilitation (ESR) Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) prior to preparation of the ESR Plan. This preliminary assessment (READ Report) and subsequent ESR Plan should include impacts to sage-grouse habitat and recommendations for mitigation.

Big Desert Roads Fuel Breaks and Zones

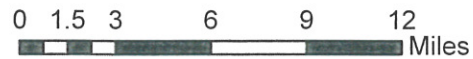


Legend

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|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Major Roads | Bureau of Land Management |
| Main Access Roads | Bureau of Reclamation |
| Graded Roads | Dept of Energy |
| Treatment Roads | Indian Reservation |
| Road Treatment Conditions | National Park Service |
| Green-strips, Completed | US Fish & Wildlife Service |
| Roto-mowed, Completed | Private |
| Big Desert Roads Project Boundary | State |
| Craters of the Moon National Monument | |

Surface Management Agency

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| | Bureau of Land Management |
| | Bureau of Reclamation |
| | Dept of Energy |
| | Indian Reservation |
| | National Park Service |
| | US Fish & Wildlife Service |
| | Private |
| | State |



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