



United States Department of Agriculture

## JOINT CHIEFS' LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PARTNERSHIP

# West Vernon Project



UTAH



West Vernon project area, USDA Forest Service

The scenic valleys and deep forests of this part of Utah have inspired people for centuries. Sheep and cattle graze. There are more than a million area residents, and tourists camp, picnic, swim, fish, ski, and snowboard throughout the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest. This is one of the most heavily visited places in the national forest system. Some of the most scenic and treasured features of this forest, which spans more than 2 million acres, can be found in the Spanish Fork Ranger District. With a patchwork of private land throughout this part of the forest, relationships with landowners and people who hold permits to graze livestock on Federal land are critical to effectively treat the landscape. This area is adapted to endure occasional natural fire, but in recent decades, fire has been suppressed. In the absence of fire, native juniper trees are not controlled naturally. Overly dense stands of these trees keep sunlight from reaching the ground. Understory plants that serve as food for wildlife, including prized game species like mule deer, struggle to thrive. Joint Chiefs' funding was used to thin juniper trees and implement other management strategies that improve the resiliency of the land and protect habitat for treasured species like sage grouse.

### West Vernon Project RESULTS



Pineview Reservoir, USDA Forest Service photo

**Reduced wildfire threats:** Partners thinned dense juniper stands and applied other management practices to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire on more than 3,600 acres of the national forest and nearly 1,000 acres of private land. Nine-thousand acres of the national forest were also cleared for future treatments.



**Improved water quality:** Reducing the juniper density and bringing back understory plants will help control erosion and reduce sediment in area waterways, protecting water quality for people and wildlife.



**Enhances sagebrush habitat:** Sage grouse are indicators of a healthy sagebrush ecosystem, and their numbers are dwindling across much of the country. Restoring understory plants supports their survival, and land restoration for sage grouse enhances habitat for other at-risk species.



#### PROJECT IMPACT

**\$1+ million**  
matching funds

This project helped form partnerships while existing ones were strengthened, leading to more than \$1 million in matching funding support for over the next five years.

Total awarded through the Joint Chiefs' from 2015-17: \$2.7 million

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.

## WEST VERNON PROJECT



Rob Fitzgerald, NRCS

## Protecting Communities and Boosting Local Economies

Rob Fitzgerald's roots reach deep under the land his family has ranched for generations. "Ranchers feel like we have an obligation to our land," said Rob. When funding from the Joint Chiefs' became available to help improve land like Rob's, he didn't hesitate to sign up. "A lot of our property has been overrun by juniper trees," Rob said. "They secrete acid around their roots so not much else can grow, and that keeps most wildlife away. We don't see anything besides ticks, tarantulas, and rattlesnakes. My dad got rid of some of those trees years ago, but we couldn't find the money to do it at a scale that mattered until this program came along."

Reducing the density of juniper trees is about more than aesthetics. Rob wants his land to remain productive for future generations. "If we had to haul water, it would be tough for us," he said. "Each tree gobbles up hundreds of gallons of water when it rains. This has been one of the driest years we have ever had in Utah, but the flow in our springs has increased." His neighbors are watching and "they recognize that they don't have water, but we do, because of removing these trees," Rob explained.

Matthew Phillippi, rangeland management specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, helped Rob and other area landowners access Joint Chiefs' funding to improve their land for grazing and habitat conservation. "These ranchers are trying to make a living," Matthew said. "What I love about my job is seeing the outcomes. We are improving sage grouse habitat, reducing the threat of wildfire, and helping people who are financially and emotionally connected to this landscape."



Matthew Phillippi, NRCS

### Key Partners

Utah Habitat Council

Mule Deer Foundation

Shambip Conservation District

Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife

Watershed Restoration Initiative, State of Utah, Division of Wildlife Resources

Safari Club International

Toole County Commission