



State of Utah

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Office of the Governor
Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office

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May 13, 2021

Submitted via electronically at

<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?project=59899>

Michael T. Elson
Forest Supervisor
Fishlake National Forest
115 East 900 North
Richfield, UT 84701

Subject: **Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project**
RDCC Project No. 78963

Dear Supervisor Elson:

The state of Utah (State) supports the Proposed Action and appreciates the Forest Service taking active management measures to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfires, increase resilience of existing vegetation groups, and improve ecological function in native vegetation communities and wildlife habitats, as well as improve firefighter and public safety. In collaboration with the Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF) and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), the State provides the following scoping comments for your consideration.

The Department of Agriculture and Food

Using prescribed fire treatments to mitigate wildfire effects will improve native vegetative communities, thus allowing greater livestock distribution within grazing allotments and potentially larger herds. UDAF supports and encourages the Forest Service to promptly implement the proposed project to improve rangeland health and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

UDAF appreciates the inclusion of livestock grazing permittees through the process and implementation of the prescribed fire project. The Forest Service should continue to collaborate with livestock grazing permittees and allow additional AUMs in other grazing areas in the case of temporary AUM reductions. The Forest Service should use desirable non-

Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

May 13, 2021

Page 2

native species alongside native species during the reseeding process to improve forage resiliency, prevent erosion, and combat invasive species establishment.¹

In addition, the Forest Service should inspect burned landscapes at a site-specific level to determine when livestock grazing is authorized. Not all landscapes need to be rested for two full growing seasons; some landscapes need to be rested for longer. Having the flexibility to monitor the needs of the landscape on a site-specific level will promote adaptive management and allow for site specific management approaches to be implemented. The Forest Service should develop the proposed project in accordance with the State of Utah Resource Management Plan, which states, “The State promotes fuel breaks, thinning, chaining, prescribed fire, and the selection of fire-resistant vegetation in green-stripping and burned areas.”²

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources

The use of prescribed fire supplies a valid tool for increasing biodiversity and improving wildlife habitat. UDWR recognizes the many benefits of this project, such as reducing conifer encroachment, stimulating aspen regeneration, and reducing fuels and likelihood of catastrophic wildfire. There are also many important fisheries resources on the Fishlake National Forest that have the potential to be impacted negatively through the introduction of increased sedimentation.

Challenges in balancing the needs for both terrestrial and aquatic species and habitats exist. A project of this magnitude can only be successful through close coordination and consultation. The Forest Service should provide the opportunity for UDWR to be involved as the NEPA analysis is more fully developed. The Forest Service should establish specific site-level prescriptions before implementation of prescribed fire activities or finalization of wildfire management decisions. The following comments from both a terrestrial and aquatics standpoint may at times seem contradictory, which highlights the need for high levels of coordination between agencies, sections, and disciplines.

The proposed action spans the Fillmore (21 A and B), Beaver (22), Central Mountains Manti South (16), Monroe (23), and Plateau (25 A, B, and C) wildlife management units and contains crucial summer habitat for big game species. It also occurs within the Parker

¹ Bybee, J., Roundy, R. A., Young, K. R., Hulet, A., Round, D. B., Crook, L., Aanderud, Z., Eggett, D. L., Cline, N. L. 2016. Vegetation Response to Pinon and Juniper Tree Shredding. Rangeland Ecology and Management 69: 224-234. Available online: https://www.firescience.gov/projects/10-1-01-7/project/10-1-01-7_shred.pdf

² State of Utah Resource Management Plan. Page 85. Available online at: https://rmp.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/SRMP_Web.pdf

Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

May 13, 2021

Page 3

Mountain Sage-grouse Management Area (SGMA) and contains occupied sage-grouse habitat. The Fishlake National Forest has over 70 perennial streams and 60 lakes and reservoirs of which many are considered Blue Ribbon Fisheries.

Terrestrial Considerations

Prescribed fire is a great tool to address many of the concerns of poor summer range conditions. The deer herds on all of the above mentioned wildlife management units are currently estimated to be below management objective. One of the limiting factors identified across multiple management units (21, 23, 25) is the amount and condition of summer habitat on public lands. UDWR's district biologist expressed concern for the deer in the Beaver management unit, because the body condition of deer in the unit last year was very poor. The Boulder unit deer herd is also exhibiting poor body condition scores. These body condition scores are likely correlated to limited nutrition in summer. Prescribed fire would help improve crucial summer range conditions through the immediate growth of forbs and grasses and future aspen regeneration.

