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TOP STORY

## Volunteers work to reseed burnt areas after summer wildfire

By KARL HOLAPPA staff writer  
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A group of volunteers gathered last Sunday to spread over 700 pounds of seed in the Umtanum Recreation Area as pa Evans Canyon Fire.

Contributed

After a summer wildfire devastated tens of thousands of acres of shrub steppe habitat in Kittitas County last summer, a group of hardy outdoors enthusiasts have taken stewardship to new heights as they pitch in to rehabilitate the habitat they love.

Groups of volunteers have worked multiple weekends over the winter to help reseed the Umtanum area in the Yakima River Canyon after the Evans Canyon Fire scorched the landscape this past summer. Most recently, volunteers got out twice this month to finish spreading a large batch of seed received from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in an effort to bring some greenery back to the canyon come spring.

Deb Essman of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club said two groups of approximately 10 volunteers worked last Thursday and Sunday to spread approximately 1,100 pounds of seed. In total, groups have spread 2,400 pounds of seed in the canyon since the beginning of winter.

"It's been awesome," Essman said.

Essman said there was a sense of urgency with the volunteers knowing that WDFW plans on closing the suspension bridge at the Umtanum Recreation Area for maintenance and repairs at some point in the near future, effectively cutting off access to the area that needed reseeding.

"We didn't know when that was going to happen," she said.

## **BOOTS ON THE GROUND**

Volunteers Adrian Slade and Tyler Larsen were two of many who made multiple trips out to the canyon to help sow seed during the winter. Both are regular recreators in the canyon, and Slade said she has been troubled by the many fires she has witnessed in the region since she moved to the area.

"I've been feeling at a loss of anything productive to do," she said.

Before the pandemic, Slade said many of the restoration efforts were conducted through WDFW, and she said it's been difficult to stay in tune with what is going on through word of mouth. She said the idea to reseed this winter came during a conference call with Essman, WDFW and the Kittitas Environmental Education Network, which she is on the board of.

"It was Deb who put out the idea that they could give us their seed, so they didn't have to deal with orchestrating the volunteer effort during the pandemic," she said. "It was just a nice cohesive effort."

Knowing that not all areas can be reseeded on foot and taking the entire landscape into focus, Slade said she devised a method to feel as productive as possible while volunteering in the field.

"I try to hone in on a little microhabitat area, just a small plot that appeals to me and just imagine what this micro-restoration effort would do just for that one plot," she said. "I see deer tracks in that area, and I see some sagebrush still hanging on. I'm just trying to focus on the small areas that will be used by wildlife and will be improved by this effort."

Despite being disheartened by the effects of various fires over the last few years, Slade said she has gotten past to how a burnt habitat looks post-fire because she has seen how the areas will eventually recover. With all that has been done so far by the groups, she said she looks forward to the next steps of the collective effort.

"We have covered a lot of ground," she said. "It's not a short hike to get to the extent of what we've seeded, and we've got a lot more to do which I'm excited about."

Having grown up in Kittitas County, Larsen said he echoes the frustration of seeing an area he has loved his entire life being ravaged by wildfire.

"That is really hard at least on my mental health, and it makes me jaded," he said. "It makes it hard to reconcile your love for an area when it feels like there's nothing you can do about it. You just have to watch it become ruined and you feel helpless.

Despite the frustration, he said the efforts to help repair the damage are both rewarding and humbling.

"It is a small effort compared to how much was burned, but the sense of stewardship I get from doing this has felt really productive for my mental health," he said. "We can't be the only people that get really depressed for this kind of thing, and even though our effort may not be helping that much in the grand scheme of things, it makes me feel that much better."

## **THE PATH AHEAD**

Although they have finished spreading the seed provided by WDFW, Essman said the group still has sagebrush and bitterbrush seed, and she said they plan on continuing to spread that in the Umtanum area until the bridge is closed.

"We still have some areas that we would like to continue to do that," she said. "As long as that bridge is open, some of us will be running up there every day. However much time we have."

Looking ahead, Essman said the next step likely will be helping to reseed areas in the lower stretches of Durr Road, where it crosses Umtanum Creek. She said she is working with WDFW to see what help they need on the ground, as she said the agency is working on securing funding to reseed larger areas of the burn via helicopter.

"I need to find out if they still have a need to have that hand-sown," she said. "I'm guessing they do, and I know they have seed available."

Reflecting on all the volunteer hours that have been put into sowing the 3,000 pounds of seed over the winter, Essman said it has been humbling to think about all the people who put in the time to accomplish that mission.

"It's a lot of physical labor," she said. "It was a lot of time. I am looking forward to this spring and hoping that we will be able to look at what we achieved. Even if it's a small thing, I just feel like what we did was a good thing, and it will be gratifying for us and good for wildlife."