Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences: describes the environment and other resources that would be affected, and analyzes the impacts.

Consultation, Coordination, and Public Participation: describes the scoping process and coordination with the public, agencies, tribal governments, and private organizations that occurred during the preparation of this analysis. A chronology of consultation and coordination is also included.

References and Appendices: A list of references and separate appendices to support the analysis are also included. The appendices include a summary of the fire management for each Field Office.

ALTERNATIVES

This EA compares the potential environmental consequences of past fire management policies and strategies with those that reflect the direction of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (1995) and the 2001 Amendment. Knowledge and understanding has grown since the days when all fires were automatically suppressed. Federal agencies now recognize that fire is a critical natural process that helps maintain healthy ecosystems and guards against natural disasters. The alternatives considered in detail represent two different options for fire management on BLM-administered public lands.

We analyze how fire can be used to help achieve resource objectives identified in land use plans and to reduce dangerous accumulations of fuel. Fire suppression, prescribed burning, and other fuels management options have been studied as methods for using fire management to sustain healthy ecosystems while reducing the risk and cost of fire suppression.

Alternative A (Continuation of Past Management)

This alternative is referred to as the “No Action” alternative because there would be no change from past management. Management direction in current RMPs and one remaining Management Framework Plan (MFP) provides inconsistent guidance to fire managers. For example, some plans require full and aggressive initial attack on all wildland fires, while others are silent on the topic. Some RMPs also appear to have inappropriate limits on the use of prescribed burning and other hazardous fuels reduction treatments. The issue and opportunities for hazardous fuels reductions, especially near interface areas, were not addressed in most of these planning documents.

Under this alternative, land use and resource management objectives receive less consideration when 1) identifying fire management objectives, 2) developing strategies for wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation, or 3) developing prescribed burn and other fuel management guidance. No amendments would be made to RMPs or the MFP.

Fire Management Objectives:

> Fire would seldom be used to achieve responsible and definable land use benefits through the integration of fire suppression and prescribed fire as a management tool. Seldom have fire management objectives been integrated with other resource objectives in the land use plans. Too often, past management plans and strategies have not considered fire history, land status, issues, concerns, and other resource objectives. Fire was not desired.

Wildland Fire Suppression and Rehabilitation:

> Wildland fires would generally be held to the minimum possible size through timely and effective suppression action consistent with values at risk and within framework of land use objectives and plans. Usually, aggressive initial attack would be taken on all fires that occur on or threaten BLM lands. Wildland fires would very seldom be used to accomplish land use and resource management objectives. Other resource management concerns and objectives would often not be considered during wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation.

Prescribed Fire and Other Fuels Management:

> Prescribed fire may be used to accomplish land use or resource management objectives only when defined in prescribed fire plans. Wildland fires would not be allowed to burn even if it is “in prescription”. Some of the current planning documents limit the use of prescribed fire to very small areas across the entire planning area.

Alternative B (Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, update of Montana Fire Management Plan, and appropriate RMP amendments)

Alternative B represents the proposed fire management plan and strategies for Montana and the Dakotas. This reflects implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. With this alternative, fire management objectives would be developed following careful

consideration of other resource management objectives. Strategies for wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation as well as prescribed burning and other fuels management strategies will be based on these objectives. RMPs and the MFP would be updated as necessary to be consistent with the fire management objectives and guidance contained in the proposed fire management plan.

Other resource objectives, concerns, and issues to be considered during fire management planning and implementation are described in Appendix A (Resource Considerations). Generally, these would be adopted as standard operating procedures and guidance for wildland fire suppression and rehabilitation or for prescribed burning and other fuels management activities.

The proposed management plan and strategy was based on consideration of fire history, land status, issues, concerns, and other resource objectives. These were used to develop initial fire management objectives and strategies for BLM administered public lands. Four fire management categories were identified. These are described below and include an estimate of the number of BLM administered surface acres that would occur in each category:

Category A: (44,000 acres) Lands where wildland fires and prescribed fire are not desired due to reasons other than ecological. Reasons may be political, social, economic, or tied to current land uses. In these areas emphasis would be placed on prevention, detection, rapid response, use of appropriate suppression techniques and tools, and non-fire fuels treatments. Aggressive fire suppression may be required to prevent unacceptable resource damage or to prevent loss of life and property.

