

US seed plan aims to protect land after natural disasters

August 17 2015, by Keith Ridler

Federal authorities announced a plan Monday to produce massive quantities of seeds from native plants that can be quickly planted to help land recover from natural disasters such as wildfires and hurricanes.

The program will make landscapes more resilient and healthier, especially Western rangelands where massive wildfires have been an increasing problem, the U.S. Department of the Interior said.

"We've learned a lot based on where we have had successes and where we've had failures," said Steve Ellis, deputy director for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, as he announced the plan at the agency's regional seed warehouse in Boise. "It isn't as simple as we grab some seed off the shelf and go out there."

Officials hope to create a national network of seed collectors, growers and storage facilities so enough native seeds are available immediately after disasters to avoid erosion and prevent invasive species from moving in. The window to plant desirable species after a disaster can be less than a week and involve hundreds of square miles.

The strategy targets Western rangelands, where drought-stricken terrain fuels huge wildfires that have destroyed homes and key animal habitat. A blaze on the Idaho-Oregon border had consumed by Monday nearly 450 square miles of rangeland needed to feed cattle and habitat for sage grouse, a bird being considered for federal protection.

That fire has been fueled by cheatgrass, a fire-prone invasive species that moves in quickly and pushes out native plants, then dries out and burns easily. The new seed strategy is intended to prevent that from happening.

Besides wildfires, federal officials also noted the widespread damage that Hurricane Sandy caused in 2012 to native plant habitats on the East Coast that stabilize soil and absorb storm surges. A shortage of native seeds left the area vulnerable to erosion and invasive plants, federal officials said.

"Having the right seed in the right place at the right time makes a major difference in the health of our landscapes," Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said in a statement.

The strategy unites 12 federal agencies with tribes, states and local and private entities, and a key to its success will be the ability of growers to produce enough seeds.

Risa DeMasi, chair of the American Seed Trade Association and partner of Grassland Oregon, said at the announcement that seed growers are eager to help. But she also said producing the quantities of seeds needed after disasters will hinge on bolstering native seeds with regionally adapted species that do well in specific areas.

"That can be a very effective tool," DeMasi said. "We can start planning for that because then we can meet the needs in a much broader region."

Greg Mueller, vice president of Science at the Chicago Botanic Gardens, where research is done on restoring habitats, said the plan should remove some of the unpredictability of current restoration efforts.

"We can be geared up and ready to go rather than this boom-and-bust

activity that is happening now," he said.

Scientists and land managers for decades have been unable to stop the advance of cheatgrass, a big target of the plan. But Tim Murphy, the BLM's Idaho director, said hopes are high that the seed strategy will succeed.

"I don't think we'll ever see 100 percent removal of cheatgrass," he said. "What we are going to see is cheatgrass being a minor component of the rangeland in the future."

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