CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND NEED

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Pinedale Field Office and the Bridger-Teton National Forest, Big Piney Ranger District (Forest Service) have prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations, including the Forest Service Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook (FSH 1909.15) and the BLM National Environmental Policy Act Handbook (H-1790-1). This EA discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental effects that would result from the Proposed Action and alternatives. Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Pinedale Field Office in Pinedale, Wyoming.

Chapter One contains the purpose of and need for the Proposed Action, including the background of events leading up to the action. Chapter Two describes the issues and the alternatives including the Proposed Action and summarizes the potential environmental consequences of each alternative. Chapter Three, Affected Environment & Environmental Consequences, describes the existing resource conditions and discloses the effects to the environmental resources from the Proposed Action and alternatives. That chapter also contains a list of persons and agencies contacted in the development of the EA. The Reference section contains a list of the materials used to complete the EA. The appendices contain a glossary of silvicultural terms, a list of standards and specifications, site-specific stand data and prescriptions for BLM and Forest Service lands, and the Class I cultural resource inventory.

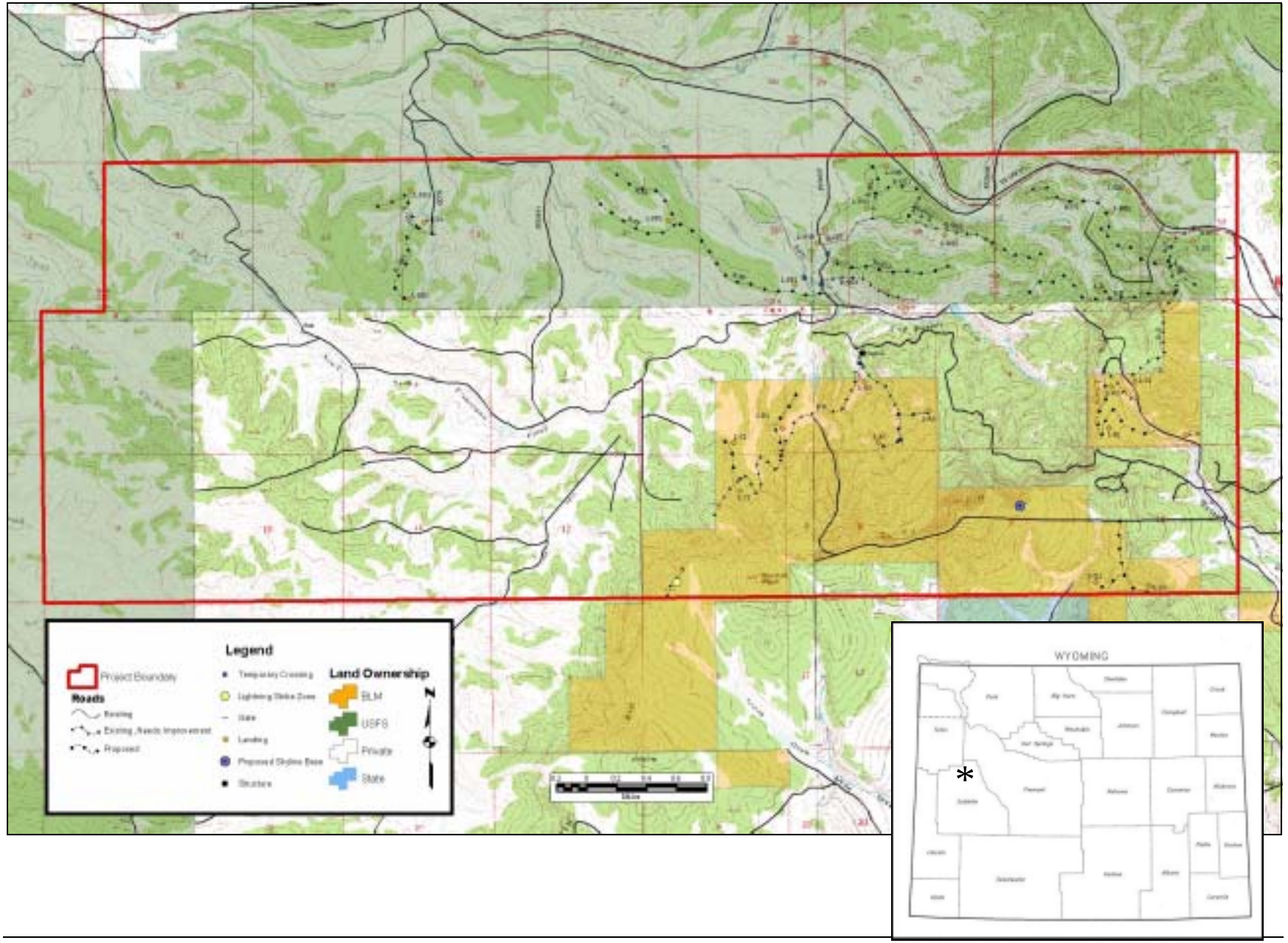
Project Location

The project area is located in the area around the Hoback Ranches community in Sublette County, Wyoming, north of Kismet Peak and Signal Hill, approximately 20.4 miles (32.2 km) north and northwest of Daniel Junction on BLM and Forest Service lands. Hoback Ranches is approximately 35 miles north of Pinedale and 45 miles south of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The Hoback Ranches development is located to the west and south of State Highway 189/191. Forest Service lands border Hoback Ranches to the north and west, and BLM and private lands border this community on the southern and eastern sides (Figure 1). The project area is 14,710 acres in size and consists of private (6,434 acres), BLM (2,316 acres), and Forest Service (5,960 acres) lands. There are approximately 42.1 miles of existing roads in the project area. The project area is encompassed by the Raspberry Ridge (1967), Pass Peak (1966), Signal Hill (1979), and Kismet Peak (1967) Wyoming quadrangle maps and includes parts of the following: T 36 N, R 112 W, Sections 3,4,5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10; T 36 N, R 113 W, Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 12; T 37 N, R 111 W, Sections 31 and 32; and T 37 N, R 112 W, Sections 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, and 36.

