Case Studies: Areas of Habitat Connectivity in BLM Land Use Plans

Introduction

The case studies in this series are examples of how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has successfully implemented inclusion of areas of habitat connectivity corridors as part of the land use planning process. Managing public lands for areas of habitat connectivity warrants creative and flexible approaches. These two case studies provide examples that BLM offices can learn from and build upon in land use planning and implementation efforts. The case studies present examples from BLM Wyoming (Case Study 1, Resource Management Plan Evaluation) and BLM Arizona (Case Study 2, Resource Management Plan Decisions).

Case Study 1, Resource Management Plan Evaluation
Lander Resource Management Plan (Wyoming)

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Lander Field Office (LFO) initiated a Resource Management Plan (RMP) evaluation of its approved land use plan from 2014. Aspects of the plan evaluation included examination of the management of areas of big game habitat connectivity in the planning area.

Key Plan Level Findings:
Since the 2014 RMP was completed, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) has designated several big game migration corridors in Wyoming, including for the Sublette mule deer herd. The Long Gulch segment of the corridor intersects a portion of the LFO planning area. The plan evaluation included a review of Fish and Wildlife, Threatened/Endangered, and Special Status Species program areas, including as they related to WGFD's big game corridor. The evaluators found that the RMP identified habitat for priority species and had management prescriptions designed to maintain or improve habitat integrity, continuity, connectivity and productivity for fish and wildlife on a landscape scale.

Specifically, activities within the planning area are managed with stipulations or conditions of approval to protect big game habitat. For example, a no surface occupancy or controlled surface occupancy stipulation may be placed on oil and gas leases to protect habitat from surface-disturbing activities. Seasonal restrictions in the plan provide protections for key seasonal big game periods (e.g., elk, moose, deer, pronghorn, and bighorn sheep all require protection of crucial winter range between November 15 and April 30). The protective wildlife seasonal restrictions were developed consistent with statewide dates and in coordination with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and/or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The BLM uses a set of factors when considering a request for an exception to the seasonal restrictions (e.g.,

habitat conditions and availability, migration and travel corridors, as well as winter range, foraging, and breeding areas).

Evaluation Recommendations:
The evaluation recommended updating the RMP maps to include the Sublette mule deer herd corridor, but did not identify a need to modify management to protect the big game corridor, as the existing plan provides adequate coverage. This is consistent with WGFD, which determined that "the landscape in the Long Gulch Segment is mostly unaltered, the existing and projected risks to this segment appear limited, and substantial protections exist, so functional migration habitat in this segment should be maintained." (Sublette Mule Deer Migration Corridor Assessment June 22, 2017, pages 28-29). However, ongoing collaboration with WGFD will ensure that continued functional migration habitats are protected and ensure consistency with other future land use plan decisions that may be considered in adjacent BLM field offices. No additional land use planning actions were recommended for this aspect of the land use plan. The RMP adequately provides for protections of habitat continuity and connectivity by placing restrictions on timing or duration of multiple use activities.

Case Study 2, Resource Management Plan Decisions
Lower Gila South Management Plan (Arizona)

Several BLM land use plans in Arizona have identified areas of habitat connectivity within the plans' desired resource goals, objectives, and management actions. This case study highlights such a management approach in the Lower Gila South RMP approved in 2012.

Starting in 2004, the BLM participated in an effort lead by Arizona Department of Transportation, along with nine other public agencies, that identified large blocks of protected habitats and potential movement corridors. The BLM used this information, and building upon the previous RMP, incorporated management for this important wildlife areas into the Lower Gila South RMP. The following goals, objectives, and management direction apply to habitat connectivity corridors and provide direction on how to address new information.

> **Goal:** WL-12 (Wildlife Movement Corridors): Manage wildlife movement corridors so they contain ample habitat to assist wildlife in moving from one area to another in a relatively safe manner.
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> **Objective:** WL-12.1: Manage wildlife movement corridors in a manner that will assist wildlife in safe passage from one area to another.
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> **Management Action**: WL-12.1.1: All new roads and primitive roads where average speeds may be greater than 45 miles per hour, or highways crossing public land, will be designed to facilitate movement of wildlife to reduce mortality of wildlife from vehicle collisions.
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> - WL-12.1.2: Maintenance or expansion of existing roads will incorporate measures to maintain or restore wildlife habitat

connectivity and will incorporate, where appropriate, wildlife underpasses or overpasses.

- WL-12.1.3: Existing and/or designated roads and/or trails will be subject to seasonal closures if conflicts with wildlife cannot be mitigated.
- WL-12.1.4: New surface disturbance within 100 meters of the edge of large washes located in the desert washes vegetative community (those depicted on USGS 1:24,000 maps) will be mitigated as needed to protect the integrity of washes as corridors.
- WL-12.1.5: Density of roads, primitive roads, and motorized trails will be limited to 3 miles of road per section or less within the wildlife movement corridors, in accordance with the Habitat Guidelines for Mule Deer (Mule Deer Working Group 2006).
- WL-12.1.7: Surface-disturbing activities will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Activities will be concentrated in less sensitive resource areas or in areas already disturbed. If no other options are available, actions must be mitigated and managed to ensure consistency with management objectives, with an emphasis to maintain wildlife habitat continuity and movement connectivity. If impacts to wildlife cannot be mitigated, the action will be denied.

As shown in the management actions, the Lower Gila South RMP provides flexibility in meeting the RMP goal of managing these public lands to ensure appropriate wildlife movement. Specific implementation habitat management plans may be developed in the future to further prioritize implementation actions.