Greater Sheeprocks Sage-Grouse Habitat Restoration and Hazardous Fuels Treatment

This is a multi-partner effort designed to protect, enhance and expand sagebrush habitat for greater sage-grouse, mule deer and other sagebrush dependent species.

Objectives

1) Protect, enhance and expand sagebrush habitat at the landscape level for greater sage-grouse and other sagebrush dependent species level to ensure the long-term stability and persistence of the Sheeprocks greater sage-grouse population;
2) Create travel corridors for greater sage-grouse between brood rearing and winter habitat;
3) Mitigate the three major threats to sagebrush habitat: fire, conifer expansion and invasive species;
4) Improve ecosystem function and resiliency by removing competition from trees and promoting the growth of sagebrush and other key vegetation;
5) Reduce fuel loading and the risk of high severity wildfire by managing juniper expansion and infilling.

Background

Healthy sagebrush ecosystems should consist of a diverse array of plants and support a wide variety of wildlife species. However, sagebrush habitat throughout the Great Basin is being degraded due to juniper expansion and infilling. Juniper woodlands have increased substantially throughout the Intermountain West over the past 150 years. Prior to 1860 sagebrush-steppe communities were dominant and trees were virtually absent. Where juniper dominates they out-compete understory vegetation for light, moisture, and nutrients eventually resulting in nearly complete loss of sagebrush and other key species.

Additionally, excessive fuel buildup can eventually lead to high severity wildfire which may further degrade the ecosystem by promoting weed dominance. Degraded sagebrush habitat can be improved by removing junipers and reseeding with perennial species where desirable understory species are lacking. This proactive approach reduces the risk of catastrophic wildfire and promotes healthy sagebrush ecosystems that are critical for sagebrush dependent wildlife like greater sage-grouse and mule deer.

Purpose

The Sheeprock population of greater sage-grouse is in jeopardy. Declining population trends years have left managers with little choice but to augment the population with translocated birds. Part of the process of stabilizing the population will be vegetation treatments to improve habitat. Key threats to greater sage-grouse include juniper expansion, invasive species and fire. Since 2004, the BLM and partners have done extensive vegetation treatments throughout the Greater Sheeprocks area to reduce fire threat, remove expanding juniper and restore ecosystem resiliency. Within the last three years nearly 10,000 acres of BLM and Private land were treated to remove juniper and expand greater sage-grouse habitat. Current projects are designed to build on previous efforts by expanding useable habitat and creating corridors between nesting/brood rearing habitat and winter range. To accomplish this, juniper will be removed in select areas using a combination of hand crews with chainsaws (lop & scatter) and mastication (bullhog) which shreds trees on site resulting in mulch that helps stabilize soils and promote seed germination and growth. Seeding will occur where perennial understory is lacking. A total of 3,464 acres were treated during 2017 with 3,416 acres being seeded. This year 7,406 acres are identified for treatment with 4,889 acres being seeded. Treatments will occur between October 2018 and March 2019 in three project areas: Erickson Pass, Cow Hollow, and Cherry Creek.

For more information please contact Fire Management Specialist Erik Valdez at (801) 977-4300

Scan for more information on Pinyon/Juniper expansion in the Great Basin.