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Methow Conservancy Surveys Health of Valley Shrub-Steppe Land

Approximately seven percent of the Methow watershed is comprised of shrub-steppe land—dry natural grasslands home to sagebrush, bitterbrush, and arrowleaf balsamroot.

The somewhat barren beauty of shrub-steppe habitat leaves it particularly vulnerable to development and easy conquest by invasive weeds. According to USFS biologist Kent Woodruff, “Shrub-steppe areas are the most threatened and underserved ecosystem in the Methow watershed.”

This past spring, the Methow Conservancy launched an effort to raise awareness about the often-overlooked shrub-steppe habitat and its important role in our Valley. As part of this educational campaign, the Methow Conservancy conducted a Shrub-Steppe Survey of twenty pieces of private property to gain a better sense of the overall health of this habitat and its common sources of stress.

During June and July, eight Conservancy volunteers completed the surveys, covering more than 4,500 acres. The overall quality of the shrub-steppe habitat surveyed was good. Among the landowners surveyed, interest in the shrub-steppe habitat and learning how to care for it was high. This is a particularly promising trend.

Of the properties surveyed, 14 out of 20 (70%) were in good condition, with predominantly native species and limited weed invasions and development impacts. The survey also revealed a wide variety of plants—with one 80-acre sample supporting 44 native plant species.

Several impending sources of stress were also exposed during the survey. Invasive species (weeds) currently appear to be the biggest threat to the health of the shrub-steppe lands in the Methow. Weeds crowd out native plants and decrease soil nutrient levels. One property surveyed hosted 17 weed species in a 60-acre sample. On most of the properties, however, weeds were concentrated in disturbed areas, with only limited movement into surrounding native areas.

Fragmentation from development is another potential source of stress—only 5 of the 20 properties surveyed were over 200 acres and all of the larger properties were bisected by roads. Such fragmentation creates “edges”—which are known to have the highest percentages of invasive species.

Ultimately, protecting habitat like the shrub-steppe is a complicated, multi-layered art. But, efforts to prevent disturbances to large, healthy portions of shrub-steppe; educate residents about the beauty, diversity, and fragility of this habitat; and thoughtful, coordinated weed control efforts can help to conserve areas of high-quality shrub-steppe land in the Methow Valley.

“The good news is that there are still pockets of high-quality shrub-steppe here in the Methow Valley. Unfortunately some of these areas are under intense, development pressure, and disturbance in shrub-steppe areas often lasts a lifetime or more,” says Katharine Bill, Executive Director of the Methow Conservancy.

“At the Methow Conservancy we’re working to protect these areas with conservation easements, education and stewardship plans. So far we’ve protected 1,785 acres of shrub-steppe land with six conservation easements (out of 40 total easements for the Valley). We hope that these easements will help reduce sprawling development, weed spread and species disturbance that are associated with degraded shrub-steppe lands,” says Bill.

The Methow Conservancy is a locally-based nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring people to care for the land of the Methow Valley. Full copies of the 2004 Shrub-Steppe Survey Final Report are available from the Methow Conservancy.

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