

# Native plant restoration being studied to help stem rangeland fire danger

A multi-state team of scientists is working to reduce fire dangers throughout the vast range areas of the intermountain west by studying ways to reintroduce native plant species on these lands.

The team is cooperating in an effort called the Integrated Restoration Strategies Towards Weed Control on Western Rangelands project. Its goal is to find ways to restore Great Basin rangelands ruined by non-native

weed species that are well-established in the basin and spreading rapidly.

Range scientists from Oregon State University (OSU), the University of Nevada, Utah State University and the University of Idaho have joined forces with research and management staff from the U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the USDA Agricultural Research Service and Natural Resources Conservation

Service.

Researchers and land managers want to stem the advance of weeds such as cheatgrass and medusa-head because they dramatically increase the danger of rangeland wildfires, said Paul Doescher, an OSU rangeland researcher.

The weeds also cause loss of wildlife habitat and reduce the value of the land as a grazing resource for livestock, he said.

"Cheatgrass and other weeds boost fire danger

because they germinate in the fall and grow through the winter and spring, drying out by mid-to late summer," Doescher said. "On sites dominated by these plants, their growth cycle creates a tremendous amount of excellent fuel during the hottest time of the year."

Under these conditions a random lightning strike might start a roaring range fire at any time, he added.

The problem with the non-native species is that

they tend to displace native grasses and sagebrush over time and eventually take over large areas of rangeland.

Researchers are studying how these weeds compete with native plants and how the weeds interact with soils and climate as they grow. The research team is also studying various approaches to re-seeding native plants on damaged rangeland sites to identify the most successful seeding strategies.

The team is midway through the four-year study.

The Integrated Restoration Strategies project is one of the biggest field studies ever undertaken in the western U.S., according to Doescher. The study area encompasses the entire Great Basin, an area of 190,000 square miles between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada Mountains that spreads into Nevada, Utah, Idaho and Oregon.

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