You can forgive Rod Davis if he gets a little excited about the Bootstraps program he and colleague Marilyn Smith have developed in recent years.

Bootstraps gives unemployed young adults in rural northern Nevada jobs and job training while they work on vital natural resource projects on public land. The program that is located in Battle Mountain, Tonopah and Hawthorne helps solve two big problems at once by teaching lasting life skills to idle youth while protecting Nevada’s rangelands from invasive vegetation.

“It’s not often that you get a two-for-one deal in our business,” Davis, an extension educator in Battle Mountain, says chuckling. “But I’ll take it any time I can get it.”

Problem No. 1

Rural Nevada counties have some of the highest rates in the nation of young adults from 18 to 25 years old who are not working and not in school. Approximately 30 percent of the families headed up by single mothers live below the poverty level in rural northern Nevada.

“The isolation of these communities contributes to the lack of resources available to the young people,” Davis says. “What you wind up with is a large number of idle youth ‘hanging on the street corners,’ which makes them very visible to community adults.”

Smith, an area specialist in youth development in Elko, says Nevada has one of the worst records in the nation for teens successfully transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. These young people who drop out of school and then find themselves unemployed often wind up in jail or abusing drugs or alcohol, costing the state money.

“The economic impacts on the family and community of idle youth not capable of supporting themselves are obvious,” Smith says. “But if you want to reverse the problem and get these young people back in school or in a job, programming has to be intensive and provide long-term support. That’s what Bootstraps does.”

Problem No. 2

Besides the obvious need for a job program for rural Nevada young adults who are not successfully transitioning into adulthood, the involvement of Cooperative Extension in creating a plan for sage grouse habitat...
Cooperative Extension Educator Rod Davis, center, works with Bootstraps participants at their campsite.

restoration provided the synergy for the environmental focus of the work program. The idea for Bootstraps came along about the time that Davis was working with state and federal land managers to figure out how to control the pinyon-juniper forests spreading out across the central Nevada range.

Pinyon-juniper forests have increased 10-fold in Nevada and the Intermountain West since the late 1800s, squeezing out other vegetation and the wildlife that need mountain brush. Once the trees move in, sterilizing the ground beneath them and causing critical topsoil to erode, it’s difficult to get the lost shrubs, grasses and forbs to come back.

The biggest victim is the Nevada sage grouse, which is a candidate for the endangered species list. The sage grouse needs the diverse vegetation, bugs and perennial streams that are swallowed up by pinyon-juniper forests.

“When the heavens didn’t open up and rain down money to fight the pinyon-juniper, we started looking at the old model of the California Conservation Corps and the idea of a program that would train people and put them to work,” Davis recalls. “It turned out there was a pretty big target audience for that kind of program.”

Bootstraps is born

Davis and Smith, working with the Bureau of Land Management, were able to launch Bootstraps on a small scale in 2005. A similar program was launched in Tonopah under the direction of Extension Educator Amy Meier, and recently a program was started in Mineral County under the direction of Extension Educator Staci Emm ’96 (journalism). Each of the program sites target specific needs in their community. In Tonopah, that issue is weed control on public lands. In Mineral County, the youth work with local agencies to gain job skills and provide additional support for community projects.

Bootstraps got a big boost this year with a $492,000 American Recovery and Restoration Act grant, which will ensure the program continues for another three years. It also was named a Program of Distinction by the National 4-H Headquarters (www.nifa.usda.gov) last year.

The Bootstraps program trains up to 15 participants each year in two three-month sessions at each of the three sites. The jobs are advertised in regional newspapers and participants apply for the jobs, are interviewed and selected to be a part of a local work team. The teams start out with a two-week session in the classroom, where they learn about job safety. The safety training is adapted to local needs. In Battle Mountain the safety training is focused on chainsaw safety, repair and maintenance; emergency first aid; and emergency dispatch procedures. Participants work on their resumes, meet job recruiters and work on interview skills. They study health, conflict resolution and teamwork.

For the rest of the session, they spend each Monday morning in the classroom and then the remainder of the week in the field working. The Battle Mountain crew members set up camp near their worksite; cook and clean up for themselves; and study during breaks in an air-conditioned camper donated by Barrick Gold Corporation, a mining company. They study to get a high school GED diploma, but also come to understand the importance of the work they are doing.

“They find out they can succeed,” says Davis, who often visits the camps and teaches classes. “The work connects them to the community. All of a sudden they are being treated with respect in the world of work.”

The work pays off

So far, the Bootstraps crews have restored about 2,000 acres of sagebrush habitat by cutting down invasive trees. Outside Tonopah, Meier says crews have sprayed pesticides or otherwise removed weeds from nearly 550 acres of public land in Esmeralda, Nye, Lander and Eureka counties, protecting valuable rangeland from an infestation of plants that compromises wildlife habitat and rangeland health.

The groups’ work has been noticed. A few years ago, a representative of Nevada Bighorns Unlimited, an organization that works to increase populations of wildlife in Nevada, improve wildlife habitat, and promote hunting and outdoor sports, came across a Bootstraps crew installing a wildlife watering device in the mountains outside Battle Mountain. On the spot he offered to make a donation, and since then Bighorns Unlimited has pledged $10,000 a year to the program. Other funds have come from BLM, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Nevada Division of Wildlife and the Mule Deer Foundation.

Smith and the team of Cooperative Extension faculty, meanwhile, are working on a teaching guide, a safety training curriculum and a job coach handbook, and expect them to be published in 2011. These resources will allow other areas and states to replicate and expand the Bootstraps program. The Bootstraps student workbook is in its second printing.

The impact evaluation plan implemented by Cooperative Extension faculty at each site includes short-, intermediate and long-term results of the program. One of those measures involves tracking each program’s graduates. Interviews with participants are conducted for five years after they graduate, and those transcripts, as well as observations from the job coaches who work with participants in the field, show “significant improvements” in work habits and skills. Worksheets completed during their weekly classroom sessions also show improvements in participants’ responsibility, goal-setting and decision-making, Smith says.

Most Bootstraps graduates either go on to finish school or move into other jobs.

“And they aren’t just flipping burgers,” Davis says. “Seventy percent of these participants either wind up back in school or getting meaningful work. That’s probably the greatest accomplishment we get from this.”