

An abundance of crested wheatgrass  
By Larry Hyslop



Crested wheatgrass heads

Recently, I was wishing I had a haying crew, or at least a cow, horse, or a few goats as I trimmed the tall grass on my property. I was creating a firebreak, being nervous about this year's wildfire season. Other acre lots stand between me and open sagebrush but a half-acre of tall grass still makes me nervous.

Some of the ground is tall cheatgrass and mustard but mainly my property is covered with a luxuriant growth of crested wheatgrass. This spring's abundant moisture has been good for this grass, a grass very important to Elko County although it is an introduced Asian grass and somewhat controversial.

It is easy to both identify and find. The grass stems hold flattened seed heads, as if you stepped on a typical grass head. It is so common if you removed all the crested wheatgrass around and inside Elko, the ground would be bare of grass other than the omnipresent cheatgrass. I-80 is lined with crested wheatgrass, and most mine reclamation sites have it.

The problem with crested wheatgrass (if there is a problem) is it is a non-native grass. It originated on the cold deserts of Asia, in much the same area and under the same conditions as cheatgrass.

Range managers first planted crested wheatgrass to control an invasive weed, halogeton. Crested wheatgrass grows well in our arid county and is tolerant of heavy grazing. Range managers saw its value as forage on depleted rangelands. From the mid-1950s to 1970, they planted over one million acres of crested wheatgrass before environment groups complained about this wide spread use of a non-native grass.

Crested wheatgrass also competes well against cheatgrass, which has taken over much of the lower elevation and drier lands burned off by wildfires. Replanting a burned area with native grasses is the best solution, but natives are harder to establish. Therefore, many burns are re-seeded with crested wheatgrass since it establishes easily and the grass seed is much cheaper and more available than native grass.

Here is where the controversy comes in. Some say sagebrush, along with native forbs and grasses, will naturally invade crested wheatgrass plantings. Others say crested wheatgrass grows so well, natives are difficult to get started so only this non-native grass remains. If native grasses, forbs and crested wheatgrass are planted at the same time, crested wheatgrass will keep the natives from becoming established. Some say natives are the only seed to use, since they provide the best forage for more types of wildlife. Others state anything that competes with cheatgrass is the best seed to use.

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