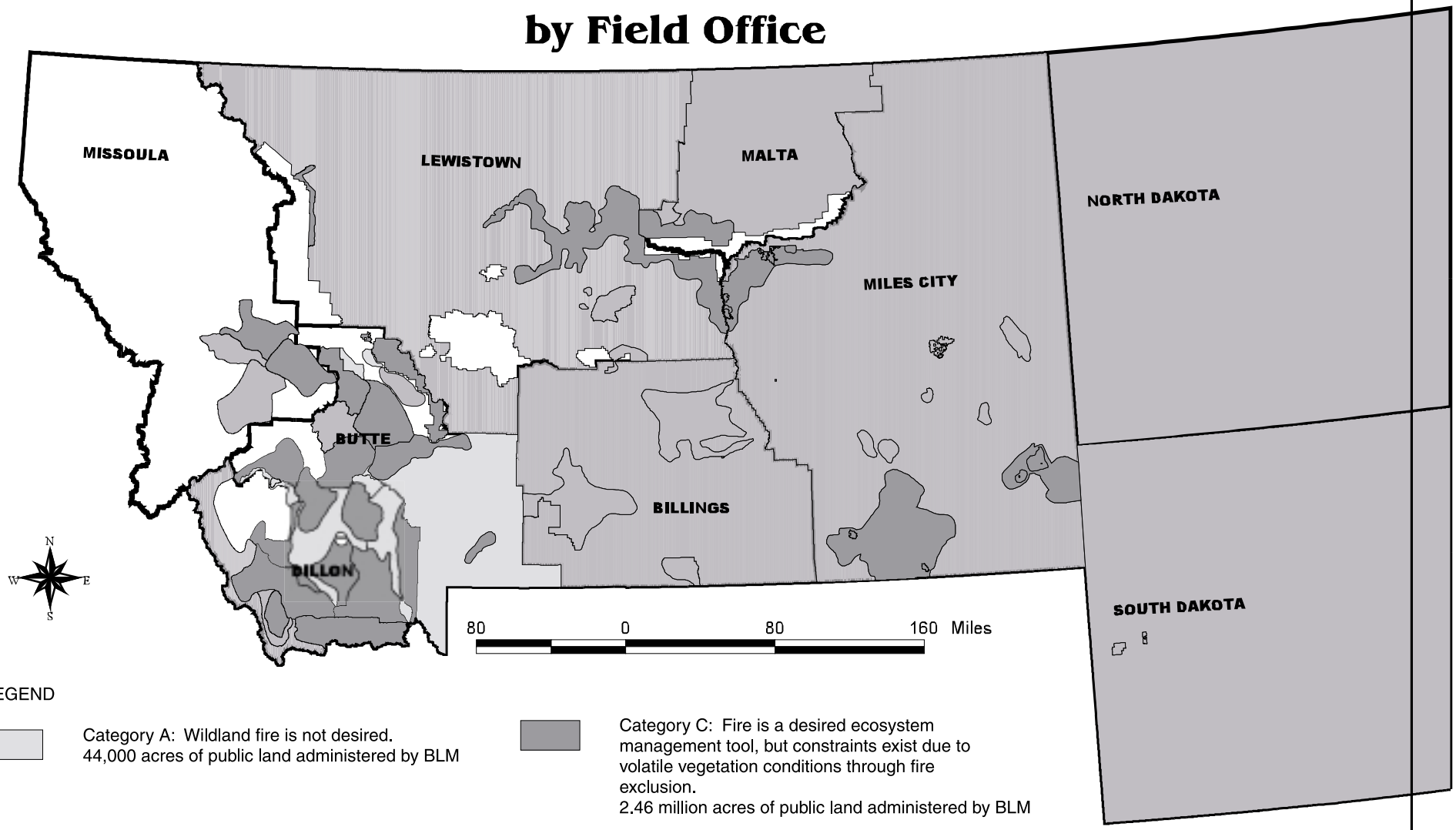
Category B: (5.78 million acres) Where unplanned wildland fire is expected to cause negative effects, but these may be mitigated or avoided through fuels management, prescribed fire, prevention of human caused fires, or other strategies.

Category C: (2.46 million acres) Where fire is desired to help manage the ecosystem, but there are constraints because of the existing vegetation condition due to fire exclusion. In these areas more substantial non-fire fuels treatments may be necessary prior to use of prescribed fire.

