

## **Nevada Cheatgrass Action Team Meeting Minutes**

**July 31, 2013, 8:30–12:30**

**National Resource Conservation Service Building, 1635 Corporate Blvd., Reno, NV 89502**

**Attachment 1** – List of meeting attendees.

**Attachment 2** – PDF of presentation presented by Dr. Jeanne Chambers.

### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Nevada State Director Ted Koch and Nevada Representative Mark Amodei provided opening remarks**

Ted stated that the purpose of the Nevada Cheatgrass Action Team (NCAT) is to strategically employ tools across the landscape over time to stop the dominance of cheatgrass. He listed several of the tools in the toolbox such as prevention - maintain resilient native plant communities, use of green stripping along roads; suppression - cheatgrass biomass removal (including target grazing and mowing), prioritize suppression in key area; and restoration - reseed with native seed, avoid grazing or other disturbance soon after restoration. The concept of the NCAT formed in response to 1) Nevada Representative Horsford asking Ted, “Who’s job is it to lead the effort on cheatgrass?” and the realization that no one is responsible, and 2) Several private landowners approaching Ted and asking for help and being willing to open their land to researchers and managers to implement available tools in a landscape prioritized manner. With this implementation the NCAT can begin to make progress against cheatgrass and learn, through adaptive management, the processes and mechanisms that are most effective at the landscape scale. The private land owners are Jeff White, Newmont Mining Company/Elko Land and Livestock – IL Ranch; Duane Coombs – Smith Creek Valley Ranch; and Zane Marshall, Southern Nevada Water Authority.

Rep. Amodei touched on funding issues and the need for assignments within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of the Interior to get funding and get rolling on federal lands as well as the private. Amodei indicated that the NEPA process needs to be streamlined for habitat restoration/rehabilitation projects, particularly in burned out cheatgrass areas.

Ted indicated that fire is the main vector to increase dominance of cheatgrass. Cheatgrass will spread on its own, but if it is present in an area and a fire goes through the most likely result is cheatgrass dominating the system following the fire. Thus, fire facilitates dominance of cheatgrass.

Sage grouse precipitates this meeting, but the sagebrush ecosystem needs the management as well. Ted has initiated the NCAT to bring researchers and land managers together so that everyone can give a shot at what they think the solution is and bring everyone together for discussion.

### **Dr. Jeanne Chambers presentation on Strategic Approach to Managing Cheatgrass:**

Jeanne presented objectives of increasing resiliency of native ecosystems to disturbance and enhance resistance to invasive species. This will decrease cheatgrass abundance and spread, increase perennial

herbaceous species, and maintain desirable amount of sagebrush that will increase habitat quality for sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate species. As well, this will provide for ecosystem services such as clean air and water.

Current management focuses on local-scale treatments and generally has mixed success.

Jeanne described the response of four Great Basin vegetation types, association with precipitation zones, relationship of each vegetation type to resilience to disturbance and resistance to invasion. Key points include:

- Resilience changes over environmental gradients
- Resilience decreases with disturbance/stress outside of historic range of variability
- Resistance reflects environmental suitability
- Resistance decreases with disturbance/stress

Jeanne provided a discussion on factors that affect resilience and resistance. Jeanne discussed the results of a sagebrush treatment evaluation projects. That looked at the effect of fire versus mechanical treatments on exotic forbs and grasses, perennial tall grasses, and shrubs at warm and dry sites versus cool and wet sites. She outlined response to disturbance and treatment options for each vegetation type. This provided an understanding of what tools are best used under what scenarios and

Strategic planning approach

Current tools and ecological understanding allow strategic planning based on resilience and resistance

- Spatial design - where should current management practices be changed and/or treatments be implemented?
- Evaluation of alternatives – what are the management/treatment options and which will have the greatest long-term positive effects?

The strategic planning approach should include tools of protection, prevention, and restoration. A strategic plan should also establish protocol for and follow-through on monitoring and adapting as that is essential to the long-term success of this process and stopping the dominance of cheatgrass.

