

# Volunteers help sagebrush get a new start on ALE

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Facing strong winds and biting cold, volunteers from Duratek Federal Services and the Boy Scouts planted 5,000 sagebrush seedlings on a burned-over portion of the Fitzner-Eberhardt Arid Lands Ecology Reserve. Better known as the ALE, this land suffered a devastating loss of sagebrush cover during the Hanford fire in the summer of 2000.

Thirty Scouts joined 20 employees of Duratek as they put shovel to earth and planted the seedlings on Saturday, Dec. 1. Personnel from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Energy were also volunteering their time.

Joel Eacker, president of Duratek Federal Services Northwest Operations, explained why his company wanted to be involved with the planting effort. "We saw this replanting as a way our employees could express their concern for our local environment beyond the critical work we do for our customers," Eacker said. "It was also good to demonstrate to the Scouts that we all have a responsibility to protect these important ecological areas."

In addition to coordinating the volunteer labor, Duratek also purchased the plants, which were grown from seed collected from the ALE. The seedlings germinated last April and were grown until the rootstock was about 6 to 8 inches long.

The sagebrush planting is part of an effort by the Fish and Wildlife Service to protect and restore the native habitats and biodiversity of the Columbia Basin shrub-steppe ecosystem. The federal agency manages the ALE under an agreement with the Department of Energy.

A study of the burned portions of the ALE found that more than 75 percent of the sagebrush vegetation was lost during the fire. Repeated large fires since 1978 have eliminated nearly the entire shrub component of the ecosystem of the reserve. Unlike rabbit-brush, sagebrush usually does not re-sprout following a fire, so active restoration through seeding or planting is required to reestablish it.

Sagebrush is either a food source or provides cover for nesting, resting, warmth or escape for a wide variety of species. Its thick canopy also protects under-story vegetation, a valuable food source for wildlife.

Wildlife biologist Heidi Brunkal of the Fish and Wildlife Service said several species depend on sagebrush for nutrition and cover. "Sagebrush provides from 95 to 100 percent of the winter diet for the greater sage grouse," she explained. "Our local elk herds rely on sagebrush for thermoregulation — lying in mature stands for shade or thermal cover and protection from wind."

Additional sagebrush plantings on the ALE are under way on a much larger scale. Another 165,000 seedlings are to be planted by the Fish and Wildlife Service during the next few weeks. ♦



Local Boy Scout leaders plant sagebrush seedlings on the Fitzner-Eberhardt Arid Lands Ecology Reserve. Volunteers from Duratek Federal Services and other Hanford organizations joined the Scouts in the effort.