

RAILROAD RECLAMATION RESTORES INDIAN LAND

This spring the Blackfeet Indians turned their livestock out to graze near Spotted Robe, Montana, on thick, tall wheatgrass grown in defiance of constant winds up to 70 miles per hour. The wheatgrass was successfully planted alongside Burlington Northern's new railroad tracks and it will provide pasture for cattle, prevent erosion, and reduce snow drifts blocking the tracks in the winter.

Such reclamation is little known, but a routine aspect of railroad construction today. When work gangs cut a new track route through the countryside, reclamation crews follow right behind to restore land and vegetation disturbed by the work.

In this instance, the reclamation crews had 116 miles on both sides of a new track from Orin, Montana, to Gillette, Wyoming, to reseed, fertilize and protect through establishment.

At Spotted Robe, reclamation stemmed, curiously enough, from an effort to help the wild winds blow even more freely. Explains Linus L. Tumbleson, BN's director of agricultural development:

"The railroad had long ago built a snowshed there, a kind of wooden tunnel, to protect the track from heavy snow drifts. But the wood had deteriorated, so the structure was dismantled and the hills on each side were leveled to let the snow blow freely and not drift on the tracks."

But that constant wind, which can hit 70 miles per hour, was the big difficulty when it came to reclamation, Tumbleson said.

New tracks and banks of wheatgrass on both sides. Winds whip across the area at 70 mph.



"Our task was to get the vegetation started before the wind could blow it away," he said. "The natives told us we probably couldn't do it. But we did, by spreading two tons of straw mulch per acre over the entire 100 acres, after laying grass seed. To insure that the mulch would stay in place, a chisel plow was used to crimp the hay into the soil and form ridges to hold the moisture for better germination."

Two years after that 1976 seeding, "grass was belly high to grazing cattle," Tumbleson said. "Of all the projects we have done, I suppose I am proudest of that."

Tumbleson, who earned his agricultural degree at the University of Minnesota, supervises land reclamation throughout BN's 19-state operating region, from company headquarters in St. Paul.

"Anywhere we disturb the land, we will reclaim it," he said. Since the program began in 1972, BN has spent \$413,000 restoring 2,374 acres, not counting a special project which renewed an old strip-mine area in Montana.

Restoration begins with the excavation: "At that time, we take the topsoil and stockpile



Before and after establishment of wheatgrass. Straw was crimped into soil to fight wind erosion.





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drawn seeder, by hydraulic mulchers from railroad flatcars if the land is too steeply banked for a tractor, or by plane if the area is really rugged. A combination of wood fiber mulch, seed and fertilizer is used for hydromulching.

A third of the new Orin-Gillette line has been seeded and the rest will be done as construction is completed. The line, being built to carry coal trains out of the Powder River Basin to meet the country's increasing coal needs, is to be finished this fall. One six-mile stretch of the new route, comprising a total of 200 acres, was seeded by just three workers in 2½ weeks, Tumbleson said.

One of the largest and most successful reclamation projects was at Colstrip, Montana, where huge "spoilbanks" were created by strip mining between 1923 and 1958. The goal was to create an improved habitat for native game and birds, to stabilize ground cover with good forage grass and encourage recreation. A mixture of wheatgrass, alfalfa and sweet clover was planted over the 1,000 acres, along with 2,300 trees, of 14 different species. The three-year, \$660,000 project was so successful that BN recently was given the "Top Industry Award" of Keep America Beautiful, Inc., for "an outstanding voluntary effort to improve the environment and quality of life in a locale within which it operates."

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it," Tumbleson said. "Later, we will replace that to a depth of six inches, so we use the original soil for seeding."

Meantime, soil samples are sent to a scientific laboratory, such as at Montana State University, for analysis. The analysis determines the best type of grass to sow and what fertilizer will work best, among other things.

"This helps us to get the grass established as soon as possible, and we usually get better grass than was there before," Tumbleson said.

Seeding is done in several ways: by tractor-



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