

(Neb.)-Seed Blocks Used To Help Wildlife Replenish Burned Pine Ridge Forests

By: Jeremy Anderson Posted at: 03/30/2013 07:34 AM

(PINE RIDGE)-Natural resource officials in northwest Nebraska are turning to one of the oldest forms of seed dispersal to replace some of the countless trees and shrubs that were burned in the 2012 Pine Ridge forest fires.

Blocks containing seeds of native trees and shrubs will soon be fed to the region's wild animals, which are expected to "deposit" the seeds in remote areas of the region's rugged landscape.

Shelley Steffl of Chadron, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission wildlife biologist leading the effort, said the project is intended to move seeds to the most remote areas of the Pine Ridge and complement future forest rehabilitation efforts.

She and the crew have created 800 of the blocks and have enough seed for about 300 more. Up to 10 blocks initially will be made available to individual landowners whose timberland was affected by the fires. If blocks remain after the first round of dispersal, each landowner will be able to receive more as needed.

"We're looking at making these seeds move through wildlife and not livestock," Steffl said, noting the livestock are more likely to walk on gentle slope areas where thick grass provides too much competition for seeds. "The blocks are small enough that we can put them out so the deer, elk, turkeys and songbirds can help the seed dispersal."

She's recommending the blocks be placed a quarter-mile apart about midway up north- and east-facing slopes, where they will be less vulnerable to competition from thick grasses and heat as the seedlings grow.

The blocks contain seeds for 12 native species of trees and shrubs, including deciduous varieties such as Rocky Mountain maple and conifer species, including ponderosa pine. The ingredients are listed on a biodegradable label that quickly falls apart when exposed to moisture.

Steffl said one of the greatest challenges of the project was developing a recipe that contains the right ratio of molasses and livestock mineral to keep the blocks from falling apart. Most livestock feed blocks are formed using pressure and heat, but that technique could not be used without sterilizing some of the seed.

Steffl said the idea for the project derived from a brainstorming session with Upper Niobrara White Natural Resources District (NRD) manager Lyndon Vogt, and Nebraska Forest Service district forester Doak Nickerson. "The more we thought about it, the more we thought that it just might work," she said.

A grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust was used to help with a portion of funding for the project. Thanks to that contribution, these blocks are available to landowners for just \$3 per block, which is well below the actual cost of seed and production.

Landowners who want to be placed on a list for the blocks may contact Steffl at [308-432-6190](tel:308-432-6190) or visit the Upper Niobrara White NRD, 430 E. Second St., Chadron.