

# US releases review on removing vegetation to stop wildfires

By Keith Ridler  
The Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Federal officials have released their review on removing or changing vegetation over a huge swath of the U.S. West to stop wildfires on land used for cattle ranching, recreation and habitat for imperiled sage grouse.

The work would occur on strips of land up to 165 yards wide and up to 11,000 miles long in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada and Utah, according to an environmental analysis released Friday. It didn't give specific details on what the impact to the land could be.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management announced in 2017 it planned the review into creating so-called fuel breaks that starve fires of vegetation that can burn in the Great Basin.

"We know that wildfire is the greatest threat to the sagebrush steppe ecosystem and we're very interested in increasing fire resiliency in these landscapes, and this is one tool to do that," agency spokesman Ken Frederick said.

Giant rangeland wildfires in recent decades have destroyed vast areas of sagebrush steppe that support some 350 species of wildlife.

Experts say the blazes have mainly been driven by cheatgrass, an invasive species that relies on fire to spread to new areas while killing native plants, including sagebrush.

Once cheatgrass takes over, the land is of little value.

Frederick said there's no cost estimate for the work because it's not clear what types of fuel breaks field managers might choose for different areas. They could either remove vegetation or reseed the land.

Fuel breaks can cost from \$12,000 to \$44,000 a mile. Methods to create them include putting down herbicide, mechanically removing

vegetation and planting vegetation that can resist wildfires.

The fuel breaks would total about 1,700 square miles and help protect a 350,000-square-mile area by slowing rangeland wildfires, allowing firefighters to more easily put them out.

"We're confident that the fuel breaks are going to slow fire down and also create a linear feature so that fire crews can fight the fire safely," Frederick said.

But critics say fuel breaks can fragment habitat and harm wildlife, including sage grouse, and in many cases aren't effective.

Erik Molvar of Western Watersheds Project noted that rangeland wildfires have jumped interstates and the Columbia River. Instead of fuel breaks, he said, federal agencies should be trying to eradicate cheatgrass and other invasive plants.

"That is a very difficult and challenging task," he said. "But if you took all of the money and effort and time that the federal government appears ready to throw at this fuel break boondoggle, we might make some real progress."

Public comments on the environmental review are being taken until early August.

## IRRIGATION

Continued from Page 1B with long roots like tomatoes and melons, can use the residual water from the wet season to supply moisture during our dry season. Whether it would work outside of the Willamette Valley depends.

"There is not a precise recipe," Garret said, "so I cannot say who can and cannot dry garden, although dry farming vegetables in areas with less than 20 inches of annual rainfall would be much more challenging than it is for gardeners in the Willamette Valley where we get 40 inches. In these drier areas, the same practices might be used to reduce irrigation rather than use none at all."

Both gardens are continuing their trials. The gardens are open to the public and Master Gardeners are often there to answer questions. Or contact the Master Gardeners in Benton and Marion counties by phone, email or in person to get information and advice. You'll also find a lot of information geared toward farming but useful for home gardeners on the Dry Farming Collabora-

tion's Facebook page. "It works," Brodie said. "It's possible to have a garden without watering or very little and have a productive garden. It's an important technique when you're trying to save resources, and water is one of the biggest issues."

Here are some tips from Amy Garrett on how to get started:

- Know your soil depth and water-holding capacity. You need good, deep soil.
- Use a cover crop — especially a legume such as crimson clover — over winter to add organic matter and increase soil fertility.
- Plants need plenty of room; giving them about double the space is a good starting point.
- Don't plant where there is competition for water from trees or other plants.
- Raised beds are not ideal as they dry out faster. Level or sunken beds may conserve moisture better.
- Try to find a place protected from wind, which can cause plants to lose water much quicker.
- Use existing vegetation as indicators of where you have the most water. Notice which plants are still green and lush

in August. They're telling you where there is soil moisture late in the growing season.

- Maintain a near neutral pH of 6.5 to 7. Most soils in the Willamette Valley are acidic and will need an application of lime.

- Timing is key. Plant when is not too wet or too dry. It's tricky, but the important thing to remember is to plant when there's still moisture in the soil surface to get seedlings established.

- Organic matter greatly improves soils' water-holding ability. A broadfork can help incorporate organic matter deeper than a tiller.

- When planting seeds, press down on the soil so there's good seed-to-soil contact for germination.

- Keeping up with weeds is essential. "Each weed is like a little straw sucking water out of the soil," Garrett said.

- Pre-soaking large seeds like corn, beans and cucurbits may help them germinate more quickly.

- Zucchini may be a good gateway plant to dry gardening, but others to try are: tomatoes, potatoes, melons, winter squash, dry beans, corn, and grapes.

- Use early-maturing, drought-tolerant varieties

or even dry-farmed varieties when available. Some examples of varieties that do well in the Willamette Valley trials are: 'Christmas' watermelon, 'Dark Star' zucchini, 'Stella Blue' winter squash, 'Whipple' dry beans,

'Open Oak Party Mix' dent corn, 'Whipple' dry beans, and 'Early Girl' tomatoes.

- Prevent cracks and crusting of the soil with mulch or going through with a hoe and fluffing up the top couple of inches.

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