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TOP STORY

## Local volunteers pitch in to help reseed burned areas of Yakima River canyon

By KARL HOLAPPA staff writer  
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Kittitas County Field and Stream Club board members Gloria Sharp, left, and Deb Essman take a break from spreading  
Contributed

There is a lot of work needed to help restore the habitat ravaged by last summer's Evans Canyon fire, and local organizations are standing by to do what they can to pitch in.

Volunteers with the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and the Kittitas Environmental Education Network spent time in early November reseeding an area of land in the Umtanum Canyon area, treating approximately three acres of bottomlands with 55 pounds of seed donated from the Conservation Northwest. KCFS board member Deb Essman said November's effort was spearheaded by KEEN member Adrian Slade, and the group began their efforts by using mechanical spreaders before switching to spreading the seed by hand.

"We were very careful," she said. "Luckily, the conditions were good. It was wet and we had some rain. We had some snow afterward, which was great. Hopefully, it will just sit there dormant until spring."

Essman said the seed used is a mix of native wild grasses produced by a company out of Moses Lake, and that planting the species that are native to the area help retain wildlife that will inevitably return to the canyon over the coming year, as they are used to foraging on those specific grasses. If the seeds hold and the grasses re-establish, Essman said work will still need to be done to help shrub-steppe species like sagebrush return to the burnt area.

"It's fun to do," she said. "We can do the bottoms. We can walk and spread seed, but a lot of the sagebrush and bitterbrush burnt up. That is not only iconic, but also very important feed for mule deer, bighorn sheep and sage grouse. We've lost a lot of shrub steppe that is really difficult to establish."

Although the slower-growing plant species will take time to reestablish, Essman said she is confident that the riparian areas where species like aspen and chokecherry grow will regrow vigorously come spring. She said the riparian areas were also aided

in the fire by having the barrier of the railroad tracks that run through the Yakima River canyon, and many of those areas survived the burn.

"The resprout pretty quickly," she said. "It will come back."

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

Essman, who has been recreating in the burnt areas for decades and leads bird hikes in the canyon during the spring, said she visited the area as soon as the road through the canyon reopened to see the extent of the damage.

"It was heartbreaking to see all of that habitat," she said. "It was just scorched earth. I just stood there and cried. It was really sad."

There are glimmers of hope in the terrain, however. A week before November's reseeding trip, Essman said she visited an old homestead area that had apple trees that survived. A group of deer had found them and were snacking on the apples, which provided her with the relief that they would survive on what is left for now.

"Deer are browsers, and they depend on the sagebrush and bitterbrush," she said. "Whatever we can do to help wildlife, even if it is a little piece, you just feel like it's a start."

Essman said KCFS is prepared to help reseed another 90 acres in the Durr Road and Umtanum Falls areas, but they are waiting for word on whether the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife are able to muster the funds needed to treat the rest of the burned areas in the Wenas Wildlife Area via helicopter. The project is cost-prohibitive, however, with Essman estimating it costing almost \$2 million to complete.

"That's a hard thing to budget for if you're a state agency," she said. "Right now, we're on hold."

If they get the go ahead, Essman said they will put out a call for volunteers to help spread the seed.

"We are really hoping that they are able to find the emergency funds to spread the seed by helicopter," she said. "Even if we do all the bottoms, all those low-lying areas, if we have a big snow and a spring runoff, all that soil on the hillsides is going to come down in one big swoosh. It really is important. If we got every single person out hand spreading seed, it would still be a drop in the bucket."

Even though it may be a drop in the bucket, Essman said the feeling of accomplishment the group felt from seeing their seed on the ground and the hope that it will establish itself come spring makes every minute of being out there worth it.

"Every acre helps," she said.