

## Massive wildfire rehabilitation underway in Idaho, Oregon

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — A federal plan to rehabilitate 436 square miles of scorched rangeland in southwestern Idaho and eastern Oregon containing important sage grouse habitat and grazing land for ranchers calls for spending about \$67 million over 5 years.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management released the 71-page plan late last week that includes massive plantings of grasses, several types of flowering plants known as forbs, and shrubs, with more than \$26 million being spent on seeds and seed planting.

The effort follows the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision last month that sage grouse don't need protection under the Endangered Species Act because of conservation efforts taking place in multiple states.

"They're really under the gun to do this because it's pretty complex because of the different (land) ownership and the different types of soil," said John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert. "We all know that Fish and Wildlife is going to revisit the sage grouse issue in five years."

The giant blaze spanned about two weeks in August, destroying 297 square miles of sage grouse habitat, 83 square miles of that considered priority habitat that contained breeding grounds, called leks.

"In short, most of the entire fire area is largely unsuitable in the short term for sage-grouse to utilize for nesting, brood rearing or wintering, due to loss of sagebrush," the plan says.

Bureau of Land Management Director Neil Kornze made a high-visibility visit to the area in late August as rehabilitation efforts were getting under way. He told planners to think big.

Beth Corbin, a botanist with the bureau who worked on the plan and is taking part in the rehabilitation, said a main challenge will be trying to establish native plants as well as preferred non-native plants before fire-prone cheatgrass and other invasive plants can move in and take over. "We're doing our best to reseed the area to restore perennials that may not recover otherwise," Corbin said.

She said the plan includes planting the species of sagebrush in the areas where it was present before the fire, a key component as the different types of sagebrush thrive under somewhat different conditions, and sage grouse themselves prefer certain types of sage brush.

"We've been doing quite a bit of inventory (before the fire) as part of the grazing-renewal process," Corbin said as to how the agency knew which types of sagebrush to plant where.

Cheatgrass gets much of the blame for the severity of last summer's fire. Several years of drought followed by a wet spring caused cheatgrass to thrive for a short period. It then dried out, setting up the conditions for the August wildfire.

Ranchers in the area say that if additional cattle had been allowed in to graze the fire wouldn't have been as severe. Federal officials say conditions were so bad because of the drought that more cattle wouldn't have made a difference.

Of the burned area, about 356 square miles are in Idaho and 80 square miles in Oregon, with a mix of private land as well as land with either state or federal management. Of the 436 square miles total, about 350 square miles are administered by the Bureau of Land Management. The fire also burned about 63 square miles of private land.

The plan is intended to have flexibility to allow for such things as lack of rain or plentiful rain, as well as possible additional plantings in areas that are struggling.

"The big issue will be to keep monitoring to see what's happening on the ground to see if they're getting where they want to go," Freemuth said. "I think all anybody can do is be cautiously optimistic that it's started well."