



United States Department of Agriculture

## JOINT CHIEFS' LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP

# Black Hills Vestal Project



Project area around Custer, South Dakota. USDA Forest Service photo

Life in the Black Hills of South Dakota happens outdoors—and it's easy to see why. Riveting views of severe granite peaks, majestic Ponderosa pine forests and still mountain lakes offer residents a physical and spiritual connection to nature. Tourists come to look upon the faces of president's past on Mount Rushmore and to hike, bike and camp among the rugged terrain of the Black Hills National Forest. This is a fire-adapted landscape, but decades of fire suppression have left forests overly dense with heavy loads of ground fuels, making them susceptible to damaging wildfires and invasive pests. The people who live here value this place for its wild beauty, and they understand the connection between healthy land, the economy and their way of life. That's why they worked through the Joint Chiefs' to create a more fire resilient landscape and protect more than 5,000 homes. This partnership funded selective timber harvesting, brush removal and preparation for prescribed fire on public and private land. The results are clear: trees are spaced more naturally, allowing sunshine to reach the ground. The threat of fire getting into the forest canopy is significantly reduced, and invasive beetles can't spread as easily. These outcomes will protect the community far into the future and preserve what makes it so special in the first place.

### PROJECT IMPACT

# 25

## Jobs Created

Total awarded through the Joint Chiefs' from 2015-17: \$1.2 million

The Joint Chiefs' created 25 jobs for local businesses, contractors and non-government organizations to improve forest health and make the forest more resilient to insects and wildfire.

USDA's Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service are working together to improve the health of forests where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership, the two USDA agencies are restoring landscapes by reducing wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.



SOUTH DAKOTA

## Black Hills Vestal Project RESULTS



Elk

USDA Forest Service photo

### Created insect and wildfire – resistant



landscapes: Through years of fire suppression, dense "doghair" thickets of small ponderosa pine have developed. Partners helped remove these thickets to eliminate ladder fuels for wildfires and allow fires that do happen to burn slower and act like historic natural fires. A healthy forest with proper tree densities can withstand insect attacks and enables safer wildfire control.

### Enhanced wildlife habitat: In healthy



forests, more sunlight reaches the ground, allowing understory - brush, flowers and grasses - to flourish.

This understory of forages provides food for elk, deer and turkey, and provides potential pollinator habitat. Brush management practice applied enhanced meadows and created edges between meadow and forest, where pollinator plants can thrive.

# BLACK HILLS VESTAL PROJECT



Outlaw Ranch © Outlaw Ranch

## Giving Back to the Community by Protecting the Land

"I believe we are put on this earth to take care of it," said Mark Thompson, who has worked for 35 years to manage the grounds and facilities of Outlaw Ranch, a 195-acre Lutheran retreat adjacent to the Black Hills National Forest. "And if we can leave it in better condition than what we found it, we have been successful."

Each year, thousands of children and families connect with each other while exploring the granite outcrops around Outlaw Ranch. Thompson raised his three sons here, two of which now work for the federal government in natural resources management. His sons and the state forester made him aware of the cost-share opportunities under the Joint Chiefs. "When somebody gives you the incentive to do things you know need to be done, it's a no brainer," Thompson said. "When the experts tell you something, it's a good idea to do it. We have 60-70 acres of timber here, and we want what's best for the land. When the Forest Service works around us to improve their stands of timber, we are happy to partner to coordinate and do the same thing to ensure our land is improving with the surrounding area."

Funding supported the removal of brush and dead material from the ranch, which helps make the property more resilient to wildfires and better for livestock. "We have 16 horses, so having good land for grazing is pretty important," Thompson said. "I don't have a formal background in land management, so it makes sense to listen to the experts. We don't see that as the government telling us what we have to do. We instead see these professionals as partners, helping us treat this land with respect."

Most of all, Thompson is proud of the work he does to share this wild and wonderful land with children—his own and the multitude of campers he has interacted with over the years. "We try to teach kids that come through here that we need to be good stewards, not just take, but give back."



Mark Thompson © Outlaw Ranch

### Key Partners

South Dakota Resource  
Conservation and  
Forestry

Custer County  
Conservation District

State of South Dakota

Custer State Park