Background

As a result of rapid population growth in the western United States, homes and new developments are frequently constructed in fire-prone areas, often adjacent to Federal lands. This creates a “wildland-urban interface” (WUI), where structures and other human developments meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland. Development in these areas has

Figure 1. General Project Location



increased the risk of wildland fire occurring and impacting these structures and communities and has also increased the risk to the general public and firefighters (NFP 2002a).

Following the devastating 2000 fire season, the President of the United States urged Congress to approve additional funds for Federal and State agencies and local communities to better prepare for future wildfire seasons. This planning and preparation culminated in the National Fire Plan (NFP 2001), which recognizes the potential for impacts in WUI areas. Wildland fires in WUI areas are costly and difficult to manage. The structures that may be damaged are important capital investments that need to be protected. Because protecting these areas and the structures in them is complex, they pose a significant risk to firefighters tasked with their suppression. Effective management can reduce the risk to people and property. The Secretaries of the Departments of Agriculture and Interior were directed to increase Federal investments in projects to reduce the risk of wildfire in the WUI. Examples of these projects include hazardous fuels reduction, support to State and rural fire departments, economic action programs, fire prevention activities such as the FIREWISE program, and development of value-added wood utilization and related economic opportunities.

Hoback Ranches was identified as a Community-At-Risk and listed in the Federal Register on August 17, 2001 (66 FR 43384). The risk of wildfire to the Hoback Ranches area, specifically along the WUI, was assessed in 2002 (BLM 2002). During the fuel surveys, vegetation, slope, and land aspect were categorized for the project area. The risk of wildland fire to homes, structures, and cultural resources on private land was also evaluated according to road access, building materials, and the presence of survivable space. The culmination of the assessment resulted in identification of several actions to reduce the hazard of wildfire in the Hoback Ranches area (BLM 2002). The actions identified included the following:

- Reducing fuel loading next to roads and homes within Hoback Ranches.
- Constructing fuel breaks on the borders between Federal land and private lands.
- Improving the Hoback Ranches' main east-west road, Rim Road, in T 36 N, R 112 W, Section 9.
- Securing access, temporary or administrative, to Federal lands in the assessment area and initiating forest health measures combined with fuels treatment on Federal lands in the assessment areas in multiple phases.

