

1.0 OVERVIEW

The wildland-urban interface (WUI) occurs where human structures (e.g., homes, businesses, agricultural buildings, recreational facilities) meet or intermix with wildland vegetation. At times the wildland vegetation may pose a fire hazard because of its flammability or an unusually high accumulation of plant material or fuel. The accumulation of wildland fuel around and within communities in the WUI poses a significant fire hazard. Methods to reduce the risk of wildland fire in the WUI are:

- Reduce the amount of fuel in the interface area;
- Fragment or break up continuous wildland fuels;
- Improve the fire suppression capabilities and fire response infrastructure of the community;
- Reduce the incidence of human-caused fires; and
- Inform the public through educational and outreach activities of proper firewise practices that may reduce the risk of wildland fire to their homes and property, and involve the public in implementing firewise measures around their property.

Based on fiscal year 2001 Congressional direction, the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), seeks to reduce the hazard of wildland fire within the Hoback Ranches assessment area through the Communities-at-Risk Program. The means to achieve this objective are through the prevention or reduction of the buildup of hazardous fuels, improving the fire protection capabilities of the community, and public education of firewise practices. The anticipated benefits of the program are the reduction of the frequency of wildfires spreading from municipal or private property to BLM land, as well as the reduction of wildfires spreading from BLM land to municipal or private property. This will ultimately reduce the risk to human safety and damages to property, and reduce costs to taxpayers for wildfire suppression and loss.

The successful implementation of the Communities-at-Risk Program requires considerable cooperation and coalition building among community officials, private landowners, county officials, State Foresters, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) and the BLM. To this end, the BLM contracted with Dynamac Corporation (Dynamac) to fulfill specific tasks in assessing the hazards of wildland fire in the Hoback Ranches assessment area. Dynamac was specifically tasked to evaluate the flammability of fuels and structures in the assessment area, convene a public meeting to educate and to obtain information from the general public, and to assess the ability of the community to suppress fires in the WUI. The information obtained from the fuels and structure surveys, public meeting, and interviews of public officials is

presented in this hazard assessment report. A companion report, the Hoback Ranches Wildfire Mitigation Plan, presents specific actions that have been identified to reduce the hazard of WUI fires in the Hoback Ranches assessment area.

2.0 GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT AREA

Name of Community: Hoback Ranches, Bondurant, Wyoming

Population: The Hoback Ranches assessment area includes approximately 106 homes and is an unincorporated part of Sublette County, Wyoming. Hoback Ranches mainly consists of seasonal homes, with high occupancy during the summer months. Some homes are occupied year round. The population of Sublette County is 5,220; of these, 420 reside in Big Piney; 1,412 in Pinedale, 720 in Marbleton; and 2,548 reside in unincorporated areas of the county.

Ownership of Land in Assessment Area (Approximate): USFS 33%; BLM 15%; State 3%; Private (Hoback Ranches) 27%; Private (Non-Hoback Ranches) 22%.

Date of Assessment: July 15-23, 2002

The Hoback Ranches community is located in Sublette County, Wyoming, to the west and south of State Highway 189/191, approximately 8 miles from Bondurant, Wyoming and 46 miles from Pinedale, Wyoming.

Hoback Ranches was formerly part of a private ranch that was divided into multi-acre sites for permanent and seasonal recreational homes. Approximately 9 sections comprise Hoback Ranches. These sections are bordered by approximately 4 sections of public land administered by the BLM Pinedale Field Office, and 10 sections of USFS lands, administered by the Big Piney Ranger District, Bridger/Teton National Forest. Other adjacent land ownership includes private and State of Wyoming lands. Structures within Hoback Ranches vary in age (ranging from new foundations to homes more than 15 years old) and in size (from sheds and one-room cabins to multi-thousand square-foot homes). Hoback Ranches provides residents an acceptable summer commute to Jackson and Pinedale, Wyoming. The area addressed in the wildfire hazard assessment includes portions of Township 36N, Range 112E; and T36N R113E. Fire suppression is provided by the Sublette County Volunteer Fire Department and by the USFS. The nearest county fire station is located in Bondurant, Wyoming, and the nearest USFS fire suppression forces are located in Pinedale.

Topography of Hoback Ranches ranges from rolling hills to steep mountainous terrain with nearly vertical slopes. Elevations range from 7,000 feet to 8,400 feet above mean sea level (amsl) at Kismet Peak.

