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LIVESTOCK GRAZING AND WILDFIRE

At our January 27, 2012 Public Lands Committee meeting, a briefing paper by Bob Sommer, Fire Staff Officer for the Humboldt – Toiyabe National Forest, U.S. Forest Service, was read into the record. A single paragraph caught my eye: "...in 2007, the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Service issued a report titled "Northeastern Nevada Wildfires 2006, part 2 – Can livestock grazing be used to reduce wildfires? They concluded "...livestock grazing is not a panacea for wildfire reduction on Northern Nevada rangelands."

I had read the 2006 UNR report mentioned and recalled a quite different conclusion. In fact, the UNR report reads: "Can livestock grazing reduce the risk of large recurring wildfires? In a word yes, but with limitations...In site specific situations, livestock can be used as a tool to lower fire risk by reducing the amount, height and distribution of fuel. Livestock can also be used to manage invasive weeds in some cases and even to improve wildlife habitat. This *under-utilized tool* (emphasis mine)..."

In short, while grazing is not a "panacea", (which means "cure-all") it is a valuable tool and in the opinion of the authors of the 2006 UNR report an "under-utilized" tool as well.

The basic question: how can we reduce the main cause of the million acre fires, the alien cheatgrass? Cheatgrass has been in Nevada since the 1890's at least, yet the catastrophic fires did not start until the year 1999. For over a century the presence of cheatgrass did not result in fires of this magnitude. Why not? What did we do different then than now?

Also to consider is the business end of fires. As James Young, UNR range scientist for 43 years noted, "*Fire suppression [has become] a multi-million dollar business that reaches from the rangelands of Nevada to corporate America. It is not in everyone's interest to biologically suppress the cheatgrass-wildfire cycle on Nevada rangelands.*"

Today hundreds if not thousands are employed in a government funded range fire industry that was a token of what we see today when compared to only a little over a decade ago. The BLM/Forest Service fire budget is now in the hundreds of millions, and a range reseeding/recovery industry has been spawned as well, all relying paradoxically on a continuation of range fires. A conflict of interests exists; the successful long term solving of the

million acre fires means the elimination of employment for this dramatically expanded bureaucracy.

What is the impact of livestock grazing on cheatgrass and hence wildfires? In 2008 at UNR a symposium was held by the leading experts in range management. They published their conclusions in "Great Basin Wildfire Forum: The Search for Solutions." Here are several excerpts.

DR. PAUL TUELLER, professor of range ecology at UNR for 42 years: *"The extreme fire years in the recent past must be due, in part, to the noted reduction in grazing the forage base, resulting in significant fuel buildup. The lower and sometimes upper reaches of the mountain ranges have turned yellow as a result of post-fire cheatgrass establishment...Development of intensive grazing strategies is needed to allow utilization of cheatgrass and reduce future fuel loads. Grazing animals will be the tools that must be used to make desirable changes in vegetation."*

DR. LYNN JAMES, director of the USDA ARS plant research laboratory at Logan, Utah for 35 years: *"Fires depend on adequate fuels-grasses and certain shrubs. The larger the fuel load, the hotter the fire will burn and the more damaging it will be...An economical and efficient way to remove excess grass is with an on-off grazing system. Fuel loads are reduced, while producers benefit from forage consumed by their livestock. Other grazing strategies can aid in preventing or managing wildfires and controlled burns. Fires that do occur burn with reduced intensity and a general upward trend in rangeland condition is sustained."*

DR. KEN SANDERS, professor of rangeland ecology at the University of Idaho for 32 years: *"The third biggest threat is the reduction in grazing on public rangelands. If the proposed sage grouse habitat guideline that recommends leaving a grass stubble height of 18 centimeters is applied, it will not only result in an adverse economic impact on livestock producers, but it will also result in increased, higher intensity wildfire due to a larger fuel load."*

DR. WAYNE BURKHARDT, UNR professor of range management, emeritus: *"For the past 40 years, the management strategy, at least on public lands, has been to reduce or modify livestock grazing on these annual grasses, presumably to allow the re-establishment of native bunchgrasses. This has proven to be disastrous. Pre-adopted annual grasses [such as cheatgrass] can out-compete native bunchgrasses for early spring moisture on arid range sites. Reductions in grazing on these rangelands have not promoted the establishment of native flora, but rather have allowed flammable fuel build-up and increased fire frequency, intensity and spread. These unnatural fires remove the sagebrush overstory, prevent shrub re-establishment and create the conditions for the establishment of monotypic annual grasslands on what should be a shrub/grassland vegetation community.*

Public land grazers have an important role in protecting the resource by reducing fire danger, by managing fuels and improving the health and productivity of the range. Grazing should be firmly established as a necessary tool in reducing fire danger. The public needs to understand that fine fuel reduction and weed control are positive aspects of grazing and that properly managed grazing is good for the land."