Tom Warren didn't see the establishment of introduced vs. native on seeded sites. Dave Pyke has data over several hundred sites and is seeing the opposite. Jeanne indicated important point is where you are on the landscape, in other words cooler, wetter vs. hotter, drier. Jeanne indicated the northeastern part of the state where Tom is from is generally cooler and wetter and thus would expect to see more success from seeded natives than seeded non-natives.

Dave Pyke – Loss of perennial grasses most severe in areas where they occur under shrubs versus when they occur in the interspace. When fires come though, seeds under shrubs will burn hotter and are less likely to survive. Knowing the spatial distribution (under shrub vs. interspace) of perennial grasses, and not just presence, in a system prior to fire will help understand what the perennial grass response after fire will be.

The final recommendations from this discussion were to save the best first-work on preventing expansion. Monocultures of cheatgrass act as a fire conduit, not as much a concern of seed source. Prevent more areas from being converted then restore the areas that are best for restoration.

**Jeff White** Newmont has approximately 2.6 million acres much of which is in the private/public checkerboard -400,000 private and 2 million federal grazing permitted.

The ranches are operated financially independent of mining are not subsidized by Newmont. The ranches were managed differently by former owners. Newmont is trying to elevate management and increase uniformity of management across the landscape. They manage for minerals, biodiversity, water, mitigation, etc.

They have treated over 15,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat, but much of this has subsequently burned.

Lots of opportunities here. Gradient of sites gradient of opportunities. Jeff, as a rangeland ecologist is excited to have an opportunity to work with the experts to help improve his land. He sees fire rehab as a challenge, especially in low elevation sites with extensive cheatgrass monoculture. There are land access challenges. He sees the bureaucratic challenges of working at that scale allows a landscape treatment rather than individual projects. Cost is important; how can society share the cost of these treatments as the outcome affects everyone. Planning support: greenstripping and fuels management. Coordination must be paramount.

Jeff is interested in the use of ESD and ST models and sees that they can be very powerful, but they need refinement as there is still sometimes a disconnect between science and management.

He is interested in the debate on native vs. non-native revegetation efforts.

Jeff is unsure on funding sources for this effort. His concluding statement was that this meeting shouldn't result in just another meeting - let's get something on the ground.

#### **SNWA: Zane Marshall**

SNWA is a local multi-agency formed in 1971 manages water supplies for 70% of southern Nevada and owns and manages several ranches in Eastern and southern Nevada. The purpose of the ranches is for ground water, to provide a source of mitigation and for resource management. Their goal is to contribute to sage-grouse conservation and be an example to others. They collect baseline data on their ranches, particularly in Spring Valley, Hamlin, and include cover and class data; ET station data, hydro data. Lots of data to be provided. GIS and remote sensing data to be provided.

The ranches are mostly in low dry areas of the state. Deeded ground is mostly salt desert shrub, without much sagebrush, bench habitat. Grazing allotments have greater sage-grouse potential.

The level of the cheatgrass issue on their ranches is not totally known at this time. Spring Valley area and Schell creeks have some cheatgrass, but it depends on where you are in the valley.

#### **Duane Coombs**

Duane considers himself an artist rather than scientist. The Smith Creek ranch is a cow/calf producer with 3,000 acres deeded and 250,000 acres leased. Their property ranches from playa and salt desert to sub alpine. They have concerns on wild horses. Their BLM permit is a twelve month permit that gives flexibility in operation; they do not actually run cattle 12 months.

He stated that cheatgrass is here to stay so we should be looking at living with it rather than eradicating it. More fire more cheatgrass, and it is here to stay, so we should focus on healthy systems rather than getting rid of all cheatgrass. There's good science available, so start drawing in the folks that live on the ground, to blend the knowledge.

Duane expressed thoughts that for seed to be considered local or native, it needs to come from areas with similar precipitation and soils, this may mean native by county, not native at the state level.

Duane has treated 2/3 to 3/4 of the deeded ground in the last 15 years. Cost to do that hasn't been high, but it is tough making payroll. What's needed is to draw in more folks is to have assurances that their permits will be maintained. We can use cows and agriculture to drive change on rangelands. To do this the tone has to change.