Roads in the assessment area include four-wheel drive roads on public lands and narrow graveled, weight limited, steep roads within Hoback Ranches. The most heavily used road is the Rim Road, which runs in an easterly-westerly direction near the assessment area. Rim Road has an unsupported mid-slope section traversing steep terrain on the eastern side of Hoback Ranches (in section 9) and is an area of concern. Some mitigating measures have been performed on this road, including the addition of culverts and fabric base; however, load limits have been reduced and this section of road will be subject to damage from heavy trucking or machinery, during break up periods, or high snow pack and accelerated run-off. This portion of the Rim Road also bisects a number of steep concave slopes, referred to as “chutes” in wildfire suppression terminology.

The roads within Hoback Ranches do not utilize county snow removal services. Access to the assessment area during winter months is by snow machine, cross country skis, snowshoes, or sled dog teams.

Air quality in the assessment area is generally good, meets clean air act standards and enhances the viewshed. However, air quality can be adversely affected by wildfires during the summer and fall months and by valley inversions during winter months. Wind direction in this area is generally west to northwest, with some southwest winds. Easterly winds can occur with frontal passages.

Land use in the immediate area includes recreation, livestock grazing on BLM and USFS lands, post/pole sales and grazing on adjacent State of Wyoming lands, and grazing on private land not located within Hoback Ranches. Land ownership is a mixture of BLM, USFS, and private within the assessment area. Recreation is the major land use in the assessment area. Access to BLM lands is very limited; however, USFS lands in the assessment areas are accessible. Land- and homeowners in the Hoback Ranches subdivision are subject to certain restrictions on their properties, deemed “covenants.” According to the Hoback Ranches website, www.hobackranches.com, “Hoback Ranches is guided by a vision expressed in its perpetually binding covenants: to ensure the use of the property for attractive residential purposes, to prevent nuisances, to prevent the impairment of the attractiveness of the property, to maintain the natural environment and protect the ecology of the area, and thereby secure to each owner the full benefit and enjoyment of the land.” These “covenants” include restrictions on grazing, on tree removal, and various other landuse issues, and are available at <http://www.hobackranches.com/Covenants.html>. The covenants allow horse ownership on

private properties, but disallow grazing by domestic ungulates, and are perpetually active, legally binding, and enforceable.

Recreation in the assessment area is of primary importance to the residents of Hoback Ranches. Residents and visitors consider the recreational opportunities in and around the assessment area as a significant part of their lifestyle that also adds to the attractiveness of Hoback Ranches. Recreational activities include, but are not limited to: solitude, horseback riding, motorcycle riding, All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) riding, snow machine riding, cross country skiing, hiking, wildlife and scenic photography, berry picking, hunting, and birding or animal watching. These recreational activities occur within Hoback Ranches and on BLM and USFS lands accessed by residents of Hoback Ranches. Occupants and visitors to the area enjoy scenic views of the Hoback and Gros Ventre mountain ranges.

Visual resources include viewsheds of the Kismet Peak area, and views of the Gros Ventre and Hoback Mountain Ranges. Wildlife viewing and birding are also important visual resources to residence and visitors.

Riparian habitat in the assessment area includes the South Fork of Fisherman Creek, Sled Runner Creek, and Watson Draw. Riparian habitat generally transitions from sagebrush/grass to willows next to creeks or drainages.

Creeks and draws in the assessment area contain flowing water. Fisherman Creek, Sled Runner Creek and Watson Draw are the three drainages in the area. The water within these drainages is not for domestic use. A number of man-made dams and containment ponds have been developed on Fisherman Creek and some ponds have also been developed on Sled Runner Creek within Hoback Ranches. Roads and approaches within the Hoback Ranches development are next to and cross Fisherman and Sled Runner Creeks and Watson Draw. BLM land has a former dam that has failed near the center of Section 5, T36N R112E. Seeps and springs are located on BLM land on the lower slopes of the north and northwest aspect of Kismet Peak. Springs in the Kismet Peak area flow down into Hoback Ranches and some are used by homeowners for domestic water.

