

Jim Sage Vegetation Treatment Idaho - 2005

The historic landscape of southcentral Idaho's Snake River Plain featured juniper trees along the rocky Jim Sage hillsides – the backdrop of Cottonwood Basin – and sagebrush blanketed the valley. Fire would burn through the area, renewing vegetation and wildlife habitat for the next 50- to 75-year cycle of growth.

But fire suppression and livestock grazing in the Jim Sage area over the decades changed things; 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 BLM's Twin Falls District. For the last 30 years, average fires in the junipers of the Jim Sage area have been under five acres, not nearly large enough to renew the landscape.

Fire use specialist Rance Marquez looked to the National Fire Plan goals of reducing hazardous fuels and restoring fire-adapted ecosystems, and early in 2002 began planning vegetation treatment in the Jim Sage area. A 10-year plan will eventually treat up to 28,000 acres, 12,000 acres of which will use heavy treatment such as chaining or prescribed fire. The goal is not to eliminate juniper altogether, but to provide sound juniper management and maintenance on the hillsides rather than in the valley. The first on-the-ground work – 1,200 acres of juniper chaining, was done in December of 2004.



Fire suppression and grazing allowed juniper encroachment in the area. The 10-year Jim Sage project will restore the landscape.

“This project is being implemented slowly because we don't want to produce wholesale 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 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 for the effort.

“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.”

Success of the project can be accurately judged only with the passing of time. Marquez says it will be a long-term project with the results apparent after several years.

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 functioning naturally, 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.”



December 2004 - Cottonwood Basin after juniper was knocked down and piled for slash burning next fall.

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