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Wrapping his hand around a sagebrush plant, inmate Mr. Pence pulls the seedling out of its cone-tainer to check for root growth. He is just one member of the sagebrush team at Oregon's Warner Creek Correctional Facility (WCCF), completing the full circle of a native plant's life from seed to plant-out.

<https://ser-insr.org/news/2019/5/13/restoring-habitat-and-hope>

Inmates at WCCF and eight other prisons in Idaho, Nevada, California, and Wyoming are propagating sagebrush to help restore priority greater sage-grouse habitat that has been burned by wildfires on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The greater sage-grouse, an iconic bird of the sagebrush steppe, has declined substantially across its historic habitat. The great basin has lost approximately half its former sagebrush ecosystem in recent decades. Invasive weeds create fire conditions that burn large areas making it difficult to re-establish native plants. This, in turn, puts greater sage-grouse habitat at risk. Sagebrush does not recover quickly after a fire, often taking 30 to 50 years to become reestablished. Transplanting seedlings with a developed root system supplements re-seeding efforts and gives sagebrush a head start over invasive cheatgrass.

Since 2014 the “Sagebrush in Prisons” program has out-planted over 1 million native plugs, mostly on federal lands, with support from the Bureau of Land Management’s Plant Conservation and Restoration Program. [Institute for Applied Ecology](#) (IAE), a non-profit organization based in Corvallis, is overseeing the project in partnership with the BLM and Department of Corrections. The Winnemucca BLM District Office in Nevada has received hundreds of thousands of sagebrush plugs grown by inmates. The staff from the BLM district office commented:

*“The Winnemucca BLM District has benefited immensely from the seedling production. Our office is really impressed with the quality of the sagebrush seedlings we received from the prisons. Seedling planting is an important step in achieving the healthy ecosystems we are working to restore. Sagebrush in Prisons makes acquiring this valuable tool for landscape-level restoration a cost-effective reality”*



Inmates at Snake River Correctional Institution grow high-quality plants (photo: Nancy DeWitt)



South Boise Women's Correctional Center inmates prepare sagebrush for delivery (photo: Nancy DeWitt)

The inmates benefit as well. The project encourages a stewardship ethic among people who otherwise have little or no access to nature and science. By propagating and nurturing sagebrush and other plants needed for restoration adults-in-custody gain vocational skills in horticulture, problem solving, team building, data collection, and ecological restoration. The project also provides an opportunity for incarcerated men and women to give back to their community, generates a sense of accomplishment, reduces idleness and stress, offers refuge from the chaos and limitations of prison life, and increases awareness about conservation issues. As one participant this year stated:



Idaho State Correctional Institution Inmates package sagebrush for delivery (photo: Nancy DeWitt)

*"It's a great way to give back to our community. I feel it's a positive project that not only teaches inmates teamwork and dedication, but it gives us a key to a brighter future. It provides us with tools that may help us get a job. It also gives us something to focus on and be proud of."*

Starting at the end of April, inmate crews mix together peat moss, vermiculite and perlite followed by carefully filling cone-tainers with the soil mixture. Each inmate will then carefully sprinkle 5-7 tiny sagebrush seeds on the soil surface of every cone-tainer. Throughout the summer they will water, thin, and fertilize the seedlings while keeping a



South Boise Women's Correctional Center inmate plants sagebrush on a burn near Boise, ID (photo: Nancy DeWitt)

detailed log of plant care - the results are healthy, robust plants. Come fall, adults in custody will remove the plants from the cone-tainers and gently place them in bags to be boxed up for delivery. In some instances, eligible inmates will leave their prison facility during the day to out-plant the seedlings in their new habitat. These plants will eventually provide critical habitat components, such as food and cover, for greater sage-grouse and many other wildlife species.

One inmate wrote eloquently about his involvement in the project:

*"The sagebrush program has been very good for my soul. This project has done more than rescue the sage grouse, it has allowed us, men, to do and be something positive. Through this project, men's lives*

*begin to have worth; we see that we can be positive and benefit the world instead of bringing it down. Someone smiling, and saying well done can move a man's heart and give him back hope."*

Inmates at prison facilities also receive sustainability lectures from educators who come to the facility each month to discuss topics such as green energy, beekeeping, mammals of the sagebrush steppe and other aspects of science or ecology. This educator-prisoner interaction provides scientists with an underserved audience for their work, and prisoners with information they may not have had any access to in their lives.

Guest speaker, Marc Von Huene from Treasure Valley Beekeepers Association, had this to say about his experience entering the prison environment:

*“As I had never worked with inmates before I had to overcome a lot of my preconceived ideas. These are people that lost their way for any number of reasons – bad influences, bad home life, questionable friends. Rehabilitation is absolutely the best option. I’m glad I could play my small part. I think giving these guys something to nurture and be proud of is a great way to bring out the caring people from each one of them.”*

With funding support from the Oregon Community Foundation, IAE added a new component to the project in 2018. Local middle school and high school students from Paisley and Lakeview High School in rural Oregon participated in the planting out process on an area affected by wildfire just outside their town. Students designed restoration experiments using different fertilizers, mycorrhizae and various growth mediums. These same students will monitor their plants survival later this spring.

For inmates serving time, the “Sagebrush in Prison Project” provides a needed opportunity to work outside and nurture





Paisley Oregon students plant out sagebrush on a burn located near their school (photo: Stacy Moore)

living things. For many it is the first time they have completed something worthwhile and given back to society. A woman inmate at South Boise Woman's Correctional Center in Idaho summed up the project with these words:

*"This program gets you out and about with a purpose. It is far easier to stay out of trouble when you are busy. Growing sagebrush gave me back some of the dignity and respect that you lose when sentenced to do any time behind bars."*

If you want to know more or have questions, you may contact [Tom Kaye](#), Executive Director and Senior Ecologist at [Institute for Applied Ecology](#)



South Boise Women's Correctional Center inmate sagebrush team (photo: Nancy DeWitt)

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