The project addresses multiple concerns and meets numerous objectives outlined in UDWR's Mule Deer management-unit level plans including but not necessarily limited to:

- Support enhancement and restoration efforts in quaking aspen forests unit wide by reducing encroachment of spruce / fir forests. (Unit #23, 25A, 25B)
- Continue to reduce threats to catastrophic wildfires, by reducing fuel loads and creating firebreaks (Unit # 25A, 25B, 25C)
- Seek cooperative projects and programs to encourage and improve the quality and quantity of deer habitat, with public and private land managers to maintain a stable or upward trend in vegetative composition (Unit #23, 25A , 25B, 25C)
- Coordinate with federal and state partners in designing projects that will improve fire resiliency and protect areas of crucial habitat. (Unit # 21, 22)
- Seek out opportunities to improve the limited summer range across the unit. Develop summer range habitat improvement projects that remove encroaching trees, improve succulent vegetation and wet meadows, increase aspen recruitment, enhance and/or protect riparian areas, and use prescribed fire to promote early succession habitats where appropriate. (Unit # 21, 22)

Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

May 13, 2021

Page 4

Utah's Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) describes fire as the third-most critical problem, involving the combined effects of wildfire and, paradoxically, fire suppression. Inappropriate fire frequency and intensity is one of the highest threats to aspen-conifer habitat. Aspen-conifer communities have been identified as the second richest habitat type in terms of wildlife species diversity and abundance. Recent studies have shown that larger scale burns (e.g., 5,000 acres) that burn more intensely have been the most successful in terms of aspen regeneration. Higher-intensity burns stimulate higher numbers of young aspen, per unit area, than do lower intensity burns. A larger treatment area distributes ungulate browse pressure, allowing most young aspen stems to reach a safe height. From experience on the Monroe Mountain, the local district biologist encourages large acreages be burned all at once in high elevations to help distribute ungulate grazing pressure. It has been observed that aspen regeneration in smaller fires can be suppressed or eliminated by the pressures of grazing from wild and domestic ungulates.

Project design features acknowledge that if sensitive or endangered species are found in the project, activities will cease until consultation with a biologist occurs. Table 1 mentioned sensitive species; however there is no longer a state sensitive species list. The WAP identifies Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SCGN) and those determinations are useful for biological planning purposes. The Forest Service should consider the species identified in the WAP for project planning, although not for a regulatory purpose. UDWR also maintains the Utah Natural Heritage Database that curates data and observations for species listed under the Endangered Species Act and the SCGN's identified in the WAP. UDWR recommends an official species occurrence analysis be requested for the project records from the Natural Heritage Database here:

https://dwrcdc.nr.utah.gov/ucdc/ContactUDWR/Information_Requests.htm

The results may be discussed with the UDWR Southern Region Impact Analysis Biologist, Jessica Kinross, for help interpreting significance.

Aquatic Considerations

There are numerous conservation strategies and management plans available regarding the aquatic resources associated with the area affected by this analysis, including but not limited to, Boreal Toad (*Bufo boreas boreas*) Conservation Plan (2000), Range-wide conservation agreement and strategy for Bonneville cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki utah*) (2000), Conservation strategy for Colorado River cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii pleuriticus*) in the states of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming (2006), Conservation Agreement for Springsnails in Nevada and Utah (2017), Boulder Mountain Sportfish Management Plan

Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

May 13, 2021

Page 5

(2016), Fish Lake Sportfish Management Plan (2017), and Tushar Mountain Lakes Sport Fish Management Plan (2020) . These plans can help guide management decisions associated with this analysis. Aquatic resources will rely heavily on a proper balance of prescribed fire benefits to watershed health through the reduction of risk for large scale wildfire and impacts associated with increased sedimentation.

UDWR appreciates the consideration for Boreal Toads as three of our four Boreal Toad populations within the Southern region are in this area. The project design features (PDF) appear comparable to others implemented on the Monroe Mountain Aspen Regeneration project. UDWR and Fishlake National Forest Biologists have worked closely to manage Boreal Toads and their habitat on Fishlake National Forest Lands, and UDWR encourages that continued cooperation.

