

# Restore

*re store, vt, 1. to return something to its proper owner or place; 2. to bring something back to an earlier and better condition; 3. to reestablish or put back something that was once but is no longer there. Encarta® World English Dictionary® 1999*

## Healthy Fires?

This issue of *Restore* focuses on the use of prescribed fire to restore impaired habitats and maintain healthy landscapes. Many people may ask, "Do we really need to 'burn' landscapes in order to 'save' them?" The answer in many cases is a resounding yes!

Fire has been a natural part of New Mexico landscapes since the beginning of time. It plays a natural role in grasslands, woodlands and forests by keeping invasive and encroaching species in check and invigorating native grass, shrub and forb species.

Cover photo by Ty Bryson

BLM

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The BLM works with participating landowners and other partners to use fire as a tool to prevent restored lands from returning to undesirable conditions. Prescribed fires could be conducted on restored landscapes every 4 to 16 years depending on vegetation type, land uses, weather patterns, and habitat conditions.

The BLM and other agencies are already using fire to help remove salt cedar from riparian areas and to thin overgrown forests and woodlands, but will expand its use in the coming years to maintain restored ecosystems and healthy grasslands, according to Hector Madrid, the BLM's State Fire Management Officer.

We hope you'll be fired up about the use of prescribed burns after reading this issue!

## Restore Fire Management

The BLM's Fire Program has been an integral part of Restore New Mexico efforts, and will be more so as we move from restoration to maintenance.

Many of the first treatments under the Restore program have been chemical treatments in mesquite,

creosote and piñon-juniper vegetation types. Our goal to reduce these encroaching species to historic numbers on the landscape (about 10 percent of plant cover) is in the process of being met.

It's been amazing to see the natural regrowth of grasses in treated areas! Our next step is to maintain these ecosystems as native grasslands or open woodlands and forests to continue the benefits to watersheds, native plants and wildlife, as well as users of our public lands.

Our initial Restore treatments are not one-time actions that we can walk away from and consider the land fixed forever. The BLM and other partners will mimic natural fire processes by re-treating restored areas with prescribed fire.

In addition, when conditions are appropriate, we will consider using what fire people call 'Appropriate Management Response' (AMR) to wildfires, which under very specific



Dense vegetation is cut and piled, then burned, to reduce fire risk to the community of Timberon.

conditions will allow us to have wildfires meet the same objectives we would achieve with prescribed fire. AMR fires will only occur in pre-identified areas where human life, property and other critical resources will not be adversely affected.

The BLM and its partners will be sensitive to all land users when any fire treatments are to be used. Factors such as grazing rotations, hunting seasons, wildlife or plant biological cycles, and smoke impacts will all be factored in. Fire managers will include land users in the planning process when such actions are considered.

**Hector Madrid** – *BLM-New Mexico State Fire Management Officer*

This series of photos, taken near Carlsbad, shows the recovery of native grasslands after a fire.



September 2007



October 2007



August 2008

## 900,000 Acres and Counting!

Restore New Mexico partners have treated, restored and reclaimed 900,000 acres of lands throughout New Mexico since 2005, and will reach their 1,000,000th acre later this year. This is historic not just because of the number of acres involved (and the transformation of entire landscapes), but also because of the support and unprecedented participation in the program by a variety of partners – people who are recruiting even more individuals, agencies and organizations to join the effort.

The BLM and its partners will celebrate the one-millionth acre restored in New Mexico in the summer this year – check the BLM’s website after March 2009 for further details: [www.blm.gov/nm](http://www.blm.gov/nm) ... click on “Restore New Mexico.”

## Updates from the Field

The **Las Cruces District Office** has completed 14,820 acres of creosote treatments in the Jornada area of Sierra County plus 3,682 acres in Luna County since March 2008, plus 200 acres of salt cedar control in Sierra County. The office has also completed 707 acres of thinning in ‘Wildland/Urban Interface’ areas and 6,903 acres of prescribed fire throughout the district.

Pending contracts for work starting in February include 6,500 acres in Otero County (the McGregor Range portion of Otero Mesa), and 29,000 acres of creosote in six

## A Word from Linda Rundell

As this edition of the Restore New Mexico newsletter goes to print we’re celebrating the Senate’s passage of the Omnibus Lands Act which includes establishment of the Snowy River Cave National Conservation Area, the Paleo Trackways National Monument, and the Sabinoso Wilderness. The Act was the culmination of years of effort on the part of many people and I congratulate everyone who was involved in making it happen! While this effort isn’t technically part of the Restore New Mexico, it represents a recognition of the outstanding natural character of these public lands in our state ... our job under Restore is to bring back the iconic landscapes of the American West, which are also great treasures.



