

Restoring state landscapes is possible, under way

MY VIEW

By Linda Rundell

With the return of monsoon moisture to New Mexico, the drought's over, at least for now, and good things are happening on the ground.

The rain represents much more than just a temporary greening of our grasslands; it's the finishing touch in a statewide renewal that's taking place on federal, state and private lands — a renewal that's benefiting fish and wildlife, and enhancing our quality of life.

The Bureau of Land Management is working with a variety of partners to restore landscapes to the healthy ecological states our ancestors encountered when settling the Land of Enchantment.

We passed the 750,000-acre mark this summer for acres restored since 2005 — and we're nearing a once unheard-of goal to reclaim a million acres of land in New Mexico by 2010.

Our Restore New Mexico effort is historic because of its vision and scale. We're working with state and federal agencies, ranchers, energy companies, conservation groups, local governments and other partners restore areas where historic overuse of the land has transformed desert grasslands and open woodlands into monocultures of creosote, mesquite and juniper, and streamside areas into thick stands of salt cedar:

- ◆ Creosote and mesquite are being replaced with healthy grasslands that can support much bigger populations of antelope and deer.

- ◆ Salt cedar is being removed from streams to restore our iconic cottonwood-willow forests, recreating habitat for fish, birds and other species.

- ◆ Overgrown woodlands are being restored to open savannas with abundant grasses and 'browse species' that beckon herds of mule deer and elk.

- ◆ Surface disturbance from historic oil and gas operations (from the time when there were no requirements for surface reclamation) are being repaired, defragmenting (consolidating) wildlife habitat to benefit prairie chickens, sand dune lizards and other grassland-dependent species.

- ◆ In southeast New Mexico, the BLM and its partners restored more than 115,000 acres of mesquite-infested grasslands to their natural function in June, bringing the total acreage of grasslands restored in the Permian Basin to 375,000 acres.

This year, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish reintroduced antelope to an area south of Carlsbad that hadn't seen pronghorns for 50 years.

The BLM has also removed salt cedar along the Black and Delaware Rivers south of Carlsbad, restoring healthy cottonwood-willow riparian ecosystems.

In areas north and west of Las Cruces, 80,000 acres of creosote have been treated (with another 54,000 acres to be completed this year), benefiting grassland-dependent wildlife and increasing groundwater supplies.

Restored grasslands will be used for future reintroductions of Aplomado falcons to New Mexico.

On Ladron Peak north of Socorro, prescribed burns were conducted on 8,500 acres of thick stands of juniper to help desert bighorn sheep. Healthy mosaics of woodlands, grass and brush will result. Overgrown stands of trees have been reduced, invigorating high-value food sources, but also removing many of the hiding places for cougars that were preying on the sheep.

In the San Juan Basin, the BLM is closing and rehabilitating unneeded or redundant roads to improve habitat for deer, elk, antelope and other wildlife, and decrease erosion and runoff from roads on public lands. And near Taos, the BLM is 'shaving' patches of dense sagebrush on public lands, creating rich grassage mosaics for wildlife.

It's almost like we didn't know what we lost. Grasslands and open woodlands in our state used to host spectacular concentrations of antelope, mule deer, elk and other wildlife. Our rivers and streams used to carry a lot more water, and perennial streams flowed longer, providing homes to lots more fish than we find today.

I particularly want to thank the partners in Restore New Mexico, who have greatly enlarged its scope. The Natural Resources Conservation Service has provided over \$3.75 million over the past three years from its federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program to restore public lands, plus additional funding for efforts on private and state lands.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish is contributing funding for a variety of efforts through its Habitat Stamp program. Quail Unlimited, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, Foundation for North American Wild Sheep and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation are also contributing to the program.

Late last year, NFWF provided \$250,000 as a match to more than \$400,000 in state, private and federal funding to restore more than 6,000 acres of grasslands in a watershed directly north of Carlsbad.

The BLM has matched these funds with almost \$10 million over the last four years to take

advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts is serving as a 'banker' to hold much of the shared funding and contract for landscape treatments.

But Restore New Mexico is much greater than the sum of its parts. It's taking a vision and making it happen on the ground, restoring the landscapes that lift our spirits and define our character.

To find out more about our efforts, visit our Web site at www.blm.gov/nm and click on Restore New Mexico.

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