

Reclamation

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until there's at least 90 percent of the original perennial cover, which, in this climate, can sometimes take 10 to 30 years to establish."

The region verges on desert, receiving between 6 and 8 inches of precipitation a year. Even now the ground is bone dry, looking more like the heart of August than what's typically the rainy month of May.

The lack of moisture can make reclamation challenging, and the industry keeps a close watch, too. Their seeds are approved for the region, shipped from suppliers in Utah and elsewhere.

"Some seasons the seeds don't do as well, and if we don't see some significant establishment after three or four years, we'll come back in and reseed," said Lyndon Bucher, an environmental supervisor with American Colloid. "But it's interesting how, with just the right conditions,

everything can suddenly blossom."

Getting to this point involves a process known as back-cast mining, or concurrent reclamation. As one pit is opened, the next pit is simultaneously closed. It's filled with overburden from the newest pit, the ground contoured and the topsoil spread and seeded.

The process continues down the bentonite bed, leaving a strip of land in various phases of reclamation. Moisture was abundant across the region last year, and plants responded in kind. Like a garden planted in stages, the vegetation here has returned, with some areas further along than others.

Matthew Dillon, an environmental specialist with American Colloid, moves through the field, identifying the plant growth. There's wild rye and rabbit brush, four-wing salt brush and clumps of sagebrush just inches tall.

The standards of reclamation weren't as stringent decades ago, Dillon said. He

notes the lack of perennial cover in some old mining areas, which remain barren 30 years later.

But as the industry returns to mine the remaining bentonite using new techniques, Dillon said, it will also work to restore the vegetation using new knowledge.

"We don't want to put anything too caustic in there," Dillon said. "These desert plants put their roots down quite a ways. We can have the best topsoil in the world, but if the plants hit something real salty, they'll die.

"So we'll put about four feet of suitable overburden on the surface, which provides a good place for the roots to go once they push through the topsoil."

With millions of dollars tied up in reclamation bonds, the industry has a vested interest in ensuring the work is done right. The bonds cover every phase of the process, and when one area is reclaimed, the money rolls forward to cover the next phase of operation.

"When it comes time to

get the money back, we'll submit a package to the Department of Environmental Quality and the BLM saying it's ready for bond release," said Jason Schneider, mining operations manager with American Colloid. "They'll look at the plant growth and erosion to see if it's stable. If it is, the bond is applied to a new area."

In this arid climate, some plant species return quickly, including drought-tolerant grasses and forbs. Salt brush isn't far behind with its bright green leaves. Sagebrush can be harder to restore.

But the industry is working on sagebrush as well. Bucher said they've established sagebrush plots in different reclamation zones to monitor the success of different seeds, soils and growing conditions.

"Over the last five or seven years, there's been a big push to put sagebrush back into the reclamation," Bucher said. "To start to establish it has been a learning process, and we're trying different techniques."

Reclamation Is Important For Wyoming Lands (continued)

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