I also want to congratulate the recent recipients of the Restore New Mexico award: Dawson Geophysical, Alisa Ogden, and Ray Keller (more info. below). I continue to be amazed and humbled at the dedication, talent and generosity of our partners and employees who are working to restore and improve New Mexico’s landscapes.

The BLM and other partners are in their third year of reintroducing Aplomado falcons on public lands in the southern part of the state. In the northern part of the state, we’re continuing to participate with the New Mexico Game and Fish Department and private sector partners in hopes of acquiring otters from the Northwest to relocate in into the Rio Grande system. Rumor has it that at least one pair of the otters released on Taos Pueblo lands last fall have made it most of the way to Santa Fe!

As the slow but steady creep of cheatgrass threatens to invade more of New Mexico’s native ecosystems, we’re stepping up our efforts to eradicate this troublesome invader. Until recently, our state has been relatively unscathed by the spread of cheatgrass, but it appears to have finally established a foothold and has been reported in nearly all New Mexico counties. It will take a comprehensive effort on the part of all of our partners including the agricultural and petroleum industries and local, state, and federal governments to win this war.

There’ll be dancing in the streets – well, in our BLM offices anyway – when we hit the 1-million-acre milestone in the Restore New Mexico program. Who would have thought, just 4 short years ago, that so many partners would have joined with us in our efforts to restore New Mexico’s degraded rangelands to their historic splendor?! We can’t afford to sit back on our laurels and celebrate too long, however, as there is still so much more to accomplish – so much more grass to grow and so many more watersheds to heal.

- Linda Rundell, BLM-New Mexico State Director

priority watersheds: Salt Basin, Tularosa, Jornada, Mimbres, Gila and Playas. About 26,000 acres of additional work is pending funding from the National Interagency Fire Center for work in Hidalgo Luna and Otero Counties.

The BLM has formed partnerships with livestock operators, the NRCS

(federal EQIP program), Quail Unlimited, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, New Mexico State Land Office the Department of Game and Fish to conduct these efforts.

The BLM’s **Roswell Field Office** is continuing its efforts with grazing permittees and other partners to

## Restore New Mexico Awards

The BLM and the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts are proud to announce three awards given to Restore partners in 2008:

**Dawson Geophysical Company**, which contributed \$50,000 to the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts to help fund grassland restoration and oilfield reclamation efforts near Carlsbad.

**Lisa Ogden**, outgoing president of the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association, who partnered with the BLM's Carlsbad Field Office on one of the earliest prescribed fires to control invasive shrubs in the mid-1980s, followed by others, as well as for helping fund the removal of salt cedar along the Black River.

BLM's own **Ray Keller**, a rangeland management specialist in the Carlsbad Field Office, who worked over his career to build relationships with ranchers, other agencies and groups that led to the phenomenal participation in – and success of – Restore New Mexico in southeastern New Mexico since 2005. As Ray likes to say, the program has been a 31-year overnight success!

Each awardee was presented a limited edition bronze sculpture of an antelope to recognize their outstanding contributions.



December 2008: Jesse Juen, BLM Associate State Director presented a Restore New Mexico Award to Alisa Ogden at the New Mexico Cattle Growers annual meeting.

restore portions of the Pecos River and other riparian areas from salt cedar. In 2008 Roswell staff burned 420 acres of salt cedar extracted and piled along the Pecos River; since 2005 over 1,850 acres of salt cedar has been treated by fire. Native plant communities have responded well to its removal. Cottonwood trees now thrive since

the competition from the invasive salt cedar has been removed.

In 2009, The Roswell Field Office plans to burn 4,500 acres of salt cedar along a 7-mile stretch of the Pecos River floodplain to aid in the reduction of heavy thickets that have encroached in native plant communities. Plans are also

in the works to burn 3,000 acres of creosote that was chemically treated several years earlier near Carrizozo. Since the treatment, grasses have returned to historic levels, and combined with the return fire to

the ecosystem, will keep invasive brush species in check.

The BLM's **Carlsbad Field Office** recently completed a 10,098-acre prescribed fire in cooperation with grazing permittee Tim Higginbottom. The area, 25 miles southeast of Carlsbad, was historically a desert grassland but had become overgrown with invasive mesquite and other brush species.

In 2004, a chemical treatment was applied on 6,500 acres. Native grasses and forbs began to reappear in the coming years. In 2008, fire was applied to the landscape. Before these treatments began, the project area consisted of about 14 percent grasses, 2 percent forbs, and 84 percent shrubs (primarily mesquite). After treatment, grasses increased to 55 percent, forbs to 17 percent, and shrubs decreased to 28 percent. A variety of wildlife has benefitted, including upland game birds,



Salt cedar that had previously been extracted and piled near the Pecos River is burned by BLM fire specialists.

mule deer and raptors. Fire will continue to be used to control shrub encroachment and maintain the grassland.