Additional items were identified and are listed in the *Wildland-Urban Interface Communities-At-Risk Mitigation Report, Hoback Ranches Assessment Area* (Mitigation Report) (BLM 2002). The focus of this EA is the proposed fuels reduction opportunities on Federal lands and the potential environmental impacts of those actions. This EA identifies issues and resources with the potential to be impacted by implementation of the No Action, Proposed Action, or other action alternatives.

Purpose of & Need for Action

The action proposed by the BLM and Forest Service to meet the purpose and need consists of fuels reduction on public lands around the Hoback Ranches community. The creation of shaded fuel breaks on BLM and Forest Service lands is proposed under all action alternatives. Trees would be widely spaced at the center and grow tighter in spacing toward the edges. All ladder fuels and dead and down material would be removed from the forest floor. Grasses, forbs, and

low-flammability shrubs may also be left to control soil erosion. Certain trees may also be left for aesthetic appeal. In Alternatives Two, Three, and Four, additional BLM and Forest Service lands would also be treated more extensively to address the high fuel load in the area. Selective removal of live, diseased, dead, and other trees would occur to decrease stand density, therein addressing the fuel loading issue, while giving consideration to recreation, viewshed, and wildlife habitat. A full description of the Proposed Action appears in Chapter Two.

The goal of the Proposed Action is to increase the amount of defensible space on Federally-managed lands that are adjacent to the Hoback Ranches community to reduce the hazard of wildland fires spreading from Federally-managed lands to the Hoback Ranches community and from within the community to public lands. The project responds to goals and objectives of the National Fire Plan, the Pinedale Resource Management Plan (RMP) (BLM 1988), and the Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (Forest Service 1990).

This action is needed to address findings of the Mitigation Report; specifically that areas of excessive fuels and high fire danger were identified around the community. The wildland fire hazard is very high because of dense forest vegetation that is the result of fire exclusion; the buildup of standing dead, dying, and diseased trees; semi-continuous, heavy, downed, dead, woody material; ladder fuels; canopy spacing; topography in conifer forest stands; and the closeness of fuels to structures (BLM 2002). Wildland fire risk is also increased due to forest health issues, such as infestations of various parasites in the conifers, that result in standing dead, red-needled, or dying trees. High canopy densities, combined with even age conifers and heavy loadings of downed, dead, woody material yield minimal vegetative biodiversity. In combination with the topography of the area, these conditions will enable the propagation of crown fires (BLM 2002). Private land covenants also exist that restrict residents from cutting trees that are greater than 3 inches in diameter. These covenants are contributing to the hazardous conditions that are increasing the risk of wildland fire in the area.

During the preliminary assessment conducted in 2002 several characteristics were rated and the results support the need for the Proposed Action.

- One hundred percent of the sites had heavy continuous fuels, with moderate to heavy downed/dead woody fuel and an abundance of fir sapling ladder fuels.
- One hundred percent of the sites had a fuel bed depth of greater than three feet.
- Seventy-two percent of the structures surveyed, had fuels less than 40 feet from structures, twenty-two percent had fuels within 40 to 100 feet of structures, and the remaining six percent had fuels greater than 100 feet from structures.
- Seventy-seven percent of the sections with structures had a majority of the homes with fire resistant roof and/or siding; however, although most of the structures were roofed with metal or other fire retardant material, all were constructed of log or wooden siding that appeared not to be fire resistant.
- In eighty-seven percent of the sections with structures, between 10 and 50 percent of the homes had survivable space around them.
- The project area has a response time of greater than 40 minutes for emergency services, mainly due to the distance from fire suppression forces, and the narrow, steep roads within the area.

- Roads in the area are somewhat maintained, but in general they are narrow with no shoulders.
- The predominant east/west road, Rim Road, is in need of additional engineering and support, and currently may not be capable of supporting fire-fighting trucks and equipment.

Thinning and removal of excessive fuels, including live overstocked and ladder fuels and dead and down fuels, in addition to rejuvenation of aspen stands (through reductions in conifer encroachment) would reduce the potential intensity of wildland fires, providing a safer environment from which firefighters could undertake suppression actions.

