

Background and Discussion

Nevada is third behind Idaho and California as the most burned over states in the union. Nevada averages 400,000 acres and over 1.2 million animals burned annually. Nevada fires spew out over 40 million pounds of pollution containing mercury, benzene, ozone, carbon monoxide, particulates and many other kinds of pollutants annually.

Before 1950 an average of less than 10,000 acres burned in Nevada annually. Because of the failed policies of the Federal Government the number of acres and animals burned has increased forty times from 10,00 acres to 400,000 acres burned per year, and from 30,000 animals to over 2.2 million animals burned each year. Pollution has also increased by forty times from one million pounds of pollution to over forty million pounds of pollution spewed into the atmosphere each year. The fires of Nevada produce more pollution than all the mines, power plants, vehicles, construction and agriculture in Nevada combined. *(See Attachment 1, Smoked Bear Press Release)*

In 1999 alone, Nevada lost 45,000 acres of bighorn sheep habitat, 668,000 acres of antelope habitat, 144,000 acres of sage grouse habitat, 481,000 acres of sage grouse habitat, 481,000 acres of chukar habitat, 304,000 acres of mule deer summer range and 341,000 acres of deer winter range to wildfire. *(See Attachment 2, Nevada Wildlife Almanac, 4452, Printed by the Nevada State Printing Office, Carson City, NV)*

Cause and effect

The Federal Government has reduced sheep grazing on Federal Lands by over 90 percent and cattle grazing by 50 percent within the State of Nevada since 1960. The results of these reductions were not unpredictable. In 1994, Elko County appointed a Grazing Task Force to gather information regarding public lands management within the state. After months of investigation the Task Force found that Federal agency decisions had caused significant declines in the number of livestock and duration of grazing on public lands in Elko County. From 1992 through 1994, cattle numbers in Elko County had declined by 63,000 head. **"Livestock grazing acts as an important fire prevention tool. There is a direct correlation between the height and density of grasses and the spread, duration, and intensity of wildfires."**

The Task Force found that the U. S. Forest Service was reducing livestock use on Forest lands as a means of gaining control of permittee's vested water rights.

The Task Force found that, "Large federal expenditures on fire management had not proven cost effective. Examples included the Tin Cup and Dawley fires in 1994. More than a half million dollars

were spent to suppress these fires." Local fire control would have been more timely, efficient, and cost effective." (See Attachment 3, *Elko County Board of Commissioners Grazing Task Force - Findings and Recommendations, June 1995*) (See also, Attachment 4, *Effects of Long-term Livestock Grazing on Fuel Characteristics in Rangelands* by Kirk W. Davies, others)

In a report to the Elko County Commission in Aug. of 2000, Dr. Tony Lesperance reported that for every A.U.M not utilized another half acre was going up in flames each year. (See Attachment 5, *The Relationship Between Livestock Grazing And Fire.*)

Natural Regulation - Fire - and Concerns for Public Health and Safety

Natural regulation implemented by federal officials is not new. Policy allowing fires started by lightning to burn within limits became a standard soon after forest reserves were created. At that time, the practice of deliberately clearing land with small fires was known as "light burning." It had champions among settlers, loggers, foresters, and others who saw the limited burning as a way to reduce fuel, increase water flow, regenerate pasture, and prevent catastrophic fire. Early advocates of light burning took their cue from regular burning by Indians.

Light burn policy came to an end however, soon after the Big Blowup fire of 1910 occurred. A bad fire season was limping to a close in late August of that year when unexpected winds of near-hurricane velocity struck the panhandle of Idaho and western Montana. The big Blowup raced thirty, forty, and fifty miles in a burst. Smoke from the blaze reached as far east as Boston. Because of the constant fall of ash from the fire, persons living in central and eastern Montana called it the summer of white snow. Flames scorched more than 3 million acres in two days, and kept on burning, destroying logging camps and small towns in its path. No fewer than eighty five people were killed.

