



More cottonwoods planted in the UMRBNM

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It has been a couple of years since the BLM staff from the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument participated in a cottonwood planting event. The weather hampered efforts in 2019 and COVID-19-related issues were to blame in 2020. So, it was with a certain level of excitement that the Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument and the BLM began coordinating a joint planting event this spring along the banks of the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River.

In preparation, the BLM and the Friends staff met near the banks of Arrow Creek where they cut more than 100 cottonwood poles thanks to the generosity of the local landowner, Hugo Turek. The selected poles were 1-1.5 inches in diameter – still young enough to have the ability to easily sprout roots when planted.

The actual planting site is a piece of private land owned by Rick Anderson adjacent to an aging cottonwood gallery on BLM land. Rick and his wife raised their family on the land and their grandchildren love to visit the site each summer to enjoy all that the outdoors and the river have to offer.

The next step was to use the BLM skid steer to auger all the planting holes six-seven feet deep over the span of two and a half days. In an area where the water tables can fluctuate more than ten feet in a season, deep holes allow the cottonwood starts to reach the stable water table sooner. It was a difficult and, at times, frustrating process to select drill sites suitable for the cottonwoods. They had to be protected from the ice jams but also out of the thick band of cobble and rock deposited over years and years by the river. Some of the initial drill sites had to be abandoned, and the number of plantings dropped from 150 down to 118 finished holes.

This planting effort would not have been possible without support of many different people and organizations. Additional materials for the planting event such as buckets and fencing were provided by the Friends or donated by local businesses and staged the days leading up to the big event.

Finally, on March 20, more than 25 volunteers gathered along the banks of the Missouri River just

downstream from Decision Point where Lewis and Clark hesitated before deciding in which direction they would travel. The planting site was tucked in an area between two aging cottonwood groves with no cottonwood trees younger than 60 years old in sight.

Over the next eight hours, volunteers planted the 118 trees, starting the next generation of cottonwood galleries. The planting efforts included not only planting the cottonwood poles but also installing PVC pipes for future watering efforts and fencing to protect against wildlife. Several volunteers had noted the signs of a porcupine in the area – bark stripped off the adjacent Russian olive and chokecherry. To date, the BLM and Friends have planted more than 850 trees during events just like this one.

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Volunteers pause after planting more than 100 cottonwood trees along the Upper Missouri River this spring. Photo courtesy of Friends of the Missouri Breaks

The future of these young cottonwood trees will be determined by their ability to develop strong root systems that reach the permanent water table, and the next two years are critical to their success. To improve the odds, two interns from the Friends of the Monument will make weekly watering trips to the planting site throughout the summer. Though this process is labor intensive, inventories of the past project sites have shown it to be worthwhile. After two years, surveys of the plant sites have shown that 45-82% of the newly planted trees survived and developed roots to the water table.



Photos courtesy of Friends of the Missouri Breaks

