

Reclaiming the Ruby Pipeline Right-of-way

By Larry Hyslop



Tour members check the new growth in the pipeline's cleared ground

The group's consensus was the disturbed ground seemed to be recovering nicely. Grass was standing in rows after being drill seeded last January, along with some random woody plants and forbs. A dozen people toured the Ruby Pipeline right-of-way to learn about its reclamation efforts. They represented the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group, along with local ranching and mining interests.

Tom Gimsey is Manager of Area Operations for El Paso Pipeline Group. After a briefing by two of the company's environmental managers at the Wieland Flat Compressor Station, he took us to a nearby stretch of the pipeline right-of-way.

The pipeline is quiet now with gas flowing through its 42-inch wide line at pressures of at least 1,000 psi. Only eleven permanent employees work along the pipeline between the gas hubs in Powell, Wyoming and Moline, Oregon. Four of these work north of Elko. Most operations are automated, with controls and sensors located in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

It was a different scene in August, 2010, when construction started simultaneously at eight different spots along the route. Bad weather required brief construction halts and some stretches were shut down for 30 days because of sage grouse on leks within two miles of construction, but the pipeline was put in use July 28, 2011.

Construction required extensive planning ahead of time, including finding an acceptable route. One requirement kept it away from sensitive areas such as sage grouse leks. A strip of land 114 feet wide was cleared for 360 miles across Nevada, resulting in 8,500 acres of disturbed ground. After the vegetation was removed, the top soil was pushed to one side and underlying soil was pushed to the opposite side of the cleared path. After the pipe was welded and dropped into a trench, the underlying soil was replaced followed by top soil. Within 20 days of construction completion through an area, the ground was seeded. The strip of ground we looked at had been seeded last January so it had a wet spring and dry summer to begin regrowth. Much of the route will also be re-seeded at a time of year determined by the local BLM office.

Nicole Petigo, environmental project manager, described working with seven BLM offices across four states, with several different versions of policies. Nineteen different seed mixtures were developed for several different eco-regions with different soils. Each BLM office stipulated the seed mix to be used on its public lands and each land owner along the route could ask for a custom mix of seeds. In some areas, the seed mix specifically created a green fire break. Next spring, some areas will receive bitterbrush, mountain mahogany, and 300,000 sagebrush seedlings.

El Paso will monitor the right-of-way for problems such as noxious weeds, overgrazing and ATV use for the next five years and will probably continue beyond that time. Transects will be run across a 300 feet width, so the vegetation outside the disturbed ground can be compared with what is returning in the right-of-way. The entire route is flown monthly checking for problems such as excessive erosion. A bond is in place to ensure reclamation and has already been reduced due to work completed.

Stream crossings such as Marys River required a lot of work and a narrower strip of cleared ground. Willow plugs were planted to replace lost vegetation. No road was left along the route and part of the monitoring is to ensure ATVs do not use the cleared ground as trails.

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