McNeel Conservation Plan

Introduction

RL McNeel Living Trust is entering into a conservation easement held by the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust (WSGALT) and funded by the Jonah Interagency Office (JIO). The McNeel Plan (Project) will provide for sagebrush habitat conservation and enhancement.

The intent of the project is to provide management goals and objectives designed to benefit the wildlife and associated habitat which has been impacted by the Jonah Field as outlined in the Record of Decision (Jonah Infill Drilling Project EIS, Sublette County, Wyoming, March 14, 2006). This project applies to the private lands within the RL McNeel Living Trust Conservation Easement and three associated allotments held by the Ranch and managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The specific allotments are Brodie Draw, East Aspen Ridge, and Jewett Ryegrass. (See Figure 1)

Entities working in partnership (Partners) for the development and implementation of this project include RL McNeel Living Trustee (Eva Kelly), JIO, BLM, and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). All partners agree this project meets the needs and intent of JIO wildlife mitigation funding.

By the end of 2009, the Partners will have completed baseline vegetation inventories using ecological site descriptions, habitat assessments, and a fence and infrastructure inventory. Project objectives will be further developed for future management actions to meet project area goals as agreed upon by Partners.

This is a living document that will be reviewed and modified as future monitoring information aids in understanding the ecological dynamics as a result of management.

Property Description

The Project area encompasses approximately 11,079 acres in Sublette County, WY. It is located 1.5 miles south of the town of Daniel and approximately eight miles west of highway 189 on the Ryegrass Road. This project encompasses some private (640 acres) and BLM (10,439 acres) lands associated with the RL McNeel Living Trust.

<u>Upland Vegetation Resources:</u> The project area is typical of semi-arid, high elevation sagebrush steppe ecosystems in southwestern Wyoming. The dominant vegetation species is Wyoming big sage brush with the expected associated bunchgrass-forb understory. Black sage brush/bare ground tends to dominate windswept ridge tops that have shallower soils.

Documents Consulted (include but not limited to)

- Umbrella Memorandum of Understanding Between Wyoming Game and Fish Department and United States Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management (Wyoming) for Management of the Fish and Wildlife Resources on the Public Lands (March 1990)
- Pinedale Resource Management Plan ROD (2008)
- Jonah Infill Drilling Project ROD, Sublette, County, Wyoming (March 13, 2006)
- Wyoming Standards for Rangeland Health (1997)
- Sage-Grouse Habitat Management Guidelines for Wyoming (WGFD in cooperation with BLM, July 2007)
- Wyoming Interagency Vegetation Committee. 2002. Wyoming Guidelines for Managing Sagebrush Communities with Emphasis on Fire Management. Wyoming Game and Fish Department and Wyoming BLM. Cheyenne, WY. 53 pp.
- JIO Wildlife Strategic Plan (January 2009)
- Natural Resources Conservation Service Ecological Site Descriptions

Project Goals

Maintain, preserve and/or enhance 11,079 acres of sagebrush-steppe habitat for native wildlife, with emphasis on sage grouse, antelope, and SGCN species; and ensure access to habitat by pronghorn and other wildlife; while maintaining a viable livestock operation.

Objective 1

Maintain or achieve a landscape mosaic of native vegetation species diversity and successional stages capable of supporting all native wildlife species with emphasis on habitat needed for sage grouse (s.g. Habitat Management Guidelines for Wyoming).

Strategies

1. Implement baseline vegetation inventory on deeded land and the associated BLM allotments to determine habitat conditions and needs. The inventory will use ecological site descriptions to aid in determining site potential.
2. Utilize baseline inventory to develop specific vegetation goals and objectives for project areas.
3. Utilize the inventory as basis for future vegetative monitoring.
4. Fund grazing-related structures and needs (e.g. water, fences, etc.) and grazing management practices that are designed to allow management strategies tiered towards the above goal and objective.
5. When appropriate, use various treatment methods to provide a variety of habitat block sizes (successional and/or age classes) designed to support sustainable populations of native wildlife species.
6. Restore hydrologic function within several wet meadows to improve sage grouse brood rearing habitat.

Objective 2

Provide water sources where needed to support a wide distribution of wildlife species across the landscape.

Strategies

1. Evaluate existing water availability and identify locations where water is desirable for wildlife.
2. Compliment any water development with areas reserved or enhanced further for wildlife (e.g. fenced out riparian areas), especially sage-grouse (e.g. enhancement of vegetation utilizing developed water source).

