

Volunteers join effort to stop tamarisk invasion

By [Matthew Berger](#)

Sunday, February 26, 2012

GATEWAY — The stiff breeze shooting through the canyon kept trying to knock down the newly planted willows. The future trees — branches, really — had been clipped from a dense stand of willow two miles up the Dolores River and trucked down to this now-bare bank. Its previous colonizers, invasive tamarisk trees, laid in piles of debris scattered along the sand.

That was the scene as about 30 volunteers clipped and planted willows in this canyon Saturday afternoon, about seven miles south of Gateway. It marked the second year of planting willows along the Dolores, and the first that volunteers were allowed to help out.

"We hope to make this an annual event," said Fran Parker, volunteer and partnership coordinator at the Bureau of Land Management's Grand Junction Field Office. "People like to come out here to volunteer because it's so gorgeous, and the (Gateway Canyons) resort provides food."

People like helping out here so much, in fact, all four of the planting days planned through Tuesday reached the maximum number of volunteers, and Parker has a waiting list of replacements.

As invasive tamarisk has taken over riverbanks, crowding out native species such as willow and cottonwood, efforts have been taken to remove the invaders, using chain saws, hand saws and an imported beetle that exclusively feeds on tamarisk. The tamarisk along this western bank of the Dolores were removed last fall, but the task of helping the native species move back in remained.

The method used to accomplish that Saturday was surprisingly simple: clip branches off willows in a healthy grove, drive them to the formerly tamarisk-infested banks, drill holes about two feet into the soil using a generator-powered drill, slide in the branch, tamp down the soil, and wait. The main difficulty is getting the new willow down to just the right depth, the capillary fringe, where the new tree will have enough water but not so much that it drowns.

"This is a pretty proven method," said Sparky Taber, who leads the Grand Junction BLM office's restoration work. "We'll know by midsummer whether they are successful or not. I'd be happy with a 50 to 60 percent success rate."

The willows planted Saturday were about one foot apart, and Taber said the successful willows will send up suckers to fill out the space.

Other methods, such as digging a trench in which to plant the willow branches, have had mixed results. Beavers and frost also impeded past efforts.

It was clear from just looking around that Saturday's plantings are part of a long-term effort. Across the river a large patch of tamarisk remained.

"That was an original release site for the tamarisk beetle in 2005," said Taber. "It's under study by the Department of Agriculture and Palisade Insectary to see how long it takes the beetle to kill them."

So far, he said, the tamarisk here have been weakened severely. The new willows are being planted among the hacked-up stumps of the removed tamarisk. The fact that those trees are still just stumps is an indication of the beetle's success at weakening the invasive trees, according to Taber.

"In the old days, these would have just sprouted back up again," he said.

So far, the Dolores River Restoration Partnership, which includes the BLM and a range of conservation groups, foundations, universities, state agencies and local

counties, has removed tamarisk from, and restored, more than 700 acres of public and private lands.

Ultimately, it plans to restore 2,050 acres along 175 miles of the Dolores from McPhee Dam up to the Colorado River by 2014.

Aside from willow planting, the partnership has planted cottonwoods, removed tamarisk and wrapped cottonwoods with fencing to protect them from beavers.

With the volunteer list already full for this series of plantings, the next opportunity to get involved will be March 24, when the Tamarisk Coalition and the BLM's Moab office will lead another willow planting day farther down the Dolores River, along the state line.

"That was a really fun event last year. Kids were there. People brought their dogs," Parker said.