

Gravelly Landscape Collaborative
July 2017 news article
Submitted by Jennifer Boyer jen@future-west.org

You can look at maps, charts and graphs and even google earth imagery but nothing compares to kicking the dirt and seeing things with your own eyes. This opportunity was provided in early July by the US Forest Service staff to look at the proposed Greenhorn project area and answer questions and discuss opportunities.

The Gravelly Landscape Collaborative attended the tour and paid particular attention to the landscape goals that reflected community conversations, concerns and values.

The first tour stop focused on removing conifers that have encroached on open meadows and parks. Conifers have spread due to fire suppression and now limit open areas and aspen groves that provide critical wildlife habitat and available range for livestock. There were questions about the scale and techniques that would be used in a slash and burn approach to removing encroachment. The actual approach will be on a site by site basis and take into consideration conditions (such as climate and proximity to infrastructure) to ensure that unintended events are avoided. The group also discussed the importance of good communication with the public and local officials prior to any action. Commissioner Allhands shared that his phone will ring as soon as someone sees smoke in the air.

Another stop on the tour looked at a chronic road problem associated with a spring in the warm springs drainage. The road has been repaired multiple times but the location of the spring and natural conditions of the area pose ongoing problems. The “fix” may be to entirely re-route the road or a bridge and while these could be expensive, the outcomes would protect water quality that is currently suffering and reduce the long-term maintenance of the current road. This project was identified for watershed and fisheries purposes, as well as road safety and access, but will be on hold until funding becomes available for improvements.

With wildlife in mind, the group discussed connecting high quality habitat for Big Horn Sheep in the Timber Creek area. The sheep require open park areas for movement, they avoid moving through and dispersing if the area is under a forest canopy. The application of fire in a controlled manner that would remove 40-80% of the forested area would allow the population to expand and move throughout this part of the landscape. The fire would likely be aerially administered since the

terrain is steep and difficult to access. The group discussed how this would benefit the sheep population and provide more habitat that is now in limited supply.

Finally the group pulled out on an overlook to view conditions after a fire a few years ago. The professional foresters explained that removing trees through fire or harvest actually promote forest resiliency by reducing massive insect outbreaks and releasing tree growth especially for Douglas Fir. They explained that today they implement pattern of “hops, skips and patches”, not the clearcut squares of yesteryear. The groups talked about how this approach meets multiple community goals including supporting wildlife, protecting watershed health, reducing extreme insect damage and an opportunity to gain income to support road work and weed control.

For more information you can visit <https://gravellylandscapecollaborative.org/>