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Idaho

Western weed summit takes aim at invasive plants

By KEITH RIDLER
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Finding a way to stop fire-prone cheatgrass and other invasive species is unavoidable if sagebrush ecosystems in the West are to remain viable for native plants and animals, experts say.

More than 200 federal and state land managers and scientists trying to figure out how to do that took part in the three-day 2015 Western Invasive Weed Summit that wrapped up Nov. 19 in Boise.

Janice Schneider, the Interior Department's assistant secretary for Land and Minerals Management, said a key to any success will be state and federal agencies as well as other entities finding ways to work collaboratively.

"It's critically important from an ecological perspective as well as an economic perspective," she said. "This is going to remain a top priority for this administration."

Officials say an action plan will come out of the Weed Summit in January that will serve as a road map for the various entities to use in fighting invasive plants. While not yet written it will, officials said, part of it will look at some ways to remove barriers between agencies so that limited budgets can do more.

The sagebrush steppe supports some 350 species, including greater sage grouse. But those ecosystems have been shrinking for decades as cheatgrass and other invasive plants move in and force out native species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in September opted not to list sage grouse as needing federal protections, but will

revisit that decision in five years.

The Weed Summit in Boise is part of a much larger effort following Interior Secretary Sally Jewell's order in January calling for a "science-based" strategy that safeguards the greater sage grouse while contending with wildfires that have grown larger over the years and have been especially destructive in the Great Basin region.

"It's such a large-scale landscape problem, no one agency or individual could really effect a change without everyone working together," said Ken Mayer, Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' coordinator for the Fire and Invasive Initiative. Hence, he said, the need for the Weed Summit.

Some 3 million acres of sage grouse habitat has burned since 2012, with the most recent giant wildfire consuming 436 square miles of rangeland in southwest Idaho and eastern Oregon last summer.

Schneider, during her trip to Idaho, visited the area that is now undergoing an extensive rehabilitation effort, another aspect of Jewell's order that aims to recover scorched habitat.

Cheatgrass has been expanding unchecked in the West for more than a century. Giant fires starting in the 1990s that threatened homes raised awareness of the plant, said David Pyke, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. The potential listing of sage grouse also brought focus on the destructive abilities of cheatgrass.

But Pyke said more than a century of losing ground to cheatgrass might be changing.

"I think we have the ability to be able to turn that ship and actually begin to restore a lot of these lands and save the ones that are still intact," he said.

Lowline Angus offers big value for its small size

By HEATHER SMITH THOMAS
For the Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — Small-framed cattle, including Lowline Angus, are becoming popular with people who raise grass-fed beef for custom butchering.

Lowlines began as a research experiment in Australia that kept one herd the same frame size they were when first imported from Scotland; this herd was closed to outside genetics in 1964.

The project was disbanded in the 1990s because ranchers wanted bigger cattle. Gene Kantack of Mini Cows West near Idaho Falls was one of the first people to import embryos and breeding females from Australia in the late 1990s.

"We'd seen an article telling about these cattle being sold when the research project ended. We selected four breeding heifers to import. They came via San Francisco and 97 days of quarantine," Kantack said.

"Selecting quality breeding stock, flying them from Australia, going through three months of quarantine, made Lowlines very expensive. So then we imported semen from six of the best bulls and used that semen on our heifers," he said.

"We were flushing embryos, putting them in surrogate cows, mostly Jerseys. We shipped calves all over the country in large dog crates," he explained. "There was quite a demand for them, even from petting zoos, because at that time there were no Lowlines in the U.S. and they were a novelty."

His target market was farmers with small acreages who didn't have much room for cattle.

"These cattle are gentle and easy to handle," he said. "But the most exciting thing is the quality of beef they produce.



Heather Smith Thomas/For the Capital Press

Gene Kantack with a newborn calf.

Many people talk about fish oil as the best source of good fats but you can get a lot of Omega 3s in beef, and a lot more in pasture-fed beef."

He believes that if consumers realized there is a difference in the beef they would be more interested in Lowlines.

Other ranchers are also using them for crossbreeding — for calving ease and breed-back on first calf heifers or bringing down cow size in a herd that's gotten its frame size too large.

Lowlines excel in carcass traits like ribeye area, fat thickness and marbling.

"You can't get a typical size beef animal to marble in the right

length of time like you can with a Lowline. Full-size Angus just can't grade mid to high choice on grass only," Kantack said.

Stocking rate is another plus.

"We can put 2-to-1 on a pasture and put 70 percent of the beef on a carcass with 40 to 50 percent of the feed required by a larger animal. If you have a small acreage, every dollar counts, and you can keep these cattle in with a 39-inch-high mesh fence," he said.

"Many people are not mowing their acre of grass anymore; they'd rather have something to graze it that will provide beef — and they want

something they can manage. They don't want phone calls from the neighbors telling them their cow is out," Kantack said.

Randy Nabb raises Lowline Angus near Twin Falls, Idaho.

"I bought embryos from Gene, including some from the Australian bull Roustabout," Nabb said. "I bought my herd bull, Odin, from breeders in Wendell, Idaho, who bought all their cattle from Gene. The cows I've been getting my heifers from were bred with semen from Gene's bull, Quartermasters Best, a son of the original Lowline that was the first one ever registered in America."

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