

Jim Sage Vegetation Treatment Directly Responds to National Fire Plan Goals

When the landscape of south central Idaho's Snake River Plain was historically working properly, one could see juniper trees along the rocky Jim Sage hillsides that are the backdrop of Cottonwood Basin, with sagebrush alone blanketing the valley. Fire would burn through the area, ultimately renewing vegetation and wildlife habitat for the next 50-75 year cycle of growth.

But with fire suppression and historic livestock grazing playing key roles in the story of the Jim Sage area, sagebrush is now far from alone in the Cottonwood Basin. Juniper has encroached into the valley and now dominates one of the few remaining areas capable of supporting sagebrush-steppe habitat in the Idaho Bureau of Land Management's Twin Falls District. During the past 30 years, average fire size in the mature junipers of the Jim Sage area has been less than five acres, clearly not enough to be doing the job of renewing the landscape.

Responding to these issues, fire use specialist Rance Marquez looked to the National Fire Plan goals of reducing hazardous fuels and restoring fire adapted ecosystems. Marquez began planning for a vegetation treatment in the Jim Sage area in January of 2002. A ten year plan was completed that will eventually treat up to 28,000 acres, of which 12,000 acres would entail heavy treatment such as chaining or prescribed fire. The goal of the project is not to eliminate juniper altogether, but to provide for correct juniper management and maintenance on the hillside rather than in the valley. The first on-the-ground work, 1,200 acres of juniper chaining, was recently conducted in December of 2004.

"This project is being implemented slowly because we don't want to produce whole scale changes on the entire landscape," Marquez said. "With incremental treatments we are trying to ensure the area can provide habitat for various species over the long term."

With project work now actually visible on the landscape, both negative and positive responses have been received, though the majority of feedback is supportive. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game and Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, among others, have expressed their support of the effort.



Due to fire suppression and historic livestock grazing, juniper encroachment has become a priority issue in Idaho BLM's Twin Falls District. The Jim Sage Vegetation Treatment will spend the next ten years working to restore the landscape to correct working order.

"This isn't a fuels project versus a wildlife project," Marquez said. "The distinction between the two is not exclusive and one does not take priority over the other in this project. We're trying to restore a healthy landscape that will be good for both fuels and wildlife."



This is a December 2004 photo of Cottonwood Basin after juniper was knocked down and piled for slash burning next fall.

Success of the project can be accurately judged only with the passing of time. “As humans we can’t judge the success of a knee surgery the day after the procedure has been completed. It takes months and years before we can really gauge the effectiveness of the surgery,” Marquez explains. “That same principle of course applies with vegetation treatment. Just as it would be with Mother Nature running her course, it will be years down the line that we can look at the landscape and see it’s success through renewal and restoration.”

The Jim Sage Vegetation Treatment Project should enable future generations to look across the Cottonwood Basin landscape of Idaho’s Snake River Plain, see an area that is again working properly, and know that BLM’s Twin Falls District fulfilled its mission to “sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public lands, for use and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

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