

News Release
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Uncompahgre Cultivates Tomorrow's Foresters While Shaping Future Forests



Photo caption: Ecological Restoration Institute Executive Director Dr. Wally Covington, Ouray District Ranger Tammy Randall-Parker and Colorado Forest Restoration Institute Director Tony Cheng discuss changes to the forest that have occurred since pioneers arrived and the threats that now put landscapes at risk.

MONTROSE, Colo. -- Sifting through a lush carpet of grasses and forbs and neatly dressed in a Forest Service uniform, Emily Bernier calls out, "We've got 20 percent cover of *Pseudostellaria*."

Guided by Montrose High School science teacher Rusty George, this 17-year-old is participating in the Forest Service Forestry Intern Program. She's spending her summer monitoring the effects of thinning projects on the vegetation of the Uncompahgre Plateau, an overcrowded ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forest in southwestern Colorado.

"Anytime you can place young people in a position where they can see the importance of protecting and restoring the wildlands and taking care of this country's resources, you shape their thinking process about their future and the future of the world," said George.

Bernier is heading to Colorado State University in the fall for a biomedical sciences degree and a minor in conservation biology. Her dream is to become a surgeon, restoring health to sick patients. Similarly, the training she's receiving in the woods is part of a massive effort aimed at restoring health to the forest.

"Whether you are taking care of people or trees, I'm trying to make the world better than what I was born into," she said.

The Uncompahgre Plateau Collaborative Restoration Project is one of nine landscape-scale treatment efforts nationwide funded by the U.S. Forest Service.

“The plateau is a million-acre landscape that is threatened by three primary concerns,” said Ouray District Ranger Tammy Randall-Parker. “After a century of excluding fire, we now have a lot of young trees that shouldn’t be here today, competing with each other for nutrients, and creating a crown fire risk. The now weakened older trees have become vulnerable to unprecedented insect infestations. Bugs like bark beetles have moved in and are taking over, killing trees. A third risk is the decline of key forest components like aspens and meadows in these dense pine forests.”

“The top problem if you look around is the forest,” said CSU School of Ecosystem Science and Sustainability Professor Dan Binkley. “We’ve lost something that’s not quite the forest. The meadows are an important part of the ecosystem. And with all these trees, a little dry weather and wind will create a fire situation that will then result in what we don’t want, the world’s biggest meadow.”

With a common vision to restore the plateau to a more natural ecological condition that can withstand wildfire, drought, climate change and attacks from insects and disease, land managers, environmentalists, wood products industry representatives, scientists, educators and elected officials have come together.

The group met this summer on a 50-acre parcel that had been mechanically thinned and is a part of a 1,000-acre stewardship contract to be worked on throughout the coming year. Other stewardship contracts, about one each year, are planned for the next 10 years.



Photo caption: Collaborative groups like this one made up of scientists, land managers, ranchers, loggers and educators are coming together to restore millions of forested acres across the West.

“Prior to the treatment this was very dense, a condition we would not have seen prior to human settlement,” said Tony Cheng, director of the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at Colorado State University, part of the Southwestern Ecological Restoration Institutes. “A main objective of the project was to open up the forest, favoring the ponderosa pine and Douglas firs and removing the subalpine fir and other species that had encroached on the area because it hadn’t burned for a number of years.”



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Along with ground fires, also missing from the western landscape in recent years are loggers. “Through this collaboration we’ve created a process that has broken the gridlock in resource management,” said retired CSU Ecology Professor Bill Romme. “There’s been a lot of uncertainty in the supply of timber, so small-time loggers couldn’t make a living and we lost the market for the excess trees.”

Colorado Wild Director Ryan Bidwell says the treated area may appear harsh to those used to seeing thick forests, but he calls it a necessary step to transition forests from current conditions to a restored state. “It’s a work in progress. We’re all operating with the same understanding of what this landscape should look like and could look like, taking action that’s driven by what the forest needs and not by economic or political objectives.”

Also involved in the collaborative effort is Stu Krebs. Born and raised in Montrose, Krebs has spent a good part of his 60+ years in the backcountry. “When I was 15, the forest was more open. It’s oppressive how closed much of the plateau is these days. This restoration project is really neat. We’ve been out on our hands and knees trying to pick up evidence of what things were like in 1879. When I walk around this treated area, I’m struck by this gut feeling that it feels like this is the way things should be.”

Ranger Randall-Parker looks to this ambitious restoration effort with optimism in a race against time. “We’ve really got maybe just the next 20 years to abate the fire and insect threat before we lose it all. But I have great confidence in what we can accomplish together.”

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