



Aspen Management on Private Lands

By: Western Landowners Alliance Staff

September 2014



Aspen Management on Private Lands

By: Western Landowners Alliance Staff

September 2014



The decline of aspen in Western forests over the past several decades has been a significant concern to scientists, foresters and land managers, including private landowners. Aspen is an important component of Western forests for aesthetic, economic and ecological reasons. Based on recommendations from researchers, land managers are implementing regeneration projects designed to restore aspen to the landscape. Because aspen is a pioneer species that comes in after major disturbance events such as fire, and because it is generally shade intolerant, a common and scientifically recommended approach to restoring aspen is to mimic such disturbance in the form of patch cuts.

A patch-cut treatment typically involves the removal of most or all aspen stems and conifers in the harvest area. Aspen propagate primarily through suckering—sending sprouts up from the roots. When a patch of aspen is harvested, the disturbance stimulates intense suckering, generating thousands of young stems per acre. A similar response is often observed after forest fires.

In parts of the West, significant elk populations can adversely impact the ability of aspen to mature. Heavy foraging by elk on young aspen can prevent saplings from ever reaching maturity and in many Western forests, there is a notable absence of young aspen trees. Where elk populations are large, short multi-stemmed aspen “shrubs” provide evidence of intense browse pressure.

Because of this, aspen regeneration in areas with substantial elk populations requires post-harvest fencing enclosures to keep elk out of the harvest area. This enables the young aspen to grow to sufficient size that they are no longer at risk from browsing. Once they reach this size, the fencing can be removed. It is important that fencing be installed shortly after the harvest so that browsing does not occur as the saplings are first emerging. Land managers have experimented with a number of different fencing materials, ranging from brush and decadent trees generated during the harvest, to netting, electric and wildlife fencing.

Many private landowners have taken the lead in aspen restoration, often incurring the cost of treatments out of pocket. In some cases, healthy aspen stems or encroaching conifers can be sold to help offset the costs of building and maintaining the ex-closure. In cases where the aspen stand is old and decadent, there is little remaining commercial value that can be captured in the treatment. Some federal programs, including NRCS and Partners for Fish and Wildlife, provide cost share funds for aspen regeneration treatments.

Landowners, foresters and researchers continue to experiment and monitor aspen regeneration projects in the effort to identify the most cost-effective and ecologically appropriate strategies. Recent workshops and site tours have been hosted by Western Landowners Alliance members in DeBeque, Colorado, near Alamosa, Colorado and in Chama, New Mexico. These workshops help landowners share knowledge and see the results of various aspen regeneration projects and fencing strategies first hand. Learning from one another can save landowners and public land managers significant costs and years of experimentation.



Below are photographs illustrating different projects on member ranches and public lands, as well as links to sites for additional information. If you are a landowner who is interested in or already active in managing aspen, we welcome your participation in future aspen events and invite you to share any knowledge you may have gained.



Successful aspen regeneration at the High Lonesome Ranch. Note the decadent stand in the background.



Hal Salvwasser, former dean of Oregon State University School of Forestry, stands next to a High Lonesome Ranch aspen enclosure.



Public and private land managers and wildlife officials gather on this ranch to study aspen regeneration. Note the abundance of aspen stems per acre within the brush fence enclosure and the absence of regeneration outside the fence.



This experimental site in south central Colorado was left unfenced following a regeneration harvest. No regeneration took place due to heavy browsing by elk.



Landowners, managers and public agency officials gather on this ranch near Chama, New Mexico to discuss forestry and aspen management.



Forester Jim Webb demonstrates the height of young aspen protected by an exclosure following treatment.



Successful aspen regeneration and brush fencing on this Colorado ranch located south of Pagosa Springs. This ranch has been doing aspen regeneration projects for more than a decade.



This ranch has been doing aspen regeneration treatments for 12 years and has experimented with a wide range of strategies. Note the aspen inside the fence and the absence of aspen outside the fence.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- <http://csfs.colostate.edu/pdfs/05fhr.pdf>
- <http://csfs.colostate.edu/pages/forest-types-aspen.html>
- <http://warnercnr.colostate.edu/docs/frs/cfri/shepperd.pdf>
- <https://r1.dfg.ca.gov/Portal/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=4wZADxEXoSA%3d&tabid=924&mid=1926>
- http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_gtr178.pdf
- http://www.bluevalleyranch.com/explore_aspen.php
- <http://www.western-aspen-alliance.org/pdf/AspenRestoration.pdf>
- <http://www.friendsofnorthernarizonaforests.org/page-1508158>





Western Landowners Alliance

Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) invites you to join us in advancing the ecological health and economic vitality of private and leased public lands in the West. Led by landowners, we work to advance policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species. As landowners, we have a vital role to play in shaping the modern American West. Please see our website at www.westernlandownersalliance.org for an introduction to our work, or contact us directly at allison@westernlandownersalliance.org.