

BLM News

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Elko Field Office, 3900 East Idaho Street, Elko, Nevada 89801 (775) 753-0200

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CONTACT: Mike Brown
(775) 753-0386
e-mail: Mike_Brown@nv.blm.gov

LARGE-SCALE SEEDING PROJECT COMPLETED



Aerial view of the Palomino Ridge Seeding portion of the Spruce Allotment Project adjacent to U.S. Highway 93, south of Wells, Nevada. The light-colored areas in the photo show the mosaic pattern of the Palomino Ridge Seeding which totaled 1,165 acres.

Photo by Steve Foree, Nevada Department of Wildlife

A partnership made up of ranchers, sportsmen, Nevada Department of Wildlife, and the BLM Elko Field Office recently saw the completion of a multi-year seeding and fencing project on 7,500 acres of public land in Elko County.

For nearly 40 years, grazing, wildlife, and wild horse issues were controversial on the 800,000-acre Spruce allotment about 30 miles south of Wells, Nevada. The allotment – then the largest in northeastern Nevada – covered an area from Ruby Valley to the Goshute Mountains. In 1998, BLM completed the allotment evaluation and multiple-use decision process for the Spruce Allotment. One of the problems identified was that the winter grazing range on the Spruce

Allotment was in poor condition from a variety of factors. In 1999, as part of the selected management actions identified through the process, a division fence was built across the valley, splitting the allotment into the Spruce and Valley Mountain Allotments

BLM Range Management Specialist Leticia Lister described, “The division fence was an administrative boundary to make operations easier for the two grazing permittees and for the BLM. With the fence in place, the BLM now had to deal the problem of winter range condition and start implementing rest of the multiple-use decision. The grazing season is from November to May and the April/May use is during the critical growing period and is the most detrimental on the white sage vegetation. White sage is valuable forage for livestock and antelope. Large wild horse herds in the area were compounding this forage issue as well.”

“In the early discussions during the allotment evaluation and multiple-use decision process, one aspect of the problem was what to do with the cows for that crucial growing period of April and May,” added Lister. “We talked about seeding areas within the allotment to provide spring forage so that the cows could come off the winter range and give them a place to go in the spring. If we forced livestock off the allotment, would we be moving the problem somewhere else?”

During the allotment evaluation process, a series of meetings were held with the permittees, Nevada Department of Wildlife specialists, and BLM staff. The goal of the meetings was to figure out solutions to a number of issues such as how to do the seedings, what kind of species to plant, where to plant, how many acres would need to be seeded, how to deal with wildlife issues, and how to pay for it all.

Lister continued, “The group decided that 7500 acres needed to be seeded. That was based on the carrying capacity of the winter range. For example, if the winter range supported X number of cows from November to March, then we needed to provide enough forage to support the same cows for April and May. Because we knew that wildlife and wild horses would realistically be there as well, we added a buffer. Instead of 3 animal-unit-months per acre of seeding, we seeded at the rate of 4 animal-unit-months per acre to compensate for horses and wildlife. That was a joint idea of the permittees and BLM. The seedings were not intended to increase overall use by livestock on the allotments; rather, they were to provide a place for livestock to go during the critical part of the growing season while reducing use on the native winter grazing range.”

“The seeding projects began in 2002 and were completed this Spring. The seedings were done as six separate projects and are all adjacent to U.S. Highway 93 south of Wells, Nevada. Crested wheatgrass was the primary species planted. Russian wild rye, four wing salt bush, small burnett, alfalfa, and forage kochia were planted as well. The reason for this mix was to provide a diversity of species for both livestock and wildlife. The planting was done using several techniques

including disking, drilling, brush beating, roller chopping, and broadcast seeding. The forage kochia was aurally seeded from a helicopter,” Lister added.

Nevada Department of Wildlife biologist Steve Foree commented, “This has been a challenging project. The area is critical winter range for the East Humboldt deer herd of about 10,000 animals. Elk, antelope and sage grouse are also found in the area. By working up front as part of the design team, we were able to pick treatment areas which would have the least impact on wildlife. We were also able to design each treatment to create a mosaic, rather than just have a large block of crested wheatgrass. Participating in the project has been a good learning experience and will help set the stage for future projects.”

“The first seedings that were done in 2002 were monitored in 2003,” Lister commented. “All the species are coming up. We give them at least two years to establish and the earliest grazing on the areas will be in Spring 2005 if everything goes well and we get cooperation from the weather.”

“The cost for project has been nearly \$1 million which includes labor, in-kind donations, materials, and seed. Fuels treatment funds helped pay the cost as well because the seedings serve a dual purpose as a fuels reduction project and they create giant fire breaks. The grazing permittees Ken Jones and Jared Sorenson have been key players in the project. They’ve shared in the cost providing equipment and labor. By working together, we’ve taken a potentially controversial project and turned into a positive one,” Lister concluded.

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