

Partnership Highlight: 5 Creeks Rangeland Restoration Project

Did you know the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Burns District is involved in many partnerships with a variety of groups, agencies, and schools? Here's one terrific example (content courtesy of Oregon State University's Oregon Explorer natural resources library):

On the north side of Steens Mountain an ambitious ecosystem restoration effort began in 2008. Called the Five Creeks Rangeland Restoration Project, it covers almost 75,000 acres of public and private land. The goal of the project is to restore sagebrush steppe and riparian plant communities, improving ecological conditions for wildlife, fish and livestock across various ownership boundaries. Treatment focuses on removing western juniper, a desert conifer species that is spreading across the landscape and smothering out other desert plants. The project is remarkable because of its geographic scale and numerous partnerships – few other restoration efforts have successfully treated such a large area with one coordinated effort.

The BLM manages about two-thirds of the land within the project boundary, and private in-holdings account for the other third. Partners in the effort are as wide-ranging and diverse as this exceptional landscape, and include: six area ranches, Oregon State University, Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, Harney County Watershed Council, Harney County Soil and Water Conservation District, State of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Steens Mountain Advisory Council, Harney County Court, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, SageSTEP, U.S. Geological Survey, and various wildfire programs across Oregon -- and even into Idaho and Nevada too!

Like in much of eastern Oregon, the spread of juniper in the Five Creeks area originates with the region's settlement. In the 1880s, Europeans introduced livestock that grazed the area heavily. Livestock reduced grasses and other plants that catch fire easily and help wildfire spread. Over time, junipers out-competed those fine fuels and fewer wildfires occurred. This interruption in the fire regime gave the juniper a competitive edge, and it began expanding outward from isolated, fire-protected stands of old growth trees. Both ranchers and conservationists view juniper encroachment as a threat. Thick juniper stands can shade out understory grasses that provide forage, increase soil erosion, block animal movement, and even alter groundwater levels and stream flows.

To date, this project can boast many exceptional accomplishments including: 22,746 acres of juniper cut in prep for broadcast burning; 836 acres of juniper in specialized habitats cut and piled for pile burning; 45,275 acres prescribed burned; 7,109 acres seeded after burning; trees planted along 7 stream miles; grazing excluded from 4 stream miles; weed treatments on 2,174 acres; 200 acres of bitterbrush seedlings planted; and 2 stream road-crossing improvements. While Five Creeks monitoring will take place over the next several years, everyone can agree that the spectacular results so far will become a model that can be used at other sites. A model that represents cooperation, community involvement, and the recognition that we're all in this together!

