

New Phase of Wildfire Resilience Work Completed in Southeast Oregon

By Tara Thissell, BLM Public Affairs Specialist

Crews have completed another phase of wildfire prevention work in the Stinkingwater Mountains, removing overgrown juniper trees across more than 1,100 acres of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management. The effort is part of the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project, a long-term strategy aimed at reducing the risk of large, destructive wildfires while improving the health of Eastern Oregon's sagebrush steppe.

The recent work focused on cutting and piling junipers in several Stinkingwater Potential Control Location units. These areas are key to slowing or stopping wildfires before they can spread across thousands of acres. Removing juniper is one of several tools used by land managers to make the landscape more fire resilient.

"Juniper encroachment has really changed the way fire behaves in this ecosystem," said Justin DeCree, a Fuels Planner with the BLM. "By removing dense pockets of juniper, we're not just reducing fuel loads, we're giving native plants and wildlife a better chance to thrive."

The SOWR project is a massive collaborative effort covering more than 800,000 acres across Harney and Malheur counties. It's driven by High Desert Partnership's Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, which includes local ranchers, scientists, tribal members, conservationists, and government agencies all working together.

This proactive approach took shape after a series of devastating wildfires burned through Southeast Oregon more than a decade ago. The 2014 Buzzard Complex Fire scorched nearly 400,000 acres, following the Miller Homestead and Long Draw fires in 2012. These fires wiped out rangeland, destroyed wildlife habitat, and left lasting damage to the local economy.

In response, the HCWC was formed to plan and implement science-based strategies to prevent wildfires and restore damaged lands. The group helped secure funding through Oregon Senate Bill 762, which passed in 2021 and dedicated \$220 million to improving wildfire preparedness across the state.

"This work wouldn't be possible without the partnerships we've built," DeCree said. "It's not just about cutting trees. It's about working with the people who live here to protect what matters most."

The juniper treatments are part of a broader restoration effort. Alongside tree removal, land managers are also applying herbicides to control invasive grasses like cheatgrass

and medusahead, which act like gasoline during wildfire season. Native grasses and plants are then re-seeded to help the land recover and resist future fires.

More than 80,000 acres were treated during the first phase of the SOWR project. With an additional \$3.8 million in funding secured last year, another 22,000 acres are slated for treatment through 2025.



Before-and-after photos from recent work sites show the dramatic impact of these treatments: cleared hillsides, stronger native plant regrowth, and healthier water sources. Local wildlife such as mule deer, pronghorn, and the threatened greater sage grouse are already benefiting from improved habitat conditions.

Although this phase is complete, the work is far from over. HCWC and its partners plan to expand their efforts as more funding becomes available, with a long-term goal of building a landscape that is not only less vulnerable to wildfire, but also stronger in its ability to bounce back when fire does occur.

“This is about playing offense instead of defense,” DeCroo added. “We’re working today so that when the next fire season comes, we’re ready.”