Conformance Statement: Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans

National Fire Plan

Under the auspices of the National Fire Plan, the Forest Service and BLM are developing a cohesive strategy for reducing fuels and restoring land health in fire-prone areas (NFP 2003). These two agencies are committed to working together to accomplish community protection and ecosystem maintenance and restoration and working within a collaborative process to implement effective fuel treatment efforts. The agencies recognize that fuel treatments must be coordinated across ownerships to effectively protect communities and improve ecosystem health. The Forest Service and BLM recognize that in order to accomplish this, fuel treatment efforts should be concentrated in high priority areas such as the WUI (Forest Service and BLM 2003).

Under the National Fire Plan, A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Risks to Communities and the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation was developed in May 2002 (NFP 2002b). The top two goals of the 10-year strategy are the improvement of fire prevention and suppression and the reduction of hazardous fuels, with firefighter and public safety continuing to be the highest priority. The Hoback Ranches WUI Fuels Reduction Project is proposed in response to the fuels reduction element of the National Fire Plan.

Pinedale Resource Management Plan

The RMP provides management direction for approximately 931,000 acres of public land administered by the BLM within the Pinedale Resource Area, which includes the project area (BLM 1988). The RMP states that fire protection on public lands will be managed by taking appropriate suppression actions through the fire management plan. Although the existing RMP does not address WUI issues, the Proposed Action is assumed to be in conformance with the plan (Roadifer 2003). The BLM is currently in the process of developing a new RMP for the Pinedale Field Office that will provide future direction for managing the public land in the Pinedale Resource Area. The plan will be comprehensive in nature and will address a wide variety of issues, including WUI areas (BLM 2003).

The RMP provides guidance and objectives for multiple resource categories:

- Fire Management: The fire program will be managed to protect public safety, life, and property. Fire is considered an option for disposal to timber slash as well as for hazard

reduction. Fire protection on public lands will be managed by taking appropriate suppression actions through the fire management plan.

- Visual Resources: The objective of visual resource management (VRM) will be to maintain overall integrity of visual resources while allowing for modification and changes to occur to meet other resource objectives.
- Cultural Resources: Cultural resources will be managed to: 1) resolve conflicts between cultural resources and other resources; 2) provide appropriate levels of protection for significant cultural resources; 3) design cultural resource management actions to maintain the value of cultural resources; and 4) provide for the scientific and educational use of cultural resources.
- Soils and Watersheds: Management objectives will be to maintain or enhance the quality of surface and ground water. Soil conservation will be provided through managing for maintenance of soil productivity and stability. Management actions will emphasize the reduction of soil erosion and sediment contributions to the Green River Basin water system. Soil management practices will be applied on a site-specific basis using soil survey data, and will be related to the soil characteristics such as the steepness of slopes, the length of slope, and soil chemistry and composition.
- Wildlife Habitat: Activity planning will emphasize habitat enhancement and protection. This planning will include other species as well as federally listed threatened and endangered species.
- Air Quality: Air quality management is conducted through cooperation with other agencies such as the Forest Service, Department of Environmental Quality, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Objectives will include the protection of public health and safety and the well being of sensitive natural resources.
- Forest Management: Forest resources will be managed to provide a supply of forest products to the various segments of the public and to maintain or enhance other resource management objectives. All forest management activities authorized under this plan will adhere to restrictions identified in the RMP.

Bridger-Teton National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

The 1990 Forest Plan provides direction for the Bridger-Teton National Forest. The Forest Plan allows for a wide range of silvicultural practices and requires that the practices be applied to achieve multiple resource objectives and ensure potential effects on other resource values are not unacceptable. The Forest Plan sets a fire protection standard for the development of a program aimed at fire protection and reducing fuel loadings adjacent to or on private in holdings in coordination with local, State, and other Federal agencies (Forest Service 1990). The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Forest Plan because it would contribute to the annual timber sale amount and provide for continued or greater prosperity for local communities.

