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Helping the Range in High School Shop Class

Adrian, Ore. – Walking into Anne-Marie Chamberlain’s shop class is like walking into a full-fledged welding business.

Welders and grinders fill the air with high-pitched cracks, mechanical whines, white-hot flashes and the smell of burning metal.

It is hard to believe it is actually a school room with kids as young as 14.

For weeks, the shop students at Adrian High School in southeastern Oregon have worked at building utilization cages -- small, pyramid-shaped wire frames designed to help the BLM measure the effects of cattle grazing by excluding small patches of land.

When entering class, students do not pause for instruction or introduction. They confidently proceed straight to the shop stations and get to work.

Chamberlain attributes this scene to the nature of the local area. Adrian, with a population of less than 200, is in rural Malheur County. This is wide-open country. The county accounts for almost 10,000 square miles with only 30,000 residents – a prime scenario for cattle grazing.

Some students like sophomore Tristen Spires, have been welding and crafting for years. His dad owns a construction business in town and he said he has always been very hands-on.

“To help the BLM do research, it’s kind of cool — and it’s good for the school,” said Spires.

“This feels good, knowing your skills are being put to use — it’s not just grades,” said another student, Nelson Amaral.

This cage-welding collaboration got its start when Russ Bond, a range technician for the BLM who has children attending Adrian, approached Chamberlain and asked if her class would be interested in making 100 of the triangular steel contraptions.

“I laughed and said, ‘I don’t know if we can do 100, but we can start with 25, if you can get me the materials,’” said Chamberlain.

The materials arrived this spring, and the students were enthusiastic from the get-go.

“We had just learned welds, so the timing was perfect,” said Chamberlain.

Once the cages make it out onto the range, information collected on livestock use can hopefully lead to good decisions about rangeland health.

It is also providing good dividends for the students at Adrian who have a closer affiliation with public lands than the typical American high school student.

“A lot of the kids are familiar with public lands,” said Chamberlain. “They hunt, they fish and we’ve studied issues with public lands in our classes.”

Not too long ago, Michele McDaniel, now a BLM supervisory range specialist at the Vale District Office, was in the same Adrian High School shop class learning how to weld.

“My stuff wasn’t being put to use in the real world,” said McDaniel, who now has 15 years of rangeland experience. “The cages that these kids are building will be applied and put to use with actual land management.”

“Maybe this will drive an interest for some of these kids to pursue a career with the BLM or with land management,” added McDaniel.

Like his classmates, sophomore Qim Tolman said the work is fun and he is glad it is being put to use.

“I just hope I can get a good weld that doesn’t fall apart,” he added, with a laugh.

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-BLM-

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