

Gravelly Landscape Collaborative
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“What is going on here?! This looks like a mess! Who would do this?” These reactions are not uncommon when people are traveling through forested areas that have been recently managed for aspen trees.

What exactly are people responding to? Looking across the landscape of rolling hills, draws, open parks and wetlands and forested uplands there will suddenly be areas where conifer trees have been cut down, sometimes put in a pile and other times left scattered on the ground. They are not removed for a timber cut or harvested for Christmas trees, why are they cut and left there to rot?

If you take a walk through one of these areas you will notice that amongst the cut conifers are aspen trees. Technically, aspen groves are actually a single organism that is cloned. Over time conifers expand their range into open parks and wetter draws and seeps and crowd out aspen. This has been increasing throughout the area due to decades of fire suppression. In the past, small forest fires would remove conifers from aspen habitats, but this has been significantly reduced in the last 50 years. “Studies completed in the southern Gravelly Range found close to a 50% decline in aspen from 1947 to 1992. The primary cause for this reduction was due to conifers overtopping and crowding out the aspen” Kevin Suzuki retired Forest Service Specialist explains.

Some may question whether we should go to such lengths to remove conifer to “release” aspen with the goal of restoring aspen dominance in these areas. There are several reasons why biologists, ecologists, sportsmen and foresters promote the removal of conifers in these places.

First of all, it restores a very unique habitat type that is important for wildlife. From deer to song birds, these aspen groves provide important habitat for feeding, nesting and cover. In fact, much of the work done recently to remove conifers from the Greenhorn riparian areas was also intended to benefit other deciduous species (willow, dogwood, currant, rose, maple, etc.) and herbaceous species that were suppressed by the tree canopy. The shrubs will provide a critical browse resource for wildlife, especially the moose that roam these creek bottoms.

Secondly, conifers consume tremendous amounts of water that changes the hydrology of the drainage. The consumption of water can reduce surface water in small creeks and wetlands. These water sources are important for a diverse plant community, as well as, wildlife and livestock.

Finally, supporting healthy aspen communities maintains diversity across the landscape that provides important ecological functions such as physical breaks for fire or insect infestation.

The Gravelly Landscape Collaborative, a collaborative group focused on the Gravelly Range, agrees that the benefits outweigh the costs of removing conifer from aspen groves. GLC member, Darcie Warden shares, “the next time you run across a “conifer mess” in the forest you may think differently when you can envision a future with a robust aspen grove providing cool water, shade and essential habitat for many native species”.