Grant Proposal

We won't be cheated: telling the story of cheatgrass to save a Colorado ecosystem

An interagency group of land managers, Western Colorado University faculty and graduate students seeks $10,000 to tell the story of cheatgrass invasion in the sagebrush country of the Gunnison Basin through print media and podcasts. The goal of this communications project is threefold: 1) raise the alarm about how cheatgrass threatens the basin's economy and landscapes by describing what is at stake as well as the harm cheatgrass has wrought across the Intermountain West, 2) tell the human stories behind the fight against cheatgrass in the Gunnison Basin, 3) motivate citizens and land managers to contain and reverse the spread of cheatgrass.

As cheatgrass respects neither fence lines nor political jurisdictions, the group that requests these funds includes staff from nearly every public lands agency in the Gunnison Basin: the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Gunnison County Weed Management District, and the Gunnison Conservation District. The group also includes faculty from Western Colorado University who have researched the problem of cheatgrass invasion over the past three decades.

These public land managers and scientists have enlisted journalist and Western Colorado University Masters in Environmental Management student Sam Liebl as their project leader on this effort. Liebl is a magazine and newspaper writer with a specialty in communicating complex natural resource issues to a broad audience. His coverage and photography of Hurricane Harvey's environmental impacts on the Gulf Coast won several awards from the Associated Press earlier this year.

Cheatgrass has heavily infested and is on the verge of overtaking entire drainages in the Gunnison Basin, threatening to displace big game, degrade the value of rangelands, deplete the last remaining habitat of the Gunnison sage-grouse and turn recreational users into vectors for further spread. The consequences of cheatgrass invasion are plain to see across the 400,000 acres that have already been infested in the Intermountain West. In places like the Snake River Plain of Southern Idaho and the Interstate 80 corridor in Nevada, cheatgrass has overtaken formerly healthy sagebrush rangelands and replaced them with an invasive monoculture. Land managers are in consensus that the Gunnison Basin can avert a similar fate but only if agencies and citizens have the resources and public support to take swift and large-scale actions.

This communications project aims to catalyze that support. Half of the funds ($5,000) will go to print media coverage and conservation photography led by Sam Liebl, who will continue to contribute pieces to Gunnison County's two local newspapers and will expand this project's reach by pitching stories to major metropolitan newspapers as well as stakeholder specific publications such as ranching magazines, trail running blogs, conservation non-profit newsletters and public land agency press releases. Additionally, he will develop a presentation on this issue that he will take to conservation-oriented groups across Colorado. This amount of

funding will employ Liebl's services for five hours per week over the course of a year starting in early 2019.

The other half of the funding ($5,000) will go to the production of a series of podcasts, local social media communications, as well as short stories that will be distributed to public radio stations. The podcast series will consist of five 15-minute episodes with a story arc that will leave listeners wanting to hear more after each episode. The episodes will cover, in order, 1) Sage-grouse as a bellwether for sage brush ecosystems and how cheatgrass threatens the bird, 2) Nevada and Idaho as examples of the damage cheatgrass can do, 3) the debate over cheatgrass in Gunnison County, 4) the present threat to the Gunnison Basin's culture, livelihoods and wildlife, 5) there is still hope for the Gunnison Basin and what must be done. Segments of these episodes will be adapted as short news stories suitable for public radio stations. The interagency group will enlist the help of Western Colorado University students and local multimedia professionals to begin production of these episodes in early 2019 with the goal of beginning distribution in April and May of 2019. The timing of the episodes aligns with key life history stages of the cheatgrass where it can be recognized and pulled as well as a time of increased awareness of Gunnison Sage-grouse during their lekking season.

Public opinion surrounding management of cheatgrass in the Gunnison Basin has shifted from regarding it as a non-issue in the 1990's and early 2000's to some seeing it as an unstoppable change at present. This project will be successful if it transforms the public's apathy into support for necessary herbicide treatments on public lands, native perennial re-plantings after disturbances like fire, progressive grazing practices, awareness campaigns by recreation groups and increased commitments by the citizens and County and City officials of Gunnison to eliminate cheatgrass on road easements and private property.