The Forest Plan uses Management Areas to guide management of lands within the Bridger-Teton National Forest. The majority of the project area is in Management Area 23 – Upper Hoback and Community Interest Area 7 – Big Piney. This Management Area is located in the Bridger West Division of the Bridger-Teton National Forest, south of the Hoback Basin area and north of the Horse Creek area. Additionally, a small portion of the project area lies in Management Area 21 – Hoback Basin, which is south of the Union Pass area and east of the Cliff Creek and Upper Hoback areas. Desired Future Conditions 10 and 12 apply to the project area.

Desired Future Condition 10: Simultaneous Development of Resources, Opportunities for Human Experiences, and Support for Big-Game and a Wide Variety of Wildlife Species
The management prescription for the DFC is to provide long-term and short-term habitat to meet the needs of wildlife managed in balance with timber harvest, minerals development, and grazing. All designs for surface-disturbing activities must have a no effect or beneficial effect on wildlife.

Specific prescriptions, standards, and guidelines apply to management prescription 10. They include the following:

- Recreation - Existing roaded recreation opportunities continue where they do not interfere with the objectives for the area. Areas of both Semi-primitive Motorized and Semi-primitive Non-motorized use are provided.
- Visual Quality – The Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) are Retention, Partial Retention, and Modification.
- Fisheries and Wildlife – Wildlife prescriptions emphasize groups of species in order to increase species richness or diversity. Habitat is managed to achieve the game and fish populations, success, harvest levels, and recreation-day objectives identified by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and agreed to by the Forest Service. The Forest Plan contains specific guidelines for wildlife habitat.
- Vegetation – Rangeland is managed to maintain and enhance range and watershed condition while providing forage for wildlife and livestock. The timber prescription emphasizes achieving desired wildlife habitat conditions while developing long-term, overall big game hiding cover values. Specific silvicultural systems are identified in the Forest Plan.
- Protection: Fire – Fire management emphasizes preservation and enhancement of habitat. A full range of suppression techniques is used. Fuel conditions should be maintained that permit fire suppression forces to meet fire protection objectives for the area under historic weather conditions.

Desired Future Condition 12: Backcountry Big-Game Hunting, Dispersed Recreation, and Wildlife Security Areas
Part of the project area lies in DFC 12. The management emphasis for DFC 12 is to provide such important habitat for biggame as winter ranges, feedgrounds, calving areas, and security areas. Habitat capability and escape cover are provided for and Semi-primitive Non-motorized opportunities emphasizing big-game hunting activities are maintained. The project area lies near the southern extent of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. If any portion of the project area contains grizzly bear habitat, no surface-disturbing activities can occur there until the grizzly bear cumulative effects model can be run to help determine potential effects on the grizzly bears.

Specific prescriptions, standards, and guidelines apply to management prescription 12. They include the following:

- Recreation – Recreation and other human activities are managed to meet the needs of big-game species.
- Visual Quality – The VQOs are Retention and Partial Retention.

- Fisheries and Wildlife – Habitat is managed to achieve the game and fish populations, success, harvest levels, and recreation-day objectives identified by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and agreed to by the Forest Service. The Forest Plan contains specific guidelines for wildlife habitat.
- Vegetation – Range is managed to maintain and enhance range and watershed condition while providing forage for livestock and wildlife, particularly big game. Silvicultural practices emphasize preserving and enhancing critical big-game habitat values and specific silvicultural system guidelines and standards are identified in the Forest Plan.
- Protection: Fire – Fire Management emphasizes preservation and enhancement of habitat, particularly through prescribed fire. A full range of suppression techniques is used.

Decision Framework

The BLM and Forest Service are working cooperatively on this project and have identified the BLM as the lead agency. The Deciding Officers for the Hoback Ranches EA process are the BLM's Pinedale Field Office District Manager and the Forest Service's Big Piney District Ranger. Based on the analysis documented in this EA, the Deciding Officers will decide whether and how to reduce fuel loading and thus the risk of high severity fire in the Hoback Ranches project area. The Deciding Officers will document the decision in a Decision Notice (DN) accompanying the EA. In the DN the Deciding Officers may:

1. Select the Proposed Action.
2. Select an alternative to the Proposed Action.
3. Defer the fuels reduction at this time.

All alternatives for entry include mitigations associated with the action. The scope of this decision is limited to addressing the significant issues and possible environmental consequences of the project. The proposed and other included actions are not connected to factors or projects outside this analysis.