Consideration for Springsnail species should be included in the project analyses, for which the UDWR and Intermountain Region of the Forest Service have both signed a conservation agreement. Specific locations for springsnail populations that should warrant special considerations include:

- Bifid Duct Pyrg (*Pyrgulopsis peculiaris*):
 - Big Spring (Oak Creek Canyon in Canyon Mountains) Maple Grove springs
 - Copleys Cove springs
- Otter Creek Pyrg (*Pyrgulopsis fusca*):
 - Springs along Little Lost Creek (near FR052)
- For a newly discovered population (*Pyrgulopsis* sp.)
 - Spring near Corn Creek (1.5 miles up FS106 from FS boundary)

Additionally, Dixie National Forest implemented some PDFs in one of their projects. UDWR recommends including something similar in the project design features. For reference, here are the PDFs:

In order to prevent potential impacts to *P. santaclarensis* the following PDFs will be followed during future implementation of the Upper Santa Clara River Vegetation and Fuels Project:

- AQ-1 - For prescribed fire implementation, no water will be drafted from springs and seeps that feed the Pine Valley Canal that are habitat for *P. santaclarensis*.
- AQ-2 No direct ignition of broadcast burning can occur within 300 m of the springs and seeps that feed the Pine Valley Canal that are habitat for *P.*

Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

May 13, 2021

Page 6

santaclarensis. Hand treatment and/or pile burning can be completed within this buffer, but piles need to be a MINIMUM of 50 feet from springs and seeps that feed the Pine Valley Canal that are habitat for *P. santaclarensis*.

Fishlake National Forest is home to both the Bonneville Cutthroat Trout and Colorado River Cutthroat Trout, which are both managed under a conservation agreement. Bonneville Cutthroat occur on the Beaver, Fillmore, Richfield and Fremont River Ranger Districts, and Colorado River Cutthroat occur on the Fremont River Ranger District. Additionally, there are multiple, important sport fisheries located on all of these ranger districts across the forest.

UDWR personnel are committed to working with the Forest Service to assist in any aspect of this project. The Forest Service fisheries biologist, prior to any ignitions / treatments, should be consulted to identify critical habitat concerns and identify critical thresholds in the area for both native species and sportfish. In areas where critical habitat is found, design features should be implemented to protect or enhance those areas. Another consideration the Forest Service fisheries biologists should be consulted in the event of a natural or man-caused wildfire. Their concerns should be taken into account when determining full suppression, let burn and/or controlled perimeters to ensure both native species, and sportfish populations and their habitats are protected.

Provisions for monitoring aquatic species and habitats during and after the actions take place should be considered. We recommend monitoring and evaluation of early stage treatments be completed by fisheries biologists to help evaluate effectiveness and identify potential issues caused or attributed to the treatments. This valuable information from monitoring can be useful for future fire prescriptions.

The Proposed Action calls for annual prescribed burning on approximately 40,000 acres per year. UDWR appreciates the ambition of this goal, but requests that a desire to achieve it not be placed in higher importance than the needed site specific planning and consultation. UDWR is concerned about the potential damage to aquatic resources on and off the Forest due to the current fragile state the bodies of water are experiencing. Fishlake National Forest has small lakes and reservoirs scattered throughout, and many of those are considered Blue Ribbon Fisheries. These small lakes and reservoirs are already suffering and deteriorating due to siltation. Any increases in the rate and/or amount of siltation into these lakes from runoff following fire will reduce and/or eliminate any chances of overwinter survival of fish. Additionally, once these lakes are filled with sediment there are no options available at this time to remove the sediment or restore the lakes. The scoping notice specifically calls out Manning Meadow and Barney reservoirs with a specific recommendation to burn no more than 20% of their sub-basin. UDWR requests the ability to include other fisheries within the same prescription and commit to helping develop either a list or GIS product that identifies these fisheries.

Forest-Wide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

May 13, 2021

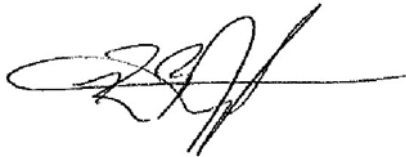
Page 7

Fire has a natural ecosystem function that has long been suppressed and risks the occurrence of catastrophic wildfire with catastrophic consequences for wildlife. The UDWR appreciates the Forest Service's commitment to establishing healthy landscapes for wildlife, habitat and the communities through controlled prescribed fire. UDWR understands that while there can be short term negative impacts, such as displacement of wildlife, the overarching objective to improve, restore, and protect habitat over time is extremely important.

If you have questions please contact Jessica Kinross, the Impact Analysis Biologist at UDWR's Southern Region Office, at 435-691-2372.

The State looks forward to working with the Forest Service through the planning and implementation of this project. Please direct any written correspondence to the Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office at the address below, or call to discuss any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Johnson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Redge B. Johnson
Executive Director