

# O · R · E · G · O · N Conservation SHOWCASE



**Matt Williams:** Rangeland health on the Williams Ranch has improved significantly since introducing Secar to the landscape as part of a USDA-NRCS demonstration 25 years ago.

feet tall. Seed for the Secar grass growing on the Williams rangeland was first collected in the Lewiston, Idaho area along the Snake River.

NRCS District Conservationist Damon Brosnan says the remarkable growth of the grass is unusual and it has raised a lot of interest with natural resource experts. “While it’s not backed scientifically, we think the Secar may have evolved. It’s like Secar on steroids,” Damon notes with a grin. Damon finds this stand of Secar unique: “It’s more pure.” When a grass evolves, it may be identified as a new variety and given the name of the place it was discovered; in this case—Twickenham.

The Williams family has a legacy of conservation in Twickenham. Some 25 years ago, NRCS District Conservationist Roy Carlson and J.C. Gibbs got the Secar seed and talked with Matt about trying it. The performance of the grass has been exceptional on the rangeland possibly because the growing conditions are so similar to Lewiston. More than two decades later Matt and his family are researching ways to optimize the grass’ seed—laying plans to harvest, store and use the seed on their land. One such use is to reseed hundreds of acres being cleared of

*Twickenham, Ore. —*

**I**f there was a contest for producing the tallest Secar grass amongst landowners in Oregon, Matt Williams may bring home the prize. Matt has found chest-high Secar on his ranch in Twickenham along the John Day River in the center of Wheeler County. Rangeland grasses like Secar are an important tool for conservation. The first Secar on the Williams place was planted as part of a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) demonstration project 25 years ago. Secar is a long-lived, cool-season wheatgrass with an extensive root system that grows from one to four

*Legacy of  
conservation  
Produces Vigorous  
Secar Grass*

western juniper through the USDA-NRCS Cooperative Conservation Partnering Initiative (CCPI).

Damon encourages a mix of Secar and Thurber's for use in this watershed. Thurber's needlegrass is a native, cool season perennial bunchgrass common to semiarid regions and grows one to two feet tall. Damon says Thurber's is a good rangeland grass for the John Day Basin but it can be tender and fragile. Damon adds, "From the NRCS perspective, I'd like to see this Secar seed source become an effective tool in our tool chest to battle against medusahead and other undesirable grasses." Secar is a perennial with deep roots that has a greater chance to outcompete undesirable grasses in an area of juniper encroachment.

This year Matt's son Josh, a 2008 graduate of Oregon State University in Land and Water Management, collected 15 pounds of seed by hand. A thrasher is being built to collect the seed in the future. Josh says the Secar grass acts like a native grass and he likes what it does for the family's land: "It feels like our rangeland is in a healthy state." Josh and Matt will dormant seed with Secar on the juniper eradication site in late November. They will use the project as an opportunity to compare the performance of seed gathered from their land to commercial seed to see if there is a difference.

The seeds of good conservation practices on the William's land were planted long before Matt's demonstration plot with NRCS. The William's land belonged to Matt's grandfather, a rancher and county judge, who ran sheep on the property. According to Matt, the

idea of conservation began to catch on around the time of the war. His grandfather put in wooden pipes and then concrete. They used gravity to build pressure in order to transfer spring water from the top of the 3,800 ft. mountain to the bottom of the valley. When electricity came to the valley in the mid-50s, they started using centrifical pumps and sprinklers in 1960. More recently, the irrigation system was made more efficient with the purchase of variable speed drive pumps.

The next generation is taking a personal role in continuing the family's legacy of conservation. Josh and his brother Gabe underscore their commitment to conservation with their thoughts on, and actions of caring for the land.

Josh says, "We are looking at the whole health of the watershed. The John Day is one of the longest undammed rivers, so it has native steelhead populations." The available habitat for steelhead and other native fish is affected by the good conservation practices of the Williams family and their neighbors in the Sutton Mountain area. Josh has been helping Matt with the eradication of the juniper, the seeding with native grasses, installing pipeline and troughs, and setting up a burn regimen for the Williams land. Gabe is an engineer who works daily on projects that will help the land.



***Secar:** Matt stands amidst a field of Secar grass on his land. The cool-season bunchgrass has the potential to outcompete undesirable grasses and improve rangeland health.*

He says there have been lessons learned in past juniper removal projects that will guide the future use of the land in this project. Careful attention will be paid to seeding, grazing, weed control and a burning regime. Gabe says, "This project will also have an impact on an area much larger than the practice boundaries." According to Gabe, this CCPI project continues the work started in the NRCS EQIP program and matches the goals of SWCD, Fish and Wildlife, OWEB, BPA and the confederated tribes.

NRCS

*Helping People Help the Land*