Objective 3

Maintain migration corridors sufficient to allow unimpeded seasonal movements of migratory wildlife.

Strategies

1. Inventory fences.
2. Where necessary contract fence retrofitting to achieve wildlife friendly fences. *(Funding for fence modification has not been allocated at this time)*

Livestock Management

Livestock management will be included in the permit renewal for Ryegrass Landscape planning efforts will implement a rotational grazing system that balances grazing and growing-season rest for preferred vegetation species.

Livestock Numbers & Season of Use: Use in each grazing allotment is initially limited to the following:

- Jewett Rye Grass cannot exceed 440 Animal Unit Months (AUM's)
- Brodie Draw cannot exceed 385 AUM's
- East Aspen Ridge cannot exceed 846 AUM's

An annual grazing schedule will be developed between the permittee and BLM range specialist. The general guidelines of the plan need to incorporate the following components:

- A deferred rotation paradigm such that each allotment receives one growing season of rest at least every third year
- The "rest" allotment should be used as the third allotment during its' growing season rest year and as the first allotment the year after its' rest year
- Livestock spend 2-7 days in Jewett Rye Grass at the end of every grazing season in order to facilitate gathering and trailing home.

Flexibility: Livestock must be managed according to a deferred rotation grazing system such that livestock move as a group, rotating through each allotment within the system. Livestock cannot use more than one allotment at a time within the rotation for any protracted period of time. The number of days in each allotment must not exceed total permitted AUM's.

Practices to Implement Project

1) Conduct and analyze vegetation inventory. JIO partners will collect vegetation inventory during the 2009 season. Once results are available, the ID team (RL McNeel Living Trust, BLM Range Specialist and JIO team) will reconvene to analyze the data and determine if any additional changes in grazing management, vegetation treatments such as mowing, burning, thinning, seeding, etc. are needed. These plans will be amended when warranted. An inventory of all existing management structures (fences and watering facilities) will also be recorded.

   The analysis process to be used to determine site based objectives will be the following: Once the vegetation inventory is available, the team will reconvene and compare the current vegetation composition of a site to the potential of the site. The group will decide by consensus on what the desired plant community should be. This will be done using the most current Ecological Site Descriptions (ESD) available from the NRCS. Below is an abbreviated example.

   > A loamy ESD is inventoried and the results show the site has the potential to increase forb diversity. By reviewing the ESD, the group believes that forb production can be increased by incorporating a seeding treatment and a modified grazing rotation. Those practices can then be implemented into this plan.
   >
   > *(Funding for inventory is allocated through JIO baseline collection)*

2) Brodie Draw well water system: The Brodie Draw Well has been drilled but not completed. This project would complete the well and attach two separate water pipelines in order to bring water to the Brodie Draw grazing allotment. This would improve livestock distribution in both allotments and increase livestock use of the Brodie Burn area in Brodie Draw allotment. The Brodie Burn occurred in 1999 and shrub recruitment has been very slow. If grazing pressure on competitive grasses can be increased then the pace of shrub recruitment should also increase, thus improving winter mule deer habitat as well as seasonal habitat for sage grouse. (Figure 2). *Estimated cost for project is $20,000.*

3) Sagebrush Treatment/Water Development. The sagebrush communities in the allotments are becoming decadent. Further assessment is needed to determine why the sagebrush in this area is decadent and if there are any management practices that can be implemented to improve condition. This would likely benefit mule deer, sage grouse, and livestock if designed appropriately. If the interdisciplinary team determines that a more uniform livestock distribution is desirable, some water developments and/or modifications would need to be considered.

Monitoring

1) Vegetation Monitoring: ESD locations were identified and inventoried during 2009. These locations will be used for future monitoring efforts. JIO will pursue long-term monitoring (20 years) for this project.

2) Wildlife Monitoring: Game & Fish partners will compile all available lek data. BLM partners will compile data sheets for riparian bird surveys, sagebrush bird monitoring, and raptors. While the JIO is still in operation, the G&F Wildlife Biologist and BLM Mitigation Wildlife Biologist will conduct all wildlife monitoring. At the sunset of JIO, a new plan will be developed if needed.

