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Fire on Dos Rios Island Highlights the Importance of Riparian Restoration

Grand Junction, Colo. — A fire that broke out on portions of Dos Rios Island on the evening of June 23 serves as a reminder of the importance of restoring healthy, resilient river corridors in western Colorado.

The wildfire highlights one of the many challenges associated with invasive woody plants such as tamarisk and Russian olive, which have spread throughout river corridors across the West. These invasive species crowd out native vegetation, reduce wildlife habitat, alter how fire behaves in riverside ecosystems, and diminish the natural river landscapes that support the quality of life of communities in the Grand Valley.

Located at the confluence of the Colorado and Gunnison rivers and visible from the recently built Confluence Center of Colorado, Dos Rios Island has long been identified as a high-priority restoration site due to extensive infestations of invasive tamarisk and Russian olive. Later this summer, RiversEdge West, with support from the Laura Jane Musser Fund, the City of Grand Junction, and other local partners, is scheduled to begin restoration work on the island. The project will remove invasive vegetation and reestablish native trees and shrubs that support wildlife, improve river function, and create a healthier, more resilient river corridor. This recent wildfire is a reminder of why that work is so important.

"Historically, riparian areas were less prone to wildfire than they are today," said Cara Kukuraitis, Director of Development and Communications for RiversEdge West. "Tamarisk and Russian olive have transformed many of our river corridors from open, diverse native habitats into dense thickets and contribute to increased fuel loads. This fire is a reminder that restoring native riparian habitat is not only beneficial for wildlife and river health; it also helps create more resilient river corridors."

Wildfire can be especially damaging in riparian areas because many native riverside plant communities are not adapted to frequent fire. When fires occur, invasive plant species such as tamarisk often gain a competitive advantage over native vegetation. Tamarisk is adapted to vigorously resprout from established root systems, allowing it to quickly reclaim burned areas. Meanwhile, native plants like cottonwoods and willows often struggle to recover after fire, particularly when compounded by drought and altered hydrology. As a result, fire can accelerate the dominance of invasive species rather than eliminate them.

This recent wildfire reinforces the importance of proactively restoring riverside habitats before invasive plant species further alter ecosystem function. RiversEdge West remains committed to implementing restoration work on Dos Rios Island later this summer, including the removal of invasive tamarisk and Russian olive and the reestablishment of native vegetation.

Native plants like cottonwoods and willows provide shade, support wildlife, improve river function, and help create a diverse river corridor. Through restoration and revegetation efforts, RiversEdge West is working to restore these ecological benefits on Dos Rios Island and strengthen the landscape's long-term resilience.

Community members who would like to support these restoration efforts can do so through RiversEdge West's Adopt-a-Tree program. Contributions help fund the planting and establishment of native trees and shrubs at Dos Rios and other restoration sites, creating healthier wildlife habitat, improving river health, and restoring the native character of local river corridors. Community members can also get involved through RiversEdge West's volunteer stewardship program, which offers hands-on opportunities to help care for restoration sites like Dos Rios.

"Restoration is about more than aesthetics," said Kukuraitis. "Healthy riparian ecosystems support wildlife, improve water resources, create opportunities for recreation, and help communities adapt to environmental challenges. By restoring native vegetation today, we are investing in a more resilient future for our rivers and our community."

About RiversEdge West

RiversEdge West restores riparian lands through education, collaboration, and technical assistance. By protecting the quality and ecological integrity of riverside habitats, RiversEdge West promotes the economic, social, and cultural wellbeing of communities throughout the American West.

