

Restoring Utah's Mule Deer Requires a Solid Foundation

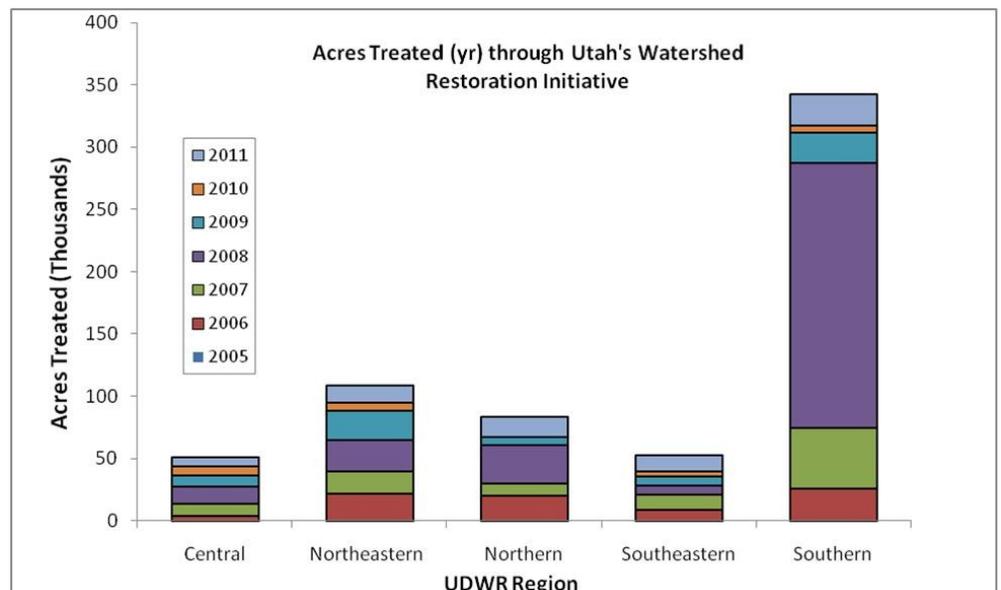
By Paul Briggs, Southern Region Regional Advisory Council (RAC) member

Sportsmen that spent time hunting mule deer in southern Utah this past fall know that the success rate was lower than in previous years. Hunters in Utah were frustrated with the experience and have let state wildlife managers know. Many issues and solutions have been proposed in the form of harvest strategies, predator control, season length, along with all the usual suspects. It seems that most individuals and sportsmen's groups have a solution or cause on which they are focused and all are correct in part. The management of mule deer on a statewide scale is much more complex than any one issue, but each issue is an important part of the total project.

With that said, let's look at the restoration of Utah's mule deer population as if it were a home restoration project. It all begins with the foundation. The foundation of any wildlife population is the habitat. Just as in restoring a house, none of the other investments put toward framing, wiring, plumbing, roofing, etc. are going to pay off when the foundation is inadequate. In Utah's Southern Region, as in most of the intermountain west, the foundation of mule deer populations (habitat) has suffered decades of neglect due to urban development and infrastructure construction. As a result, some sections of the foundation have deteriorated beyond repair. This requires a new blue print with additional footings to maintain or increase the square footage (population levels). This blue print is the Utah Mule Deer Plan (approved on December 4, 2008) and will be in effect for five years from this date. The plan identifies over a half million acres of habitat improvements and a statewide population objective of 426,000 deer.

Utah hired a general contractor to initiate needed repairs - a partnership known as Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI). As an example, in southwestern Utah from 2005 to 2011, the partnership treated approximately 341,628 acres of land, accounting for 54 percent of the states' total acres treated, while utilizing only 36 percent of the states' funding (approximately \$38,650,224). The extensive habitat improvements provide the foundation for increasing the number and quality of mule deer and other species, while providing additional opportunities to sportsmen.

This graph illustrates the effectiveness of Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative in the southern region and the leverage this great partnership has produced in regards to quality landscape level projects.



The WRI, general contractor, has enlisted the help of an extensive group of subcontractors. The list includes: the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Mule Deer Foundation, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, State of Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration, and the National Wild Turkey Federation, to name a few. For a complete list of partners visit the WRI website at (<http://wildlife.utah.gov/watersheds/index.php>).

These subcontractors complete the structure by controlling predators, improving fence and road crossing structures, providing law enforcement, facilitating land purchases and conservation easements, creating additional hunting opportunities, providing youth and public education programs and increasing access to public and private lands.

“Cooperation and partnering by all those who manage and care about mule deer habitat has provided the necessary leveraging and funding for the success of the WRI,” said UDWR Southern Region Habitat Restoration Biologist, Gary Bezzant. This group of subcontractors, like any other, is assembled based on the specific skills they bring to the project. But instead of dry wall, tile, or HVAC, the specialties include fund raising, vegetation management, land acquisition, wildlife management and education. Unlike conventional construction, these subs don’t have to wait for the concrete to cure to begin their work - state and federal agencies, sportsmen’s organizations, private landowners and others work year-round to meet WRI objectives.

As with any construction project, after the initial investment is complete, the finished product requires periodic maintenance and upkeep, as well as some unexpected repairs and maybe an upgrade or two. However, there are some variables in population management that can’t be mitigated with money. Disease, unplanned fire, insect infestations, prolonged drought or severe winters have and will always result in a temporary reduction in population numbers. However, if the foundation is solid, the rest of the structure is much easier to restore.

Now let’s zoom out a bit and see where our newly restored house fits into the neighborhood. By proactively managing the landscape and improving habitat, other benefits are achieved as well Including, improved water quality and fisheries habitat; increased forage for livestock and big game; reduced car/deer collisions, increased recreational opportunities for hunting and non-hunting wildlife enthusiasts; and benefits to sagebrush obligates, such as sage grouse.

By investing in and restoring our property (mule deer habitat), the property values (overall rangeland health) in the neighborhood increase as well.

This treatment was conducted south of Beaver, Utah and east of Interstate 15 to improve wildlife habitat and reduce the risk of wildfire to Beaver County Residents.

Multi-phase and multi-year landscape level treatments conducted in this area are very noticeable and are just in the beginning stages of producing improved rangeland health benefits in southwestern Utah.



There are always serious threats to the foundation of the project. These include increased human development on critical habitat, invasive plant species (both native and introduced), special interest groups who paint habitat/fuels management as devastation or deforestation, politicians who don't value or haven't been patient enough to see the return on the investment. Utah's general contractor and the subs all need to be aware of and address these threats to the foundation by taking steps to educate and involve others in the project, where appropriate. They also need to involve others in cooperative partnerships, while remaining focused on the overall objectives. While each component of the construction is important to the success of the project, it is a mistake to fight to the death over the color of the shutters when the foundation is being knocked out from beneath your feet.



The upper photo was taken in Kane County in a treatment conducted in 2010 on BLM managed lands (Muddy Creek). It is common practice for mule deer to follow behind the "bullhog" machines, even in early stages of vegetation enhancement restoration projects. Big game continue to take advantage of newly created forage and habitat provided by WRI funded projects.