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### **Small Sawmill Operation Coming to Ritter**

*Landowners band together to solve juniper problem*

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The Ritter Land Management Team (RLMT), a nonprofit group made up of nearly 30 local landowners, recently took delivery of a portable sawmill they hope will help rid the Ritter landscape of unwanted juniper and provide much needed jobs.

Western juniper, although native to Eastern Oregon, has become invasive and overtaken upwards of 9 million acres of rangelands, using up water in an already dry landscape. Mature trees can consume nearly 30 gallons a day, and crowd out native plants needed by both wildlife and livestock. An Oregon State University study showed that cutting juniper quickly restores watersheds and improves streamflows, which in turn improves grazing for cattle and habitat for species such as the greater sage grouse and mule deer.

When Ritter landowners identified the spread of juniper as one of the greatest threats to the health and productivity of their lands, the group began to wonder if a sawmill might be the answer. "Everyone wants to get rid of juniper, but removal is both expensive and difficult," said Executive Director Patti Hudson. "Then once it's cut and on the ground, what do you do with it?"

The group contacted Sustainable Northwest, a nonprofit working on balanced solutions to economic and environmental problems, and a strong advocate of the emerging juniper milling industry. Sustainable Northwest helped RLMT tap into the Western Juniper Industry Fund, created by the State legislature to help jump-start the juniper sawmill industry. It provided funding for a feasibility study to determine if the idea of a sawmill in Ritter had legs.

"We knew we had a lot of juniper, but we weren't sure we had enough to keep a mill going," said rancher and RLMT board member Caleb Morris. "But the study showed there's at least a 20-year supply here, and more if we expand beyond the Ritter area."

Ritter landowner and board chair Rhonda Kennedy said that in addition examining the quality and quantity of the juniper supply the study also looked at the financial feasibility of a small sawmill operation in Ritter. "It showed us how this could be done and how doing it could benefit the entire community."

Soon after the study was completed RLMT had to make a decision. The Western Juniper Fund still had money to help purchase some of the needed equipment for the Ritter sawmill, but not enough to do everything, and the program was about to end. Oregon Community Foundation quickly stepped up to help leverage the state funds and meet the match requirement. "We had to act fast to take advantage of these funds while we still could," said Hudson. "We decided to take a phased approach and purchase the mill and a telehandler to get us started. It wouldn't have happened without the Oregon Community Foundation's commitment to Eastern Oregon, a lot of hard work at the state level and all the help and support Sustainable Northwest has provided."

The Ritter mill expects one of its major customers to be Sustainable Northwest Wood, a for-profit Portland lumberyard owned by Sustainable Northwest where juniper sales are growing at 50 percent per year. “We’re looking forward to collaborating with RLMT to sell juniper from the Ritter area. Our customers will enjoy supporting the group’s rangeland restoration projects through the purchase of this lumber,” said Ryan Temple, president of Sustainable Northwest Wood.

“The market is there. We have the juniper and the means to mill it. We’re optimistic we can make this work,” said Hudson.



Caleb Morris, rancher and Ritter Land Management Team board member, runs the first log through the new mill in Ritter.