Category D: (27,000 acres) Where fire may be desired and there are no constraints associated with resource condition, or social, economic, or political considerations. In these areas natural and management-ignited fire may be used to achieve desired objectives, such as to improve vegetation or watershed condition.

Map 1 shows fire management zones and fire management categories for each zone/polygon, and Field Office boundaries in Montana and the Dakotas. These fire management zones or polygons are shown for each Field Office, and are meant to represent current conditions. As demographic, social and economic conditions and fire occurrence change, boundaries of fire management zones may shift accordingly without a plan amendment. Table 1 lists the fire management zones and categories by Field Office. Table 2 provides a summary comparison of alternatives.

MAP 1
MONTANA-DAKOTA FIRE MANAGEMENT ZONES
by Field Office



LEGEND

Category A: Wildland fire is not desired.
44,000 acres of public land administered by BLM

Category B: Wildland fire is unplanned and likely to cause negative effects, but these effects may be mitigated or avoided through fuels management, prescribed fire, or other strategies.
5.78 million acres of public land administered by BLM

Category C: Fire is a desired ecosystem management tool, but constraints exist due to volatile vegetation conditions through fire exclusion.
2.46 million acres of public land administered by BLM

Category D: Fire is desired, and there are no constraints associated with resource condition, or social, economic, or political considerations.
27,000 acres of public land administered by BLM

TABLE 1 MONTANA/DAKOTAS FIRE MANAGEMENT ZONES				
Field Office	**Fire Management Zone**	**Category**	**Size (acres)**	**% BLM**
Billings	1. Billings Grasslands	B	262,000	2
	2. Roundup	B	88,000	2
	3. Pryor Mountains	B	43,000	37
	4. Big Timber/Absaroka	B	17,200	3
	5. Twin Coulee WSA	B	7,000	55
	6. Pompeys Pillar National Monument & ACEC	B	500	100
Butte	1. Absaroka Foothills	C	67,700	6
	2. Big Belt Mountains	C	328,200	1
	3. Big Hole River Corridor	C	68,800	26
	4. Blackfoot (See Missoula FO)	C	340,800	19
	5. Boulder River	B	264,400	5
	6. Clancy/Marysville	C	269,100	19
	7. Elkhorn Mountains	C	471,600	14
	8. Fleecer Mountains	C	284,300	6
	9. Hoodoo (See Missoula FO)	C	389,400	3
	10. McCartney/Rochester	C	273,600	43
	11. North Hills	B	32,300	20
	12. Pipestone	C	369,300	11
	13. Scratchgravel Hills	B	58,600	12
	14. Sleeping Giant/Sheep Creek	C	11,600	95
	15. Spokane Hills and North	B	151,200	4
	16. Three Forks	C	356,100	8
	17. Wise River Townsite	B	10,100	14
	18. Bozeman/Livingston Scattered Tracts	A	526,400	<1
Dillon	1. Beaverhead Mountains	B	743,300	4
	2. Beaverhead/Jefferson	A	937,500	4
	3. Big Hole River Corridor	C	68,800	26
	4. Big Sheep/Medicine Lodge Backcountry Byway	B	96,100	48
	5. Blacktail Mountains	C	34,600	62
	6. Blacktail/Horse Prairie	C	593,300	39
	7. Centennial	C	505,800	27
	8. East Madison	C	359,600	2
	9. Gravelly Mountains	C	556,600	6
	10. Madison Valley	A	352,000	5
	11. McCartney/Rochester	C	273,600	43
	12. North Rubys	D	26,800	92
	13. SE Foothills/Pioneers	C	199,100	45
	14. Sweetwater/Ruby	C	295,300	28
	15. Tendoy Mountains	C	131,700	33
	16. Tobacco Root Mountains	C	289,900	10
	17. Wise River Townsite	B	10,100	14
Lewistown	1. Judith	B	172,300	13
	2. Little Snowy Mountains	B	75,000	12
	3. Missouri Breaks	C	1,463,700	46
	4. North and South Moccasins	B	14,900	31
	5. Prairie Grass/Brush & Agricultural Lands	B	19,401,800	3
	6. Rocky Mountain Front	C	82,800	17

