Seminoe Mountains Vegetation Treatments:

Habitat treatments including vegetation treatments are authorized and have been taking place in the Seminoe Mountain range and surrounding areas for the last 10 years in the form of broadcast prescribed fire and associated mechanical preparatory treatments. Treatments in proximity to identified Communities at Risk (CAR) require a high degree of control, necessitating a higher reliance on mechanical methods. In order to address threats to identified CARs and values at risk, aid in reducing large fire costs, improve response to wildfires, maintain previous investments, provide for firefighter and public safety, and restore resilient landscapes, the proposed projects would continue to treat vegetation on federal lands in the Seminoe Mountains with an emphasis on mechanical treatments. Proposed vegetation treatments would consist of removing encroaching conifer species in mixed mountain shrub and aspen stands, removal of dead material, and creation of fuel-breaks along linear features (access roads, riparian drainages).

Goal:

Improve and increase habitat for bighorn sheep and other grazing ungulates in the Seminoe Mountain Range. Reduce and remove conifer encroachment from the proposed treatment area and promote vegetation types more common and appropriate to the naturally occurring ecosystem and create conditions that promote natural regeneration of the species. These vegetation types would include mixed seral stages of sagebrush/mountain shrub grasslands, young to mature aged aspen stands, healthy riparian zones, healthy limber pine woodlands, and ponderosa savanna stand types. Set a portion of the designated target units back to early seral stages of development. Improve habitat for browsing ungulates within upland sagebrush/mixed mountain shrub communities, aspen stands, and riparian zones.

Objectives:

Treatment of live and dead vegetation within 3,415 acres of upland and riparian habitat in designated treatment polygons in the Morgan creek drainage. Target and remove up to 100% of juniper and limber pine from Phase I and Phase II encroached upland polygons to improve mountain shrub habitat. Leave 80% of live junipers and limber pine within the established upland woodland communities (Phase III) regardless of their age or size class. Treat overall conifer encroachment within aspen stands and riparian areas (defined as 20 feet on either side of the channel and green-line within perennial, ephemeral, and intermittent riparian drainages) within the target polygons. Retain ponderosa pine (Pinus ponderosa) by leaving all individual trees where possible, but especially those over 8” DBH (Diameter Breast Height).

Treatment Method/Prescription Development:

Mechanical treatment of encroaching conifer species in aspen stands and mixed mountain shrub stands would involve both manual and limited mechanized methods where appropriate. Mechanized treatment would be constrained to small areas accessible to equipment, almost exclusively adjacent to fuel-break locations on mostly flat terrain, constricted by the generally steep and rocky ridgelines and hillsides which dominate the project boundary. Manual treatments would be the dominant, preferred treatment occurring on steep terrain and within riparian areas.

Manual treatment would include lop and scatter and thin and pile methods. The lop and scatter method involves felling individual tree and leaving the slash. It is utilized on upland and riparian polygons where the overall density of the target species is relatively low. Although not anticipated for larger scale treatments, the process can also be utilized where a fuel-bed needs to be prepared to carry fire through a target unit in a prescribed burn (such as an aspen stand.) After dropping the trees, the stems are de-limbed, possibly "bucked" or cut the boles to shorter lengths, and the remaining material scattered in the immediate vicinity. Slash would be bucked and de-limbed so material does not extend 1-2' above ground level, or above the height of the surrounding vegetation, whichever is lower.

Some portions of the project area, because of high stem densities, would require construction of slash piles from the slash material, which would need to be removed afterwards through burning. Piles would be constructed on sites where high densities of encroaching conifers would result in unacceptable levels of slash and dramatically increase the hazardous fuels lying on the ground. Vegetation in the proposed project area where thin and pile operations would be located include thick stands of conifer adjacent to structures and other values where complete removal of the fuels is desired. Thin and pile would also be utilized in the understory of Ponderosa pine stands where the desired landscape following treatment would be the complete removal of understory ladder fuels and most large woody debris which could contribute to mortality in mature Ponderosa pine in the event of a wildfire. Slash piles would be removed by burning, usually a year after treatment during the late fall/winter. Piles are burned according to a prescription developed in a burn plan when surrounding vegetation is unavailable to carry fire.