Farming with Mazama Pocket Gophers

Photo: Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife

In 2021, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) Program and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) leveraged resources for a private landowner in Tenino, WA to benefit current and future populations of Yelm pocket gopher *(Thomomys mazama yelmensis)*.

The Yelm pocket gopher is an endemic subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher (*T. mazama*) and is currently found only in Thurston County, WA. This gopher occupies grasslands, and forages on a wide variety of roots and above-ground plants, especially perennial forbs.

Prior to implementation, the landowner ran their cattle in a system which did not efficiently utilize forage, allowed undesirable vegetation to flourish, and did not cater to the resources needed by the gopher.

Planting native forbs with an audience (USFWS/E. Adams)

To enhance the structure and function of this semi-native grassland, exterior, interior, and moveable fencing was implemented to strategically rotate cattle and manage the pastures in a conservation-minded manner.

Perennial forbs, including a diversity of clover species (*Trifolium*), common lomatium *(Lomatium utriculatum)*, and Oregon sunshine *(Eriophyllum lanatum)*, were interseeded by using a no-till seed drill and hand planting methods to increase resources for the cattle, gopher, pollinators, and grassland nesting birds.

Non-PFW Program biologists from the USFWS Washington Fish and Wildlife Office provided additional hands to plant over 1,200 common camas bulbs *(Comassia quamash)*, another perennial forb highly preferred by the gopher. In total, the enhancement area added about 15 acres of habitat for future populations of Yelm pocket gopher.

With the success of this first project, the PFW Program, Thurston Conservation District, NRCS, and the landowner developed a second project in 2022 to enhance an additional 168 acres on this property. Projects like this strive to find the balance between enhancing wildlife habitat, agricultural viability, and local partnerships. Working with a well-respected landowner, such as this one, may also lead to future projects within their community.

Seeding with a no-till seed drill (USFWS/C. Doll)

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides free technical and financial assistance to landowners, managers, tribes, corporations, schools and nonprofits interested in improving wildlife habitat on their land. Since 1987, we have helped more than 60,000 landowners restore more than 7 million acres of forest, prairie, wetland and stream habitat for wildlife.