

Industry improves reclamation process

By **MARTIN KIDSTON**
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LOVELL — It's another hot, dry day on the state line, and the ground crunches underfoot. The desert plants are sparse, and what little grows does so in rows and bunches.

Two years ago, skidders rumbled over this ground, removing bentonite clay from a pit 20 feet deep. But the skidders have moved on and the desert plants are now closing in, sinking thirsty roots into a careful blend of top soil and overburden.

While the bentonite industry has mineral rights to the valuable clay within its mining claims, it also has an obligation to reclaim the land once the mining is finished.

Promised by bonds and measured by the watchful eye of state and federal government, reclamation includes backfilling the open pits, contouring the ground and reseeding vegetation to match the

surrounding landscape.

"If a seeding doesn't take in two or three years, we'll ask for a re-seeding," Gretchen Hurley with the Bureau of Land Management said. "We hold the bond 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 six and eight 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," Lyndon Bucher, an environmental supervisor with American Colloid, said. "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 Ameri-

can 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

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Reclamation of Wyoming Mining Claims

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