



Alicia Hummel, a range specialist with the Bureau of Land Management, sifts through a bucket of native grass and forb seeds while explaining best practices for reseeding burned landscapes to a group of visiting journalists. The bucket of seed is worth more than \$1,000. Photo by Hannah Nikonov.

The Stories That Matter

Some of the most important conservation stories are also the least profitable to tell.

A meadowlark sang its name from the fenceline. On the fence, white markers spaced evenly along the top line of smooth wire gleamed. Red dust swirled in the hot, dry air as the line of pickups jostled down the two-track. The afternoon sun broiled our necks after we got out of the trucks, crouching low to examine the curing seedheads of cheatgrass and Japanese brome.

Across the surrounding acres, blackened circles and burnt stumps were the only remaining signs of sagebrush. Remember what the ray guns and incineration beams did to bad guys in old cartoons? Reduced them to a pile of smoldering ash? Like that, except this was for real. A team of journalists, researchers, government employees, habitat managers, and I were touring the aftermath of the Red Canyon Fire in prime sage grouse, chukar, and Hun habitat near Thermopolis, Wyoming.

I'd been to Thermop before, before the fire. Granted, I'd never been in the burned area before it cooked off, but I'd seen enough of Wyoming that I could imagine the "before" picture: clumpy sagebrush, dispersed bunchgrasses, colorful bursts of native forbs. No signs of incineration.

The week before I drove up to Wyoming, I spent a few days in Hugo, Minnesota, at the Professional Outdoor Media Association's annual Summit. I'd gotten an

email that Project Upland was up for an award, and that I should show up to accept it in person. Given that I am more or less a weird outdoorsy introvert, I was not necessarily looking forward to 72 consecutive hours of networking. (But I did look forward to touring Federal Ammunition's shotgun shell factory. *How It's Made*, anyone?)

It was a good trip. I handed out over 25 business cards and five copies of our summer issue. I chatted with people on the bus and stayed up after dark around the campfire. I met regular Project Upland contributors in person for the first time. I was surprised by the presence of old friends, and I even made some new ones, one of whom mailed me a special edition copy of *Tenth Legion* by Tom Kelly. There's no faster way to get on my You're a Good Person list than by sending me a great book.

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I had educational experiences at the Summit, too, including one interaction with the CEO of a media conglomerate. "Print is dead," he told me after flipping through our summer issue. He then shared anecdotes about how he shut down a local newspaper once because it wasn't profitable. Apparently, he still hears complaints from folks who miss it. After that, he transitioned into a pitch for affiliate marketing.

That's where the money is: affiliate links. We've all read the types of content he's talking about. If you click on a product link, they embed cookies in your browser and track you. They learn about where you shop, when you're on your computer, when you're on your phone, and more. And when you eventually buy that blaze orange dog treat pouch that attaches to your hunting vest, they know, and they earned \$0.04 on your purchase. Multiply four cents by 100,000, and there you have it: the profitability of affiliate marketing.

The CEO wasn't wrong about where the money is. Affiliate marketing works, but that's precisely the prob-

lem. Journalism becomes weaker when revenue incentives determine coverage priorities.

I get it. We all need to make a living, and we would all prefer to live comfortably. But personally, my reason for being here is not about the money. To me, being an editor of an upland bird hunting magazine is about being a voice for the birds, the land, and the people who care about them. It's about telling stories people *want* to read, printing pages readers *want* to turn.

On the flip side, there are stories that aren't being told that should be. Instead of assembling a list of the 17 most popular dog leashes, how about covering the effects of extreme wildfire on gamebirds? Or the long-term impacts of losing native plants to invasive, nonnative species with extremely limited nutritional value? Or how we manage regenerating landscapes determines