

Teamwork restoring wildlife habitat

By Larry Hyslop



A helicopter spreads wood mulch on burned slopes above Willow Creek, to reduce erosion

Most wildfires are bad for the land, but it is hard to imagine a worse fire than last August's Willow Fire north of Willow Creek Reservoir. The fire burned 34,000 acres of land, of which 30,000 was private land owned by Barrick Gold Corporation. Before the fire, this area provided good habitat, providing a good nesting area for greater sage-grouse, a transition area for mule deer as they moved between their summer and winter ranges, and quality riparian habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout. Worse, the area was some of the last remaining quality habitat after other fires in 2005, 2006 and 2011.

A major effort will be needed to rehabilitate this burned land, to return it to prime wildlife habitat, and do it as quickly as possible. Barrick wants to stabilize the ground for the benefit of the Squaw Valley Ranch, leased to Gregg Simonds, but also wants back the good sage-grouse habitat it had before the fire. In the future, this may provide the mining company opportunities to mitigate mining impacts on sage-grouse.

Even though most of the land is private, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) joined in a partnership with Barrick, realizing wildlife know nothing of land management boundaries. One of Nevada's largest sage-grouse leks is in this area. Luckily, it did not burn due to the quick response by Squaw Valley Ranch personnel.

Barrick is spending \$490,000 to pay for this year's reseeding, to be completed by BLM crews. The BLM is also spending \$400,000 for work spread over three years. NDOW is adding \$100,000, money coming from various NDOW programs, Q1, Ruby Pipeline mitigation and partner groups.

Reseeding will include sagebrush and native grasses on BLM managed ground while Barrick is using a mix including native and non-native grasses on their private land. It will include kochia seed for mule deer. The BLM will hand plant bitter brush on 600 acres to provide this vital plant for wintering mule deer.

For the past 10 years, a partnership between Barrick and other groups has used prescribed grazing to improve the upper Willow Creek watershed. The fire destroyed the good riparian vegetation along Willow Creek and undoubtedly impacted Lahontan cutthroat trout through the burned area. Upstream, the creek headwaters did not burn and these trout survive and should move back down stream as habitat returns to the stream sides. The land should recover since it was in good shape before the burn.

As a short term help, wood mulch is being spread by helicopter. Strips of mulch laid across the slopes above the creek should reduce erosion, so future rain and snow will result in less soil in the creek.

People working together, forming partnerships, can do wonderful things. Hopefully this combined effort will quickly return quality wildlife habitat to this valuable private land.

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