However, one of the biggest things to happen in the Carlsbad area last year involves Joe Stell. A modest gentleman, lifelong rancher (and leader of his community) as well as serving as a State Representative, Joe served as a model for the ranching community in his early participation in restoration activities with the BLM and other partners.

In March 2008, the **New Mexico Department of Game and Fish** released antelope on Joe's ranch, bringing the species back to an area south of Carlsbad for the first time in over 50 years. In 1992, a treatment on his ranch focused on an overabundance of brush species, encompassing 1,860 acres of land inundated with catclaw and creosote. In 1998, five years following the treatment, an application of fire was prescribed.

Sixteen years after the original treatment, through the continued



March 2008: Five antelope - a buck and four does - are released on Joe Stell's ranch.

use of healthy ranch practices, the rangelands on Stell's ranch have stayed healthy even through the dry years. Now, for the first time in our lifetimes, we can see how the native shortgrass prairie looked to our ancestors, who settled the Pecos River Valley after the Civil War.

And today, antelope are back. Statewide, antelope have increased from a low of about 1,740 in 1916 to more than 35,000 today.

The **Rio Puerco Field Office** has conducted several prescribed fire treatments in the El Malpais National Conservation Area (NCA). The office completed 500 acres of 'blacklining' earlier this year in preparation for aerial ignition of an 8,000-acre burn block in May-June. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish contributed funding through the Sikes Act to improve wildlife habitat, restore the watershed, and restore fire to the landscape.

Recent chemical treatments include 7,100 acres within the NCA in September 2008 to restore

open pinon-juniper woodlands and grasslands; a like amount will be completed in the future. The 15,000-acre project area will be maintained using prescribed fire on a 4- to 7-year rotation.

The **Socorro Field Office** has been working on several multi-year, multi-phase land health projects in the San Pascual and Ladron Mountain areas in Socorro County and Pelona Mountain in Catron County.

The San Pascual burn was an interagency effort that resulted in a successful 14,755-acre burn on BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state and private lands. The benefits of the burn include reducing the encroachment of shrub species into grasslands (especially sage) and improving forage for wildlife. Firefighters use helicopters with a plastic sphere dispenser (PSD) to light the interior of the project area after burning out the vegetation along the perimeter to create a "blackline." This project is part of an on-going effort to restore the natural role of fire in the ecosystem



Prescribed fire reduces the density of sagebrush west of Albuquerque resulting in range and wildlife habitat improvements.



Helicopters and their crews are critical resources for large prescribed burns like Ladrone and San Pascual.

– the area is now scheduled to be burned every 10-20 years to maintain the benefits.

The Ladrone Mountain Burn targeted desert bighorn sheep habitat improvements by reducing predator hiding cover and rejuvenating forage and browse, maintaining and enhancing ponderosa pine stands, and reducing pinon-juniper encroachment. The rugged, roadless area required the use of aerial ignition from a helicopter over the course of three days. The 8,500 acres burned in 2008 compliments previous smaller burns in the area since 2000.

The Pelona Mountain burn is a massive, 140,000-acre prescribed burn project to restore an open woodland/grassland landscape that will benefit deer and elk, and restore the watershed’s natural function. The first phase will include up to 55,000 acres of burns and will continue over the next few years. The Pelona Mountain Burn will be one of the largest prescribed fires ever undertaken in the lower 48 states, and is possible because of the remoteness of the area. In the future, State Forestry

and other partners, including wildlife organizations, may enlarge the scope of this project.

The BLM’s **Farmington Field Office** plans to conduct four prescribed burns in 2009, totaling over

1,000 acres. In the past 4 years, the office has completed over 2,100 acres of burns.

In October 2008 the Field Office treated 31,600 acres of sagebrush in Navajo Community allotments to reduce the amount of sagebrush in grassland ecosystems. The treatments will promote an increase of native grass and forb species to reduce soil erosion, improve watershed function, provide valuable wildlife and livestock forage – and return the areas to a condition where natural fires can maintain the balance between sagebrush and grasslands. The work was funded by BLM and the NRCS [federal EQIP program]. Cooperators included local Navajo communities, the Navajo Nation,

Eastern Navajo Land board, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the New Mexico State Land Office.

The Farmington Field Office has a growing problem from an unwelcome exotic, invasive grass species known as Downy brome, commonly called cheatgrass. It’s a tough competitor with native species and is extremely difficult to control or eradicate. To date, no single method has proven successful in controlling cheatgrass. It thrives after natural or prescribed fires; past uses of herbicides were not very selective; and reseeding of native species was futile due to the early growth and competitiveness of cheatgrass.

