



San Juan Public Lands Center Completes Programmatic Environmental Assessment in Southwest Colorado

It's a universal problem – finding the staff, money, and time to complete an environmental analysis. Projects often take two to three years, sometimes more, to complete. When it comes to projects that may protect homes, property, and forests from a fast-moving crown fire those timelines are unacceptable.

In southwest Colorado, BLM fuels specialist Randy Lewis decided to do something about that. Lewis was finding a great deal of redundancy in the environmental assessments that he was writing for fuels-reduction projects. With the exception of the high-elevation lands in San Juan County, the BLM lands administered by the San Juan Public Lands Center in Durango are very similar in terrain and vegetation, primarily pinyon-juniper with some scattered Gambrel oak and ponderosa pine. Even the treatment methods are similar. So, Lewis proposed writing just one document known as a programmatic environmental assessment, which would cover all BLM fuels-reduction projects in the wildland-urban interface.

Lewis kept it simple. It looked at only two alternatives – the proposed action and no action. It did not address lands within Wilderness areas, Wilderness Study Areas, or the Canyon of the Ancients National Monument. The decision, as well as the mitigating measures, will be reviewed during the upcoming resource management plan revision.

In July of 2003 when the BLM was given the authority to use categorical exclusions for hazardous fuels projects Lewis could have quit working on the programmatic environmental assessment. “But,” he said, “I felt that in order to use the categorical exclusion authority effectively it was important to have a document that addressed the cumulative impacts of proposed hazardous fuels treatments, as well as the mitigation measures that will address those impacts.” Each project categorical exclusion will include the appropriate mitigation measures identified in the programmatic environmental assessment.

Lewis' idea has paid off. To date, seven National Environmental Policy Act documents have been tiered to this programmatic environmental assessment, considerably reducing staff time and work.

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www.fs.fed.us/r2/sanjuan/fire/fuels/index.shtml