TABLE 1 MONTANA/DAKOTAS FIRE MANAGEMENT ZONES (CONTINUED)				
Field Office	**Fire Management Zone**	**Category**	**Size (acres)**	**% BLM**
Malta	1. Grass & Range Lands	B	4,913,700	37
	2. Little Rocky Mountains, Timber	B	65,200	46
	3. Missouri Breaks Uplands	C	376,300	66
Miles City	1. Cedar Breaks	B	122,000	49
	2. Custer National Forest	C	1,804,500	8
	3. Knowlton-Locate	B	36,200	35
	4. Missouri-Musselshell River Breaks	C	483,000	34
	5. Mixed Grass Prairie Sagebrush	B	23,020,300	9
	6. Rural Interface	B	232,700	13
	7. Special Management Areas	C	95,000	98
Missoula	1. Blackfoot	C	340,800	19
	2. Clark Fork Front	B	205,700	7
	3. Flintrock	B	521,500	4
	4. Hoodoo	C	389,400	8
North Dakota	1. North Dakota Resource Area	B	59,100*	
South Dakota	2. Exemption Area	B	22,400	24
	3. Fort Meade Recreation Area ACEC	B	6,700	97
	4. Remainder of SD Field Office	B	268,900**	

*There are 59,100 acres of BLM land across North Dakota.
**There are 268,900 acres of BLM land in the remainder of the South Dakota Field Office.

TABLE 2 SUMMARY COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES	
ALTERNATIVE A: PAST MANAGEMENT	**ALTERNATIVE B: PROPOSED MANAGEMENT**
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLANS (RMPs): RMPs would not be amended at this time concerning fire management.	**RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLANS (RMPs):** RMPs would be amended where appropriate to be consistent with the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and proposed fire management plan. SEE INDIVIDUAL FIELD OFFICE FIRE MANAGEMENT PLANS FOR SPECIFIC GUIDANCE.
WILDLAND FIRE SUPPRESSION: Aggressive initial attack would be taken on all fires that occur on or threaten BLM lands. Wildland fire generally would not be used to accomplish land use and resource management objectives.	**WILDLAND FIRE SUPPRESSION:** The following areas and values would be protected from wildland fire on BLM-administered lands: buildings and structures; oil and gas fields and related facilities; coal mines and related facilities; rock art, cultural sites, and historic structures; power lines; communities; important wildlife habitat; campgrounds and other developed recreation areas; forested areas where potential loss of key ecosystem components is high; lands having intermingled public, state, and private ownership where there are currently no agreements for using wildfire as a resource management tool; and other areas identified through continued public involvement in fire planning efforts. To reduce wildland fire suppression costs and to minimize risk to firefighters in B, C, and D areas, fires may be allowed to burn up to natural fuel breaks where and when it is reasonable and beneficial to resource values. **Category A and B areas**: Appropriate suppression would involve rapid response, use of appropriate suppression techniques and tools. Full suppression may be required to prevent unacceptable resource damage or to prevent loss of life and property. **Category C areas**: Since fire may be desired to help manage the ecosystem, suppression may be less aggressive. Minimal impact suppression ("Light-on-the-land") methods would be applied where it is anticipated that the use of heavy equipment to suppress wildland fires would cause more adverse impacts than the fire itself. Examples may be Wilderness Study Areas, designated Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, and designated areas of important cultural values. **Category D areas**: Appropriate management response to natural ignitions may be to monitor the fire and allow it to burn to achieve desired resource objectives. SEE INDIVIDUAL FIELD OFFICE FIRE MANAGEMENT PLANS FOR SPECIFIC GUIDANCE.

