

Beavers working for us

By Larry Hyslop



Beaver ponds on Susie Creek during the last, dry summer

Maggie and Susie Creeks flow south, entering the Humboldt River near Carlin. Much of their lengths are private lands, owned by ranches and mines, along with BLM-administered public lands.

The riparian zones along these streams are looking good these days. A lot of work has been done over the last 20 years to recover the riparian conditions along these streams. Ranchers, agencies, mines, and non-profit groups have partnered to do this work. Much of the improvement has come from changes in grazing techniques and specific projects.

All this work is getting a boost by beavers. As the stream habitat has improved, especially increasing woody material like willows, beavers have moved in and accomplished even more work. A remote sensing project found 107 beaver dams along 20 miles of Maggie Creek in 2006, which rose to 271 dams in 2010.

The work done by people is being accelerated by the work done by beavers. It is like adding icing to the cake, as beaver dams and ponds improve the riparian areas along these two streams. Beaver dams slow the water and collect sediment that used to be lost downstream. In five years, ponds have increased the amount of impounded water on Maggie Creek from nine miles of stream to 16 miles. In spots, the ponds are forming marshy meadows.

These ponds mean wider riparian zone along the creeks, bringing in more water tolerant plants and killing brush. Wider riparian zones create fuel breaks for future wildfires. The impounded water is seeping into the ground and raising the water table. Newmont's shallow groundwater monitoring wells have shown about a two foot rise over the past 17 years along Maggie Creek.

Carol Evans is a fisheries biologist with the BLM and has worked on these streams for many years. "Beavers are radically changing the landscape. I really don't know where this is going," she said. Beaver populations seem to be rising all over Elko County, perhaps due to less trapping from low fur prices. They are also benefitting from improving habitat and better food supplies due to improved livestock grazing practices.

Carol brought up an interesting idea. We blame much of today's stream damage on past grazing practices and higher livestock stocking rates, especially during the late 1800s. But how much stream damage was done during the 1800s as beavers were removed by fur trappers? It is estimated we lost 90% of the beaver population across the west during the 1800s. As untended dams gave out, streams were damaged from increased sediment flows and eroded channels. Riparian zones shrank, water tables dropped, plant species were lost and brush moved in. Cattle then removed willows, slowing the return of beavers.

Beavers definitely proved their worth during this past, dry summer. In spots, beaver ponds held the only water along miles of stream, making it available for wildlife and livestock and protecting populations of native trout. Carol feels a strong beaver presence may help reduce future damage due to climate change.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 1/4/2013

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