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**Media Contact:** fire.management@bia.gov
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**Author:** Robyn Broyles

Located along the Colorado River 13 miles south of Yuma, Arizona, and 15 miles north of San Luis, Mexico is the Cocopah Reservation. Its unique boundaries border Mexico, Arizona and California. Thriving along the banks is an invasive and dangerous plant called salt cedar. Its roots drink deeply, helping to lower the water table and adding large deposits of salt to the soil. As its roots and branches grow, its prolific and highly flammable branches threaten wetland ecosystems and create a significant fire hazard to neighboring communities when wildfires occur. It is also choking out the native willow, cottonwood, and mesquite trees the Cocopah people use for cultural and spiritual purposes.

While removing salt cedar is a common management practice along the Colorado River, this $563 thousand, four-year treatment plan, funded by the Department of the Interior, Office of Wildland Fire Southern Border Fuels Management Initiative (SBFMI), is a first-of-its-kind project that is making history due to its unique partnerships.

BIA, Fort Yuma Agency has the trust responsibility to provide vegetation management and wildfire protection services across the 6,500-acre Reservation. Coordinating with the Cocopah Tribe and the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Patrol, the BIA applied for, and received funding for the SBFMTI project in 2018.

The project is occurring in a high risk priority area that will help protect the West Reservation from wildfires. It spans a combined total of nine miles along the Colorado River, which is approximately 36% of the West Reservation’s land mass. In total, 1,359 acres of invasive and foreign salt cedar will be treated, preserving the Tribe’s valuable economic investments and cultural and traditional native species they use for cultural and ceremonial purposes.

Due to the treatments strategic placement along the Mexican border, the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Patrol is contributing equipment that will help remove the cedar, widening their visibility into Mexico.

To accomplish the project, the Tribe is providing resource management specialists to ensure the natural and cultural resources are protected while wildland firefighters from the BIA are using masticators and front-end loaders to remove dense stands of foreign and invasive vegetation. They are also using chainsaws to prune and trim the willow, cottonwood and mesquite trees in order to help them thrive. When conditions cool and become wetter, firefighters will also burn the piles created from the debris, returning nutrients to the soil.

This important project not only improves the natural and cultural species and restores the riparian area, it also provides valuable economic opportunities to wildland firefighters by employing them during the winter months when fire activity is low. Through their work, they will gain training and experience that strengthens fire qualifications that are necessary to advance their careers.

In 2018, firefighters treated 150 acres and will continue making progress this fall and winter. The Agency plans to hire a well-disciplined BIA hand crew to further the work.

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