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TOP STORY

## Signs of hope abound in Umtanum Recreation Area after last year's volunteer reseeding efforts

By KARL HOLAPPA staff writer  
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1 of 5



A juvenile sagebrush shines as a beacon of hope for regrowth in the Umtanum Recreation Area in the aftermath of las  
Karl Holappa/ Daily Record

A hike through the recently reopened Umtanum Recreation Area in the Yakima River Canyon shows unsurprising evidence of the catastrophe that was last summer's Evans Canyon Fire. Patches of the landscape remain scarred with blackness, with some trees and sagebrush barely hanging on to survive. Among the signs of disturbance, however, are shining beacons of hope in the form of regrowth, some of which came as a result of countless hours of volunteer work completed last winter.

The hardy volunteers trudged through frigid temperatures leading up to the closure of the Umtanum Bridge last February, spreading thousands of pounds of seed in the canyon in an attempt to give the area a jumpstart toward regrowth this spring, and for all intense purposes, the effort has borne remarkable fruit. Kittitas County Field and Stream Club member Deb Essman said people recreating in the canyon will see multiple grass species that were part of the reseeding process, as well as forbs even some juvenile sagebrush.

"At first, my expectation was that with as dry of a spring as we've had, I was not expecting very strong growth," she said. "That was my fear. Some of the areas are great. More than I expected, and that came as a surprise to me. Even though we had ideal conditions when we first dispersed the seed this winter, in that we had snowfall shortly afterward, we were hoping for ample moisture for spring."

Although she was pleasantly surprised at what she's seen in her first couple trips into the canyon, Essman said there are still areas where seed is still visible on the ground, meaning it didn't germinate this season.

"I think there is a possibility that could still germinate with the right winter and spring conditions going into next year," she said. "It's not over yet."

Essman said she hoped to see more success with the bitterbrush that was planted by the group, saying that the finicky nature of the species made planting it a labor of love last winter. The specimens were planted as plugs in order to help them have a chance of surviving.

"It was very labor intensive, and such an important winter browse for deer, especially the mule deer we have up here," she said. "I was hoping for more, but I was still pleased that we had some success, because they say that bitterbrush is very difficult to establish."

In her first trips to the canyon, Essman said the most encouraging signs she witnessed was the rapid regrowth of riparian areas.

"To see the cottonwood, aspen, chokecherry and willows coming back so vigorously is always amazing to me," she said. "It shouldn't be a shock, because intellectually I know it happens and I've seen it happen, but it's always a very pleasant surprise. There are some areas where the willows are almost as tall as I am, and the aspens are looking extremely vigorous."

Essman said more work needs to be done in the canyon over the next year. This summer, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is conducting transect studies in the canyon to get a better understanding of what survived and what didn't. Essman said her club still has seed left over from last year, and it intends on forming more volunteer groups to get out and spread it when the fall rains return to the region.

In the meantime, Essman said she makes a point to stop and tell everyone she meets in the canyon about the work that was done last winter. In doing so, she said the goal is to help them interpret what they are seeing as they recreate in the canyon this spring, and ultimately her hope is to continue to develop a sense of stewardship among the people who spend time in the areas affected by the fire.

"All of us that volunteered have a sense of personal fulfillment from the work we put in," she said. "The good thing about these kinds of projects is not only are you able to make a difference, but it also gets people to think about how they can help. We're going to need more volunteers next year, and if our work inspires people, that's a really good thing."