In 2007, the BLM approved two new herbicides, Journey and Plateau, to treat cheatgrass. Initial trials show that they can be used to effectively manage cheatgrass while not harming native vegetation. The Field Office is identifying areas that are being impacted by cheatgrass and has selected three project areas to determine what may be the most effective way to eradicate Downy brome. The first project will be



A hydromower shreds unwanted vegetation, leaving mulch that increases organic matter and soil moisture.

done in the Manzanares Mesa area, about 26 miles east of Farmington, on 260 acres of public land. The project will include prescribed fire at different times of the year, the application of herbicides, and reseeded with native grass, forb and shrub species.

BLM, in partnership with the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service and the San Juan County Soil and Water Conservation District, has begun to remove salt cedar and Russian olive from the Desert Hills River Tract Area of Critical Environmental Concern to promote the return of native plant species. A crew went to work with chainsaws and a hydromower (left) cutting down the trees, followed by an application of an herbicide on the cut stumps to prevent regrowth of the trees.

The BLM's **Taos Field Office** fire crew has been working on prescribed fire and thinning projects to reduce the amount of decaying vegetation and decrease the risk of property loss in communities. Since 2005, the fire crew has conducted 2,782 acres of broadcast burns and 763 acres of pile burns.

While achieving its objectives of restoring open woodlands and addressing the threat of wildland urban interface, these burns have been beneficial in other ways, such as enhancing wildlife habitat and providing the public with fuel wood for heating.

Partners include the Taos and Santa Clara Pueblos, and the Taos Fire Department. They are committed to these 'fuel reduction activities' to protect the rich natural and



December 2008: Raye Miller (left), Secretary/Treasurer-Marbob Energy Corporation, shakes hands with Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, after both signed a CCA. Looking on (from left) are Linda Rundell, BLM State Director, Doug Lynn, Executive Director of the Center of Excellence for Hazardous Material Management; and Lynn Scarlett, former Deputy Secretary of the Interior.

historic features on lands that BLM manages while reducing the risks to communities and other adjacent landowners.

## Partner Profile

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Land Management have launched an innovative program that encourages landowners, energy companies and ranchers to join the agencies in protecting and restoring habitat for the lesser prairie chicken and sand dune lizard in southeast New Mexico. Marbob Energy Corporation and rancher Chris

Brininstool signed agreements under the program in December 2008.

The agencies and the Center of Excellence for Hazardous Materials Management will administer voluntary 'Candidate Conservation Agreements' (CCAs) for oil and gas lease holders on federal lands and 'Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances' (CCAAs) for state and private landowners to benefit the species.

Devon Energy Corporation contributed \$50,000 in December 2008 to an industry-BLM effort to reclaim abandoned oilfield facilities in Eddy County. The work will remove abandoned roads, well pads and caliche pits on federal lands in the county, and restore the areas allowing native vegetation to be reestablished. The BLM has matched Devon's contribution, and is

**"Today, we're showcasing the future of conservation – a future that involves agencies, landowners, industry, conservation groups and communities working together to recover rare species of wildlife."**

- Lynn Scarlett, former Deputy Secretary of the Department of the Interior

“The Restore New Mexico program represents an exciting opportunity for Devon to give back to surrounding communities and assist in statewide reclamation efforts. Being a good neighbor is important to us and we’re grateful for the opportunity to partner with the BLM to improve habitat and the environment.”

-- David Frank, vice president-land, for Devon’s Western Division

working with the Carlsbad Soil and Water Conservation District to contract for this work with local firms. Reclamation will focus on historic ‘footprints’ (well pads, caliche pits and roads typically 40 years or older) that remained in place when oil wells were plugged and abandoned.

## Wildlife News

This summer will feature the fourth year of Aplomado falcon reintroductions. Angel Montoya

is leading the effort for the Peregrine Fund; he reports that four adult pairs of birds have been confirmed in the wild, including one each on Otero Mesa and Lake Valley, and two on the Armendaris Ranch. Many individual birds have been seen throughout southern New Mexico, including the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and one in the Las Cruces area. The Peregrine Fund and agency partners plan to expand releases this summer on BLM and State lands in new areas where local residents are supporting the effort. For further information about this effort visit [www.PeregrineFund.org](http://www.PeregrineFund.org) and click on ‘Conservation Projects.’



The summer of 2009 will mark the fourth year of Aplomado falcon reintroductions in New Mexico.

of Game and Fish, plans to release additional otters in the future depending on availability and funding. Partners include Amigos Bravos, BLM, Earth Friends Wild Species Fund, the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Four Corners Institute, New Mexico Wildlife Federation, Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club, and the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance.

River otters were reintroduced to New Mexico by the Taos Pueblo in the fall (2008) and winter. Ten wild otters have been released, and tracks have been spotted along the Rio Grande from Velarde north to Arroyo Hondo. The New Mexico Friends of River Otters, a coalition of agencies and conservation organizations working with the New Mexico Department



Otter released on October 22, 2008, on the Rio Pueblo de Taos (Taos Pueblo).



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