Vegetation in the Hoback Ranches assessment area is accurately depicted in the BLM Pinedale Field Office Hoback Ranches Fuels Treatment Plan Map (dated May 21, 2002). The Hoback Ranches assessment area can be divided into six general vegetation areas: Lodgepole Pine, Aspen stands, Aspen/Conifer mix, Sage/Grass, Mixed Conifer (Douglas Fir and Subalpine Fir),

and Subalpine Fir. All hazard assessment fuel samples were taken in mixed conifer and/or subalpine fir stands. Evidence of a wildfire occurrence approximately 80 to 100 years ago is present on older Douglas fir in the eastern half of the assessment. The largest of these Douglas fir trees is 42 inches diameter base height (DBH). With the exception of these older trees, it appears that a stand clearing fire may have occurred.

Forest health concerns include infestations of mountain pine beetle, mistletoe, douglas fir bark beetle, and porcupine girdling. These are present in most conifer stands, yielding red-needled trees and standing dead or dying pine and fir trees.

Mixed conifer and lodgepole pine timber stands also yield some Oregon grape, lupine, and kinnikinnick, along with heavy downed, dead, and forest litter in the understory.

Most aspen stands appear healthy, though some are aged and are in competition with conifers for available light and moisture. A fungus is present in some aspen within Hoback Ranches.

An invasive species is present in the sagebrush/grass vegetative type. Though not extensive, cheatgrass was observed in disturbed areas, such as driveways, roads, and approaches. Cheatgrass is a fire-dependent species and will increase fire hazard once established. Cheatgrass cures earlier than native bunch grasses, thus providing an ignition source and a wildland fire fuel.

Most riparian areas transition from sagebrush and grass to willows, except in disturbed areas such as driveways or approaches.

Wildlife present in the Hoback Ranches reflects the diverse habitats in the area and includes raptors, various songbirds, and blue grouse. Large mammals present include moose, mule deer, elk, and black bear. Small mammals present include snowshoe hare, mice, and voles. Elk and black bear tracks or droppings were observed in the mixed conifer stands while conducting the hazard assessment. Mule deer and moose were observed in the aspen and aspen-sagebrush/grass edge-effect areas. Numerous snowshoe hare were also observed in the aspen and aspen/conifer mix. Heavy browsing of seedlings by wild ungulates was present at some of the hazard assessment points. The assessment area has been identified as being on the fringe of possible Canadian lynx habitat, and as a possible grizzly bear transition zone. No eagle nesting areas were observed during this assessment. Occupants of Hoback Ranches have observed wolves in the assessment area during winter. Wolves, Grizzly bear, and Canadian Lynx are listed as threatened or endangers species.

Cultural/historical resources observed within the assessment area include an older log cabin without a roof in disrepair located on private land in T36N R112W Section 10 NW1/4 of the SE1/4, just north of the 4 wheel drive road going east/west. No historic structures were observed on BLM land. Potential artifacts and cultural resources were not observed, however a cultural resources specialist was not present during field work. . Further assessment is needed to adequately address cultural resources. Historic sites on lands adjacent to the assessment area include the camping area of Astorians and various other persons of the “mountain man era” during the 1800s.

The climate of the Hoback Ranches assessment area is generally warm or hot and dry during summer months with thunderstorms. Average high and low temperatures in July are 78.5°F, and 34.6°F, respectively. Cold temperatures with wind and snow typify winters. Average high and low temperatures in January are 23°F and -4.9°F, respectively. Average annual snowfall is 137.6 inches (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Monthly Climate Summary
BONDURANT, WYOMING
Period of Record: 8/1/1948 to 12/31/2001**

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Annual
Average Max. Temperature (F)	23.0	28.7	37.0	47.8	61.6	70.5	78.5	77.2	68.0	56.0	36.6	23.7	48.3
Average Min. Temperature (F)	-4.9	-2.9	4.7	18.2	27.8	32.0	34.6	32.9	25.8	17.4	8.1	-4.0	15.8
Average Total Precipitation (in.)	2.76	2.05	2.04	1.27	1.71	1.59	1.25	1.31	1.46	1.31	2.14	2.63	21.52
Average Total Snowfall (in.)	34.1	22.4	17.6	5.1	1.4	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.4	3.0	20.6	32.8	137.6
Average Snow Depth (in.)	25	30	29	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	17	9.8

Percent of possible observations for period of record:

Max. Temp.: 95.1 percent
 Min. Temp.: 95.3 percent
 Precipitation: 95.8 percent
 Snowfall: 93.3 percent
 Snow Depth: 71.6 percent

Source: *Western Regional Climate Center; www.wrcc.dri.edu*