Duane chains senescent brush to release forbs and grasses then he mows the result after 3 – 4 years. This puts seed on the ground. Duane feels we should focus on healthy sagebrush steppe, focus on the things that are agreed upon rather than the stuff that we can't.

Duane is concerned about some of the bureaucratic obstacles. He was marked for non-compliance when he had non-natives that were grazed more than 10% and this was equated to heavy grazing. This should apply to use on perennial grass utilization.

12-month permits have to be lobbied for if that's needed for better management. Conversion of cheatgrass to tumble mustard happening, particularly in areas that burn over and over; however, at least cheatgrass is palatable to cows. If you think cheatgrass is bad, what's next?

Barry Parryman stated that we are grazing at the wrong time which increases cheatgrass. When you are locked in to certain grazing times, this actually can lead to cheatgrass increases. 12-month permits allow flexibility. Grazing systems were established prior to cheatgrass becoming as large a problem. Implemented those systems now actually fosters cheatgrass when it is a component of the system.

Duane: Horse management comes from pressure put on the BLM by ranchers who have good relationships and are known commodities in management style.

### **Lunch Break**

**Ron Baxter began the discussion by stating that** all here to talk and get stuff on the table; no opinions are right or wrong.

Cliff Gardner presented information on the Maverick Range. The range was a sheep allotment and burned in the 1970's. The fire had burned off native vegetation and became a cheatgrass monoculture.

Chukar were in there. The Roses grazed the area with cattle and in 2010 it is now back to mountain brush; best deer wintering grounds with no cheatgrass. Cliff recommended a tour of this property.

The three landowners were asked what they see as the purpose/goal of the NCAT is.

Duane: Mesh best science with the economic art (landowner) of applying it.

Jeff: Something on the ground at a significant scale

Zane: Demonstrate what can be done.

Melissa Faigeles presented a goal for the NCAT, "Develop a strategic framework for the landscape scale control of by utilizing the best available science". There was a lot of concern of with this goal; to many this seemed one-sided as it does not take into consideration input from land managers or local knowledge, and does not present the concept of implementation/on-the-ground emphasis that this group wants. Much discussion followed and the following points attempt to capture the discussion:

- Consider terminology - rehabilitation rather than restoration.
- These actions must be driven by the rural operators and producers. Community-based approach.
- The concept of management needs to be included in the goal. This should be a landscape demonstration of best tools and see where they best work and look at the long term effects/influence on the landscape.
- This needs to be done on a landscape scale. Deeded plus federal leased form the landscape. Taking this approach will also help in funding.
- Concern that the NCAT's actions and applications for money will compete for the same money that's already in heavy competition.
- Public and private lands are necessary for this to work. There's a lot more flexibility on private ground as opposed to fed lands.
- Potentially tie in with the Cattleman's association. Bring in treatment techniques and then have ranches bring in the cattle to understand how it will work.
- Jeff and Zane's expectation is to get things on the ground. There are resources in place that will allow the work to be done quickly.
- There's the potential to demonstrate success on several landscapes. If Jeanne and Dave had a ranch to treat, what would they do? Triage approach – save the best (actively protect and prevent), then rehab/restore. Ask where does each action fit in the bigger picture? Provide recommendations, apply treatment on the ground, and employ monitoring and adaptive management to draw larger conclusions.
- Apply the successful methods, use adaptive management on the less successful projects.
- Potentially include environmental groups who may not agree with actions to get early buy-in and build credence. May want to select groups that have track record of collaboration. This would be a landowner decision.

The goal itself was not reworked but the consensus for forward action is to: get projects going on the ground, put together a list of projects on each property, prioritize the projects, decide what the

treatment is going to be, make management changes if warranted, apply the treatment, monitor, and apply adaptive management.

**Next step: The group wants USFWS and the SETT to remain in charge of coordinating the NCAT. Field visits are needed to each property to begin recommendations and prioritization. Lee Turner will organize the field trips with Kelly McGowan.**