TABLE 2 SUMMARY COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES (continued)	
ALTERNATIVE A: PAST MANAGEMENT	**ALTERNATIVE B: PROPOSED MANAGEMENT**
PRESCRIBED FIRE: The use of prescribed fire could be used to accomplish resource objectives in partnership with private landowners, BLM permittees, other agencies and Indian Tribes, and private groups and organizations. Wildland fires would not be allowed to burn, even if it is "in prescription". Some planning decisions limit the area to be treated with prescribed fire.	**PRESCRIBED FIRE:** Prescribed fire could be used in designated areas to accomplish resource objectives in partnership with private landowners, BLM permittees, other agencies and Indian Tribes, and private groups and organizations. If there is a wildland fire in a prescribed fire area when weather, fuel, safety factors, and other conditions are favorable for burning (that is, the fire is "in prescription"), the wildland fire could be allowed to burn subject to reasonable controls as long as the fire is meeting the management objectives and constraints that would have applied to a prescribed fire. Prescribed fires may be used to create fuel breaks where lack of fire has caused fuel build-ups that increase the potential for destructive wildfires. Typically, prescribed fires would be most appropriate in the early spring and late fall when vegetation is dormant, temperatures are cooler, and there is higher ground moisture. **Category A areas**: Prescribed fire would not be used. **Category B, C, and D areas**: Prescribed fires may be used to reduce hazardous fuels and to meet other resource objectives. SEE INDIVIDUAL FIELD OFFICE FIRE MANAGEMENT PLANS FOR SPECIFIC GUIDANCE.
OTHER FUELS MANAGEMENT: Other treatments for reducing hazardous fuels include pre- commercial thinning, commercial thinning, building fuel breaks, removing material (chipping slash piles or making it available for firewood), building access roads for fire equipment, developing water sources for fire suppression, and chemical treatments. In forest lands, large trees would continue to be harvested and shade tolerant species would be allowed to fill the understory. On rangelands, livestock grazing would reduce the build-up of fuels.	**OTHER FUELS MANAGEMENT:** Other treatments for reducing hazardous fuels include pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning, building fuel breaks, removing material (chipping slash piles or making it available for firewood), building access roads for fire equipment, developing water sources for fire suppression, and chemical treatments. Prescribed fire and other methods could be used to reduce dangerous buildup of fuels. Wildland fire could be allowed to burn where understory fuels have been reduced below dangerous levels and where, if left untreated, ladder type vegetation poses a fuel build-up risk. Prescribed fires could be used to remove fuel build-ups, mimicking the cycle of natural fire. In forest lands, thinning may be used to clear choked understories of densely grown, shade-tolerant species. On rangelands, livestock grazing could be managed to allow enough fuels to build up to carry prescribed fire especially where woody species have encroached, out-competing native perennial grasses and forbes. SEE INDIVIDUAL FIELD OFFICE FIRE MANAGEMENT PLANS FOR SPECIFIC GUIDANCE.

Anticipated Levels of Activity

Part of Alternative B would involve identifying projects (mechanical and prescribed fire) with the objective to reduce hazardous fuels near interface areas as well as other projects with the objective to reduce hazardous fuels.

Comparing the anticipated levels of activities for the two alternatives provides a basis for impact analysis and better shows the anticipated differences between the two alternatives. Table 3 displays the comparison of anticipated levels of activities between the two alternatives.

TABLE 3 COMPARISON OF ANTICIPATED AVERAGE ANNUAL LEVEL OF ACTIVITY

ACTION/TREATMENT	ALTERNATIVE A	ALTERNATIVE B
Wildland fires (average number and BLM acres burned)	77 fires; 9,068 acres. Number, damage, and cost of suppression would increase.	Similar to A in the short term; acres burned and intensity of fires would gradually decrease as hazardous fuel loads are reduced. Damage and cost of suppression should decrease in areas treated.
Acres of rehabilitation	unknown, but related to the number of acres burned by wildfire	Same as A in the short term; eventually the number of acres treated should be less than with Alternative A since wildfire on treated areas should require less rehabilitation.
Prescribed fires (annual average number and acres treated)	10 fires; 2200 acres. Some RMPs limit the acres treated with prescribed fires.	The number and total acres treated would increase. Acreage limitations on the use of prescribed fire would be removed.
Projects with the objective to reduce fuels near interface areas	0	The number of projects and acres treated would increase dramatically. 91 priority interface areas with hazardous fuels were identified in FY 2001.
Projects with an objective to reduce hazardous fuels	0	The number of projects and acres treated would increase dramatically.
Projects to meet other resource objective.	0	The number of projects and acres treated would increase.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

This section describes the resources and values that could be affected by fire management decisions on public lands. Also summarized in this section are the environmental consequences that are anticipated to occur as a result of fire (both wildland and prescribed fire). A summary description of the land and vegetation types and fire effects on these vegetation types is compiled from detailed information about fire effects on specific vegetation types. The environmental effects of prescribed burning and other vegetation treatments on other resources and values are summarized from the 1991 Final Environmental Impact Statement on Vegetation Treatment on BLM Lands (USDI, BLM).

Critical Elements of the Human Environment

The following elements of the human environment are subject to requirements specified in statute, regulations, or executive order. Past management plans (Alternative A) have not always considered critical elements when developing fire management objectives or guidance relative to wildland fire suppression or rehabilitation or for prescribed burning.