State Director's Comments: Partnerships Leverage Rangeland Restoration

The idea to embark on a restoration effort for the Great Basin was born by fire. After assessing the devastating impacts from the 1999 fires in Nevada which burned close to 1.6 million acres in this state alone, the BLM introduced a plan called the Great Basin Restoration Initiative (GBRI). The concepts introduced were not entirely new, but the BLM's commitment to address resource issues that have long been ignored was new. We are nearly three years into implementation, and it's fair to ask some questions about the GBRI. What has been accomplished? How does the GBRI tie into the national fire plan, efforts to improve sage grouse habitat, and other related efforts? And what is the support level from the agency and pertinent stakeholders?

Last September, the BLM prepared a report on our progress called Hand to Nature: Progress to Date. The report is available at **www.nv.blm.gov/GBRI/greatbasin.htm**. A second report will be issued this fall highlighting regional actions that have been implemented this year to support the goals of the GBRI.

We are proud to report that yes, the GBRI is alive and well, and on the ground progress is being made. We are optimistic about future funding, given the support from all who care about this unique region of our nation. While admitting we do not have all the answers, we are confident that BLM employees and our many partners have the knowledge and skills to apply known techniques and learn from experience to do the job. We remain convinced the GBRI will make a huge difference in the Great Basin and help improve the overall health of our public lands in the West.

It is time, in fact, past time that we pay attention to the expansion of pinon and juniper into historic rangelands. We must take more than a casual note of the general decline of aspen and sagebrush communities. It is time to seriously assess the impacts on our native shrub lands from invasive weeds and non-native grasses. Nearly 25 million acres in the Great Basin, which includes parts of Utah, Oregon, Idaho, California, and most of Nevada, are now dominated or threatened by cheatgrass and noxious weeds. No wonder The Nature Conservancy ranked the Great Basin as the third most imperiled ecoregion in the country because of the number of species at risk.

Our efforts to date and those planned for the future will not rid the Great Basin of cheatgrass and noxious weeds. It's already too late for that. Nor will it restore the ecology to what it was in the 1800s or before. Our efforts are focused on maintaining or reestablishing the plant communities that are healthy and capable of sustaining wildlife populations, clean water and air, and traditional multiple uses of the land. These efforts will also increase the plant communities' resiliency to disturbances such as fire.

When we began implementing this initiative, we gave priority to protecting the remaining healthy native plant communities. That priority continues today. For those areas that are adversely affected by wildland fires, we have successfully worked with the agriculture industry to ensure adequate supplies of native seeds to help with rehabilitation and to meet biodiversity goals. We are beginning to restore crucial watersheds with high potential for success, and we are working with public land stakeholders to develop consistent criteria for prioritizing restorationwork. All along, we have been working with the University of Nevada, The Nature Conservancy, and state and federal agencies to promote scientific studies to fill knowledge gaps and assure implementation success. Future funding will be spent in areas with the most critical resource values and highest potential for success.

This work is too important, and too expansive, for any one agency or interest group. The GBRI is foremost a partnership among public land managers and stakeholders as well as private landowners. Just two of the outstanding partnerships working on restoration are the Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition, whose membership include a wide array of public land interest groups, and the University of Nevada, Reno.

Restoring the Great Basin is probably one of the most significant resource management challenges any of us will face in our lifetime. How we handle it will say much to new generations about our ability, vision, and most of all, our stewardship of the land. By working with all stakeholders, we can make a real difference in assuring long-term resource and economic sustainability.

–Bob Abbey

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