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Long-Term Successional Trends Following Western Juniper Cutting

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Abstract

Western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis* spp. *occidentalis* Hook.) expansion into sagebrush steppe plant communities in the northern Great Basin has diminished shrub-steppe productivity and diversity. Chainsaw cutting of western juniper woodlands is a commonly applied practice for removing tree interference and restoring understory composition. Studies reporting understory response following juniper cutting have been limited to early successional stages. This study assessed successional dynamics spanning 13 years following tree cutting. Total herbaceous standing crop and cover increased significantly in the CUT. Total standing crop was 10 times greater in the CUT vs. WOODLAND. Herbaceous standing crop and cover, and densities of perennial grasses in the CUT did not change between 1996 and 2004 indicating that by the 5th year after cutting, remaining open areas had been occupied. In the early successional stages, perennial bunchgrasses and Sandberg's bluegrass were dominant. By the 5th year after treatment, cheatgrass had supplanted Sandberg's bluegrass and was codominant with perennial bunchgrasses. In 2003 and 2004, perennial bunchgrasses dominated herbaceous productivity in the CUT, representing nearly 90% of total herbaceous standing crop. A pretreatment density of 2–3 perennial bunchgrasses m⁻² appeared to be sufficient to permit natural recovery after juniper control. Perennial bunchgrass density peaked in the 6th year after treatment and the results suggested that 10–12 plants m⁻² were sufficient to fully occupy the site and dominate herbaceous composition in subsequent years. In the CUT, juniper rapidly reestablished from seed and from the presence of seedlings not controlled in the initial treatment. The shifts in herbaceous composition across years suggests that long term monitoring is important for evaluating plant community response to juniper control and to develop appropriate post treatment management to promote continued site improvement.

Resumen

La expansión del “Western juniper” (*Juniperus occidentalis* spp. *occidentalis* Hook.) en las comunidades vegetales de las estepas de “Sagebrush” de la Gran Cuenca del norte ha disminuido la productividad de esta estepa arbustiva y su diversidad. La tala de bosques de “Western juniper” con sierra de cadena es una práctica comúnmente usada para remover la interferencia de los árboles y restaurar la composición del estrato vegetal inferior. Los estudios que reportan la respuesta del estrato vegetal inferior posterior al corte del “Western juniper” han sido limitados a los primeros estados sucesionales. Este estudio aborda las dinámicas sucesionales medidas durante un periodo de 13 años después del corte de los árboles. La biomasa total y cobertura de herbáceas se incrementaron significativamente con el corte de los árboles. La biomasa total fue 10 veces mayor en las áreas con corte de árboles (CUT) que en las áreas intactas (WOODLAND). En el tratamiento con corte (CUT), la biomasa, cobertura y densidades de zacates perennes no cambiaron durante 1996 y 2004, indicando que para el quinto año después del corte las áreas abiertas remanentes habían sido ocupadas. En las etapas tempranas de la sucesión, los zacates perennes amacollados y el “Sandberg's bluegrass” (*Poa sandbergii* Vasey) fueron los dominantes. En quinto año después de aplicar el tratamiento, el “Cheatgrass” había suplantado al “Sandberg's bluegrass” y fue la especie codominante con los zacates amacollados perennes. En 2003 y 2004, los zacates amacollados perennes dominaron la productividad del estrato herbáceo en el tratamiento de corte (CUT), representando casi el 90% del total de la biomasa herbácea. Antes de aplicar el tratamiento, una densidad de zacates amacollados de 2 a 3 plantas m⁻² parecieron ser suficientes para permitir la recuperación natural después del control del “Western juniper.” El pico de la densidad de zacates amacollados fue en el sexto año después de aplicar el tratamiento de corte (CUT) y los resultados sugieren que 10–12 plantas m⁻² fueron suficientes para ocupar totalmente el sitio y dominar la composición herbácea en los años subsecuentes. En el tratamiento de corte (CUT), el “Western juniper” se reestableció rápidamente a partir de semilla y de la presencia de plántulas no controladas en el tratamiento inicial. Los cambios en la composición herbácea a través de los años sugieren que un monitoreo a largo plazo es importante para evaluar la repuesta de la comunidad vegetal al control del “Western juniper” y desarrollar un manejo apropiado post tratamiento para promover la mejoría continua del sitio.

Key Words: *Bromus tectorum*, cheatgrass, *Juniperus occidentalis*, shrub-steppe, plant cover, threshold, sagebrush, standing crop

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