Length of Agreement

The associated partners agree to a 20-year renewable commitment for this project including 3-5 year meetings to review monitoring information and associated goals and objectives. The meetings will include assigned representatives of the BLM, WGFD, and RL McNeel Living Trust. Project goals and objectives will be reviewed and updated as needed to reflect adaptive actions that may be required to meet the overall goals of this Project.

Assigned Representatives

RL McNeel Living Trust Dated 06/13/2006:
Eva Kelly, Trustee

Jonah Interagency Office:
Jim Lucas, JIO Project Coordinator

Wyoming Game and Fish Department:
Dan Stroud, Habitat Biologist
Jill Miller, Habitat Biologist

Bureau of Land Management- Pinedale Field Office:
Chuck Otto- Field Manager
Cara Farr- Mitigation Rangeland Management Specialist
Theresa Gulbrandson- Mitigation Wildlife Biologist

Figure 1. McNeel-Ryegrass Project Area

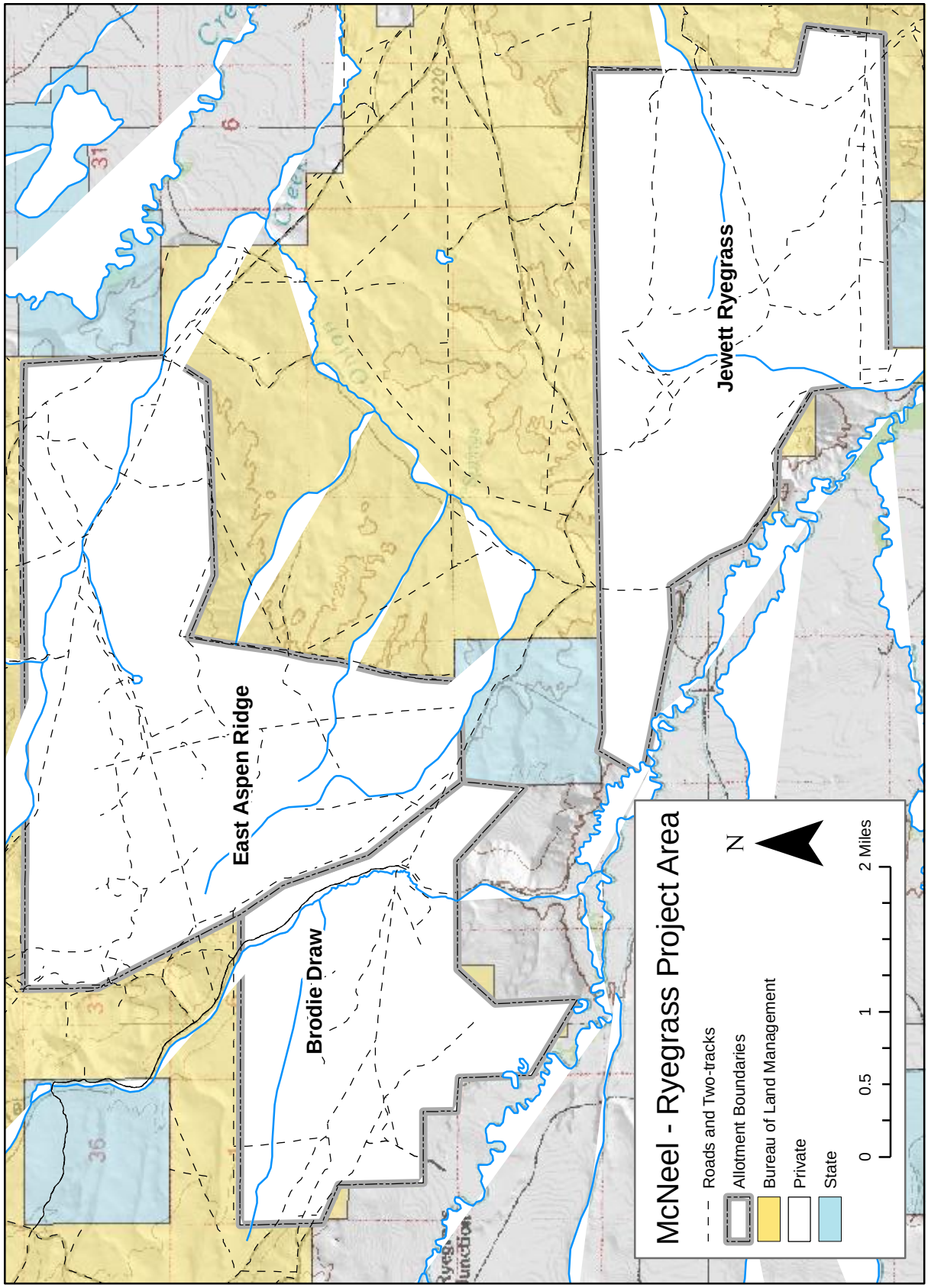
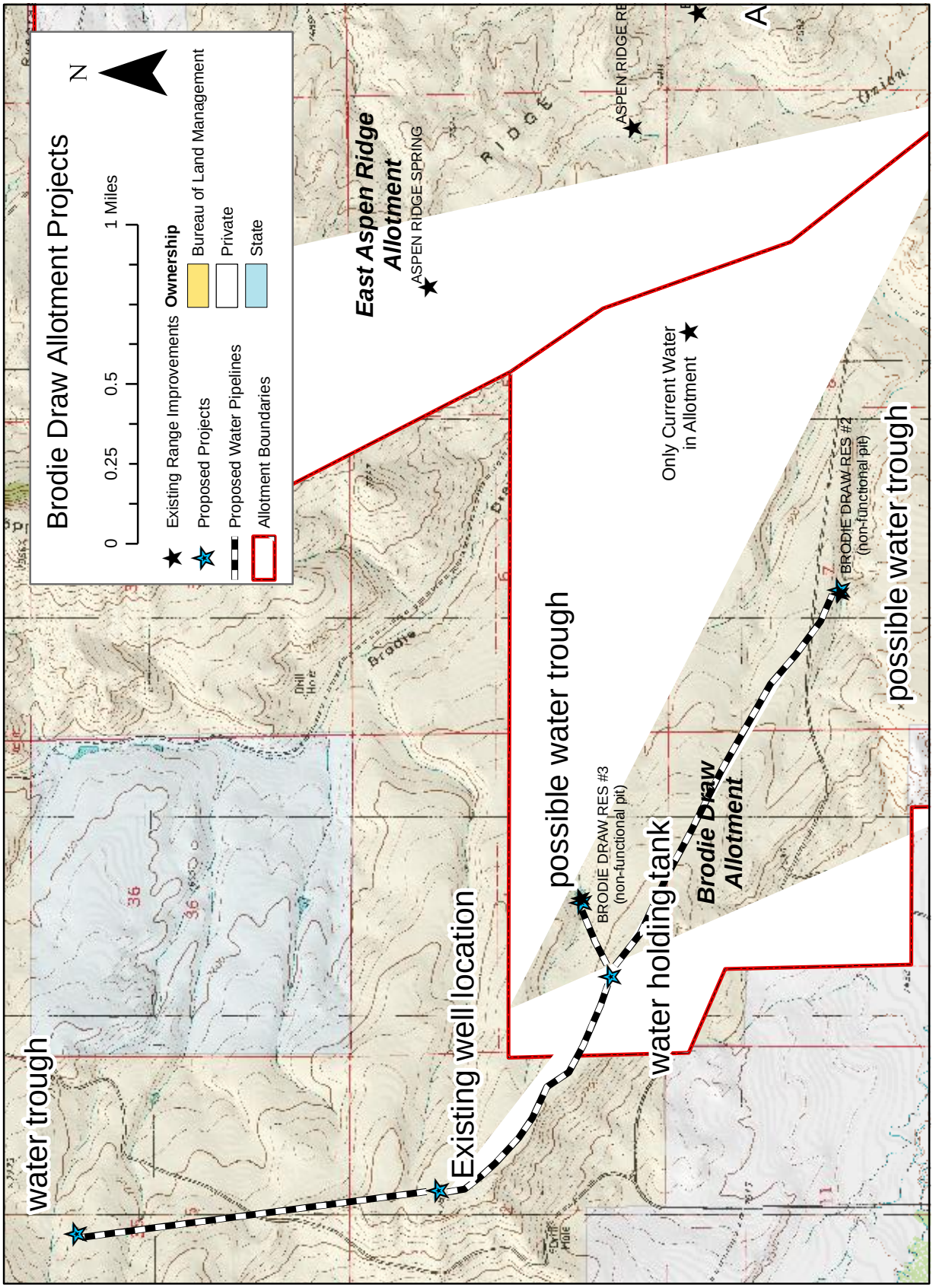
Figure 2. Brodie Draw Allotment Water Project