

Cheating Fire with Chemical Control in Utah



1986: Critical sagebrush habitat in deer winter range with a high density understorey of cheatgrass.

Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) is a winter annual that competes with native vegetation throughout much of the intermountain west. In no place is the danger of the spread of cheatgrass more evident than in Utah, where wildfire has become increasingly damaging to native ecosystems and communities at the urban-wildland interface over the past few decades. Cheatgrass has expanded its dominance by increasing the length of the fire season in Utah and destroying larger numbers of acres each year.



2005: Wildfire occurred 1987. After almost 20 years, there is still no sign of recovery of the sagebrush community.

Challenge:

Cheatgrass germinates early in the fall most years, utilizing much of the soil's limited nutrients and water content before native species begin growing. It also creates an extensive seedbed that can survive fire and repopulate quickly before native plants can become re-established. Because of its short life cycle, cheatgrass becomes dry fuel for fires by early summer, making many areas easy targets for hotter, faster-moving fires that burn with greater intensity.

Solution:

Many groups are working to help control cheatgrass, but none more urgently than the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. Under the direction

of the Division's Habitat Initiative Program, more than 100,000 acres of depleted sagebrush habitat are being rehabilitated each year in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service. The Division is working to control the resurgence of cheatgrass using a combination of seeding competitive herbaceous species, green stripping and/or herbicide treatments.

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources biologist Jim Davis has studied both the spread and devastating effects of cheatgrass for 30 years. His expertise is helping to identify locations where rehabilitation will have the most impact on decreasing the threat of cheatgrass-fueled wildfires.

Result:

In areas that have been targeted, cheatgrass control is gaining ground. By replacing the strongly invasive cheatgrass with plants that can resist fire, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is working to restore the naturally occurring fire cycle. While much work remains to be done, the Division is seeing a positive impact on the environment, reclaiming habitat and safeguarding communities in Utah.



Foresters, applicators and government officials visit a shaded fuel break at the 2005 California Forest Pest Council Weed Tour.



Learn More:

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