DR. SHERM SWANSON, professor, Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Science, UNR: *"The presence of grazing animals on the range should not be viewed as overgrazing, but rather as a valuable tool. When used properly, grazing can help achieve resiliency in desirable plant communities and responsible fire and fuels management."*

In USFS Fire Staff Officer Bob Sommer's briefing paper he also wrote: "After the Murphy fire, the Idaho BLM State Director put together a team from both Nevada and Idaho... The purpose was to look at plant communities and livestock grazing in relation to the Murphy fire. The team concluded that much of the Murphy fire burned under extreme fuel and weather conditions that likely overshadowed livestock grazing as a factor influencing fire extent and fuel consumption."

I bring this up as, while studying this question, I came across this quote from Dr. NEIL RIMBEY, professor and range economist at the University of Idaho. He wrote: *"A tour of Idaho's Murphy Complex fire and the Tongue Complex on Juniper Mountain in the late summer revealed graphic evidence that grazing may reduce fuel loads and even stop fires."*

Clearly, if both men are describing the same fire complex, and I believe they are, they seem to be reaching substantially different conclusions from what I assume are the same observations.

If fires require fuel, and the fuel causing the fires is cheatgrass, the goal to block fires then is to remove as much fuel – cheatgrass – as possible. Less fuel – less fire. And if cheatgrass has been around for over 100 years, and fires were relatively small and uncommon up until 1999, livestock must have been the source of keeping this fuel in check.

So why no giant fires prior to 1999? *This is why I am highly skeptical of the BLM and USFS.* The same "experts" that now assure us they have the solution are the same "experts" that got us into our current mess. Starting in the 1950's, the "experts" came in and told us the "range was over grazed" and the solution was a reduction of livestock. So they began to cut, small at first, huge by the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1982 and 1991, Nevada had a reduction of 180,000 head of cattle. The experts assured us this would reestablish healthy native plant communities and reduce the less desirable shrub species, primarily, ironically now, sagebrush. If you read the literature right up to the time of the massive fires, you will note the livestock industry was highly criticized for an alleged huge increase in sagebrush. Sagebrush and several other native shrubs are largely unpalatable for livestock. Hence, since they are not eaten and the more desirable plants are, they tend to increase in numbers, while the desirable palatable plants decline. This is especially ironic now in light of the fact the decline in sagebrush habitat is the primary reason the "experts" give as the cause to put sage grouse on the endangered list.

Every decade or so in the government land management agencies there is an almost complete turnover of "range scientists", as field personnel move up the management ladder, and a whole new crop of college-educated "experts" take their place. Yet Nevada ranches, most owned by the same families for generations, are "non-experts" totally at the mercy of their federal masters. This is not a put-down per se of all federal land management people, many if not most of which are good hardworking individuals. It is a statement explaining why I am highly skeptical of listening always to the "experts", as their track record in Nevada has been horribly bad.

I have always believed the people who will be most harmed by bad land management practices are the ranchers themselves, hence they have a strong financial incentive to insure the long term health of the ranges they use. It is the ranchers who have been the most vocal critics of the Federal policies, warning of exactly what has come to pass. Yet today, if our most recent meeting is an example, we are shunting aside the "non-experts" who actually live on the ground, and are once again being dictated to by "experts" getting their marching orders from Washington D.C.

Incidentally, I have absolutely no connection with the livestock industry. I am in fact a contractor living in Sparks. But I have a strong interest in the plant communities and wildlife of Nevada and have spent literally years in Nevada's backcountry. I have carefully read everything about these issues I can get my paws on (including the book "Cheatgrass" by Young & Clements. One of the few books, purchased in 2009, my wife teased me about buying. Not exactly on the NY Times best seller list!)

In conclusion, any reasonable person would agree using domestic animals to reduce the quantity and spread of cheatgrass is the best solution currently available. The government required massive reduction in AUMs and livestock turn out time frames must be reversed if we are serious about having a public rangeland composed of native plants. Our current trend insures massive fires almost indefinitely, a huge taxpayer subsidized "range fire" industry, and a future Nevada landscape composed of the dull yellow color of mono-typical stands of cheatgrass. Nevada will be the "Sagebrush State" no more.

Sincerely,

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