CONSERVATION Showcase

Breaking Through a "Forest" of Cholla

An unnaturally large amount of prickly cholla cactus on the Acoma Reservation has been cleared, allowing the land to begin restoring a natural plant community rich in native grasses. With continued efforts to keep the cactus under control, the land can once again be utilized by cattle and wildlife for grazing.

Red Lake Ranch, bought by the Acoma Business Enterprise Board in 1989 and managed by the Acoma Land and Cattle Company, is home to a perennial spring which sits in the canyon. A multitude of archeological sites on the ranch suggest that prehistoric communities heavily used the area and spring.

"Cholla comes in with ground disturbance," said Brenda Simpson, NRCS range management specialist. "There are several reasons why cholla can invade when there is reduced grass cover. Animals can break off the joints and carry it to new places."

The cholla was so thick a horse could not walk through it, and cattle certainly could not graze.

"It was like walking through a forest of cholla," said Simpson.

Acoma Land and Cattle Co. was assisted by three partners with the grassland restoration project. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) oversaw archeological clearances for the work, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service through its Tribal Wildlife Grant program cost-shared 200 acres of the project, and the NRCS provided financial assistance on the remaining 225 acres through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Because of the abundance of archeological sites, the clearing was carefully planned and tracked. A dozer with a rake attachment covered the land, and clipped the cholla at the base, similar to how a tree would be cut. The BIA restricted the dozer from many small areas of the ranch to protect the sites from archeological disturbances. While a large area of overgrown cholla was eliminated, some small areas remain.

In addition, small fragments of cholla can generate a new cactus. Special care had to be taken during the removal not to scatter pieces and therefore produce new plants. Small regrowth caused by unavoidable scattering can be controlled, and thus prevent overgrowth to reoccur.

The cholla removal project has opened up the land again, and allowed palatable native grasses, such as blue grama and four wings salt bush, to regrow. Amazingly, none of the grasses were seeded, all have come back naturally.

"We really thought we'd have to come back in and seed this area, but it's had such great response, we won't need to," said Simpson.

The newly opened range and flourishing natural grasses will soon provide an excellent pasture for cattle to graze, and wildlife to roam.

For more information about EQIP, contact your local NRCS field office or go to www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov

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