

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Beauty belies the weeds: Spokane Tribe, NRCS work to restore native habitat

An ocean of pastel lavender and yellow flowers carpet the undulating landscape of the Spokane Tribe Indian Reservation – stretching as far as the horizon. These vibrant, even beautiful, “wildflowers” look harmless, but their deceptive beauty threatens an ecosystem, an upland bird species – and a way of life.

These “wildflowers” are among a number of invasive weeds that have overpowered native grasses that are used as food and cover for indigenous wildlife. Consequently, many species have died or have been driven off the reservation during the past several years.

To help reverse the spread of these invasive weeds, USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been working with the Spokane Tribe through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to bring back the native vegetation as well as the sharp-tail grouse – a species listed as threatened by the state of Washington.

The Tribe and the NRCS are re-establishing the sharp-tail grouse habitat starting – literally – from the ground up. By planting na-

tive grasses like bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue on 200 acres of abandoned cropland, conservationists hope to slow the spread of the invasive species, while re-establishing critical areas of native grasses.

“Our seeding from the fall of 2005 is look-



Spokane Tribe Biologist David Wood and NRCS District Conservationist Dave Kreft examine a recent planting of native grasses. These plantings will help fend off invasive species and establish sharp-tail grouse habitat.

ing very good,” says NRCS District Conservationist Dave Kreft. “We had excellent winter and spring moisture,” he said, “and the plantings appear to be healthy and vigorous.”

Although the 2005 seeding did well, the 2004 seeding struggled – due in large part to poor winter moisture and an unusually dry growing season.

“It just shows that you can plan and do

“Through their dedication, the Spokane Tribe has given new life to this lake.”

Dave Kreft, NRCS
District Conservationist

everything right, but you can't control the weather,” says David Wood, wildlife biologist for the Tribe. “And there's no substitute,” he says, “for timely moisture.”

The Tribe and NRCS also planted more than 5,000 native shrubs and plants in the spring of 2005 to create cover for the sharptail grouse and other species. The Tribe may re-plant some of the shrubs, Mr. Woods says, because some of the plantings have struggled.

In addition to restoring habitat, the Tribe is also attempting to return McCoy Lake, which is often used for recreation, back to its original depth. Years ago a stream was diverted from its original path as irrigation for farmland. Over the years this diversion decreased the groundwater, which slowly started to dry up McCoy Lake.

Recently the Tribe purchased land and water rights to divert the stream back to its original channel and McCoy Lake destination.

In order to restore and enhance the stream's riparian habitat, the Spokane Tribe used the NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) cost-share program. With NRCS technical and financial assistance, the Tribe built livestock exclusion fences and planted thousands of native trees and shrubs along the stream corridor.

As a result of the restoration efforts, a healthy mountain snow pack and abundant spring rainfall,



To the artistic eye, these “wildflowers” provide color to the countryside, but for conservationists, these invasive weeds pose a threat to native plants and wildlife.

the lake has risen seven feet since 2005.

“It's great to see the Lake's astonishing turn-around,” NRCS' Kreft says. “Through their dedication, the Spokane Tribe has given new life to this lake,” he says.

Mr. Wood says Tribal members are very supportive of the NRCS and the Tribal Wildlife Department efforts to restore the land back to what it once was – back to a land with plentiful wildlife and maybe a few less “wildflowers.”



McCoy Lake, another restoration project of the Spokane Tribe, has risen seven feet since 2005.

*Story and photos by Lisa Wareham,
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