The ferocity of the Big Blowout, which came on the heels of other devastating fires triggered a call for a systemic policy change. Less than a year later, the National Forest Service firefighting program was born. Those who fought the Big Blowout united in the desire to never let anything like the Big Blowup Fire of 1910 happen again.

The war against fire proved a success, if measured in acres burned. The amount of forest and grassland consumed by fire dropped dramatically, from an average of about 30 million acres a year at the turn of the century, and from highs of 40 to 50 million acres a year in the drought years of the 1930's to an average of about 5 million acres a year in the 1970's.

The war also produced the lovable Smokey Bear, who first appeared in 1944 as fire's poster boy. Nothing before or since has influenced the way wildfire has been fought in America? (*The book, Fire and Ashes, by John N. Maclean, Chapter 4, pp 195, 196 and 197*) Now it appears, we are back to implementing these same failed policies as were implemented decades ago. We have to ask. Can the high cost in lives,

property, rehabilitation, and fire control be justified simply for the purpose of policy that may be in vogue at this time?

Perhaps two of the best laboratories for determining the long term effects of natural regulation are the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge and Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. Unbeknown to most, one of the most intensive predator control programs ever carried out here in the west was implemented in the early 1920's on an area that was then described as the northwest corner of Nevada and south central Oregon. Between 1921 and 1934, 7,500 coyotes and bobcats were systematically removed. By 1935 it was estimated that antelope numbers had increased to more than 10,000 animals. Mule deer were becoming more and more abundant and sage grouse were being seen by the thousands. (*See page 3 of, Visits To The Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge In 1989, Attachment # 6*)

Some might say, what is so significant about that. Well, the significance is, historically, or at least at the time of first exploration into the region no wildlife of any significance was seen in the region. Predator control, you might say, was the father of the Hart Mountain and Sheldon Refuges.

Now, some seventy five or so years later, we are experiencing the opposite situation. Each year fewer and fewer wildlife of nearly every kind are being seen on the Sheldon and Hart Refuges. In fact, on close inspection it can be seen, when wildlife numbers began to decline beginning in the 1960's and 70's such occurred first on refuge lands simply because, that was where the elimination of livestock grazing and reductions in predator control practices were first implemented.

Probably one of the most beneficial things accomplished by refuge personnel over the years has been the narrative reports that have been kept year by year. Beginning in 1940 at Hart and Sheldon, estimated numbers of animals, production, and yearly activities have been well recorded. (*See Attachment #7, History of Predator Control Practices on the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge and Hart Mountain Range, Report No. 110*)

3.2.1 Conservation Objectives -

Short Term

- Reduce the amount of sage-grouse habitat loss due to large acreage wildfires and invasion by non-native species.
- Reinstate livestock grazing use within allotments to equal that of the time of first adjudications. (*See Interaction of historical and nonhistorical disturbances maintains native plant communities - K.W. Davies, Svejcar and Bates*) (*See too, discussion within, Rural Heritage Preservation Project's*

Findings of Facts, Finding # 1) (See as well, Wildfire Concerns - A Brief Discussion Plus Attached Documents)

Long Term

- Maintain an ecologically healthy and intact sagebrush ecosystem that is resistant to the invasion of non-native species and resilient after disturbances.
- Maintain traditional levels of grazing use on all public lands.
- Seek to more readily activate non-active A.U.M.s within allotment on above average moister years.

3.2.2 Conservations Policies - Public Health and Safety - Paradigm Shift

- Prioritize public health and safety of those living within fire districts - emphasize the importance of encouraging local control and leadership when conducting firefighting measures within rural communities - recognize and encourage traditional fire fighting methods of controlling wildfire.
- Prioritize the importance of quick response - wildfires at all times should be put down when conditions are right for putting them down. *(See, Rural Heritage Preservation Project, Finding of Facts, Findings #25 and #27)*