

Shrub-Steppe Working Group Meeting November 2003

By Mike Marsh, WNPS Conservation Committee

A group of botanists, including state and federal scientists, meets as the “Shrub-Steppe Working Group” Topics discussed at a meeting held in November 2003 give valuable insight into what is being done to understand and protect this ecosystem in Washington.

Mapping Steppe Lands

Hans Smith, of the Pacific Biodiversity Institute, and George Wooten, with the Kettle Range Conservation Group, are using several methods and data sources to map and classify steppe habitats. They are combining the best possible habitat analysis with ownership map layers available from the Department of Natural Resources, with the goal of prioritizing parcels of land for protection or acquisition.

Richard Easterly is mapping large portions of the Columbia Basin, and finds great floristic differences among different habitats. He is optimistic that there is a way to “walk back” to a lower invasive presence, and has seen places where cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) has gone away. Steve Link commented that a study from Asia found that all plants there are allelopathic to cheatgrass, so it is not very common there.

Pam Camp, with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, discussed her work with The Nature Conservancy mapping Moses Coulee and the Beezley Hills, using infrared aerial photos. With one meter resolution, they can distinguish sites with different densities of sagebrush.

Mike Schroeder and Matt Vander Haegen, with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, are completing a landscape characterization of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands to assess their capacity to support sagebrush obligate birds/mammals. CRP is a program to withdraw sensitive lands from cultivation by seeding them with grasses and setting them aside from grazing or other harvest.

Rex Crawford, with the Washington Department of Natural Resources’ Natural Heritage Program, described his work inventorying and classifying riparian habitat in Eastern Washington. He has developed and published a detailed classification based on the Cowardin system, but which fits these environments more closely.

Dealing with Invasives

Jim Evans, with The Nature Conservancy, discussed his work interpreting the effects on the spread of invasives of the 2000 fire on Hanford. He noted that recovery seems to depend on prior grassland condition (including presence of invasive propagules) and prior presence of shrubs, which burned hotter than land where shrubs were absent.

George Wooten and other Okanogan Chapter members have worked for years to improve native lands in their area, proposing and implementing weed control methods on Washington Department of Wildlife lands and in the national forests, and getting public attention for issues such as inappropriate development of lands in the Methow Valley.

Restoration

Pam Camp is looking at possibilities for restoring wheat fields and Conservation Reserve Program fields with natives. Pam has information from a survey of restoration work in the Columbia Basin last year. Rob Crandall’s Methow Valley nursery is growing seeds for Pam’s restoration projects.

Habitat Preservation

The Department of Natural Resources manages State Trust Lands, which are intended to provide revenue to school systems and counties. Rather large areas of Trust land in eastern Washington have been leased to orchardists and grape growers, who plow up the native steppe vegetation. Rex Crawford leads a team which is

assessing East-side DNR lands, especially those slated for conversion to agricultural land, to determine their importance for preservation.

A Central Washington Land Trust has been formed, and it has approached the Cascade Land Trust with intention to affiliate.

The Shrub-Steppe Working Group is planning a conference on shrub-steppe issues, to be held in conjunction with the Northwest Scientific Association meeting in Ellensburg March 24-27.