

Restoring Cold Creek's meander in High Meadow

By Kathryn Reed

Freel Peak at 10,000-plus feet looms in one direction. Monument Pass in another. Behind the neighboring mountain is the Sky chairlift at Heavenly. Through the trees, though not visible until the descent, is Lake Tahoe.

Not a bad work environment.

This is High Meadow.



Excavator
Billy Newman
puts sod into
the new
channel of
Cold Creek at
High Meadow.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

But High Meadow could be more aptly named Construction Meadow. This is because of the multi-year restoration project that started in August. By the time U.S. Forest Service crews complete the project in 2012, Cold Creek will meander like it did before cattle grazed in the meadow, willows will sprout from the bank, the dead beetle-infested lodgepoles will be

hauled away, and wildlife will have returned to the area.

“The goal here is in five years we don’t want people to know we’ve been here,” said Stephanie Heller, hydrologist with the Forest Service and project lead.

Eighty of the 280 acres in the meadow are being restored.

This land was bought from a family trust in 2003, with a private cabin still on the property near the entrance to the area off High Meadow Trail, which is off Pioneer Trail on the South Shore.

The area was last grazed eight years ago. Cows like willows – that’s why there aren’t any. Crews are starting to plant them along the new channel.

Work will wrap up for the season on Oct. 15. Next year it’s all about letting the vegetation along the new stream channel take hold. Filling in the old channel will take place in 2012.

The \$2 million meadow restoration is being paid for with money from the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act.

What the public will notice most once the meadow project is done is that this flat, expansive land mass will be wet in the spring, more lush and possibly producing wildflowers like not seen by current generations.

“Now the stream doesn’t get out of the bank,” Heller said. “It will average 30 days each year out of the bank. It helps get the fine sediment on the flood plane. The meadow should be a lot greener. Now it browns up early.”

The 18 people working on the project are all Forest Service employees. Driving in (which is only allowed in a Forest Service vehicle) it looks more like a major construction site than a serene meadow. Boulders and smaller rock, along with piles of dirt are under the power lines. Felled trees are in a pile.

Everything being used in the meadow restoration is native. Those piles of rocks about a quarter mile away are being dumped on Tuesday into the freshly dug new channel to create a stream riffle. The dirt will be used to fill what will be the old channel of Cold Creek.

Excavator Billy Newman delicately places swatches of sod. His precision is incredible, making it look like the large yellow piece of equipment is being operated with velvet gloves.

Building the stack sod bank will help establish vegetation on the bank.

“I think the restoration is broader than sediment. This will be a major habitat restoration,” Heller explained.

She anticipates this project benefiting the area’s entire ecosystem – aiding the goshawks that nest nearby, creating amphibian habitat, having Cold Creek potentially be home to various fish species, macro invertebrates, butterflies, and warblers and other birds calling the high elevation meadow home.

At 7,700 feet, this is the highest meadow restoration project the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit has undertaken. Cookhouse Meadow, off Luther Pass, was at 7,300. Big Meadow, one day, will resemble its sister meadow.

The meadow restoration is one of four projects in the area. Aspen stand restoration, fuel reduction and trail maintenance are the other projects.

While Heller and her crew work on the meadow, Jacob Quinn, USFS trails coordinator, is working downstream on 2.2 miles of trail along Cold Creek.

“We tried to maintain the character of it,” Quinn said of the trail. The work to reconstruct the existing trail and reroute some areas will be done by the Oct. 15 grading deadline.

Next summer the plan is to rebuild the trail to Monument Pass. The road to Star Lake will be turned into a trail.

The aspen restoration is necessary because with years of fire suppression conifers have crowded out the smaller trees. As this higher elevation some of the shimmering leaves are already yellow.

Trees being taken out are ones encroaching on the aspens, the beetle-ravaged stands and the ones posing a fire threat.

For more information about the project, [click here](#).

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