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Livestock

Managed grazing keeps rangeland healthy, reduces fire damage

By **DOUG WARNOCK**
Greener Pastures

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Doug Warnock



Well-managed grazing is an effective way to control invasive annual grasses and broadleaf weeds and helps to make rangelands better able to withstand wildfires, explains Tipton Hudson, Rangeland and Livestock Management Extension Specialist with Washington State University.

Hudson discusses grazing and wildfire management in one of his "The Art of the Range" podcast series at www.artofrange.com.

"The shrub-steppe grasslands and dry pine forests found in much of the Western United States are prone to fire. There are some ecological benefits to fire and land managers should think of how to manage fire risk rather than trying to eliminate it," he said. "Some managers promote heavier grazing for fire reduction, but others caution that this can shift plant communities toward more flammable plant species. There is validity to both viewpoints. There needs to be a balance between the two philosophies."

The perennial bunchgrass plant communities, typical of many grasslands in the Pacific Northwest, have a shorter window of flammability due to their higher moisture content going into the summer than do the invasive annual grasses.

The latter, such as cheatgrass, has a much longer period of high flammability. Cheatgrass-dominated plant communities have a dangerously low moisture content, which extends fire risk from about May 1 to Oct. 1. This is a five-month high-risk period versus the two-month risk period of the perennial bunchgrass communities.

Appropriately managed grazing must incorporate the combination of duration, frequency and intensity of grazing to allow the bunchgrass communities to thrive. Having healthy, thriving perennial plants is the best way to significantly reduce the invasion of annual grasses.

Wildfire intensity can be managed by manipulating the kind, amount and continuity of the vegetation present in an area. Grazing disturbs soil less than mechanical techniques, is less expensive and is more environmentally friendly than herbicides as a means of fire fuel management.

State lawmakers call for Beef Checkoff referendum

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

Legislators from 11 states sent a letter last month to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack expressing concerns about the viability of independent cattle producers and calling for more accountability in the Beef Checkoff program.

The program assesses cattle producers \$1 for every head of cattle they sell to promote beef.

But the group said the mandatory program doesn't give their cattle-producing constituents an opportunity to influence where those advertising dollars go.

And, according to the group, the system is broken.

"This tax was voted on in 1985 under the auspices that the money raised would go to promote exclusively USA beef. Unfortunately, that money is being funneled away from its original intent and is being used by private associations and entities that do not exclusively represent USA beef," the letter stated.

"Why is a federally mandated tax going to support and promote foreign beef as well as private entities?" the lawmakers asked.

"Moderate to heavy grazing every year is not a good idea. A century of rangeland science has shown that bunchgrass must be allowed to go to seed at least every other year," he said. "That does not mean that bunchgrasses cannot be grazed every year. It means that bunchgrasses cannot be grazed during the April-June period every year. If grazed early in the season, they require a growing period after the grazing to recover leaf tissue, root mass, and to produce seed. The length of the recovery period, rather than the grazing period, is the key to avoiding overgrazing."

Animals that stay too long in a plant community or return too soon after the previous grazing can damage bunchgrasses.

Well-managed grazing is an effective way of controlling the invasion of undesirable plants and can enhance the health of perennial grasslands. There is research showing that proper grazing can help to manage fire fuel loads on rangelands. But heavy grazing every year is not the solution to fire on our Northwest rangelands and dry forests.

Well-managed grazing that targets invasive, undesirable plants and promotes fire resistant plant species helps to limit the severity and extent of wildfire.

Doug Warnock, retired from Washington State University Extension, lives on a ranch in the Touchet River Valley where he writes about and teaches grazing management. He can be contacted at dwarnockgreenerpastures@gmail.com.

USDA to slow pork processing line speeds

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

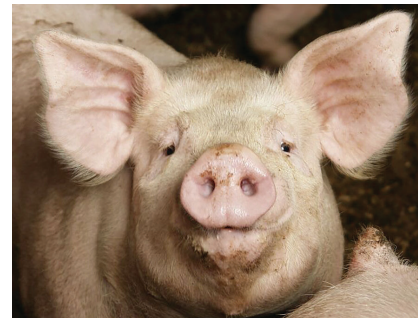
USDA has announced pork processing plants operating under the New Swine Slaughter Inspection System should prepare to revert to a maximum line speed of 1,106 head per hour on June 30.

USDA's action is the result of a federal district court ruling striking down a provision in the final rule for the new system allowing increased line speeds. That provision had removed maximum line speeds and allowed plants to determine their own line speeds based on their ability to maintain process control.

The U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota vacated that portion of the final rule, finding that USDA violated the Administrative Procedures Act when it failed to consider earlier public comment on worker safety in the final rule.

Five of the six plants affected by the decision have been running higher line speeds for more than 20 years under the pilot program aimed at modernizing USDA's swine inspection system.

Those plants were running between 1,225 and 1,450 head per hour, according to an analysis by



National Pork Producers Council/Linked In
A federal judge's ruling has forced USDA to reduce the line speed at pork processing plants.

Dermot Hayes, an economist at Iowa State University.

The National Pork Producers Council urged USDA to appeal the ruling, citing disastrous consequences for hog farmers.

"NPPC is disappointed with the USDA's decision to support a flawed federal district court decision to strike down line-speed provisions..." the council said in an emailed response to Capital Press.

Line speeds in the New Swine Inspection System have been successfully evaluated and tested since the Clinton administration, it said.

"Based on more than 20 years of development, NSIS line speeds have

been proven to safely support much-needed pork processing capacity in the United States," the council said.

While USDA has until the end of August to appeal the decision, irreparable harm will be exacted on small U.S. hog farmers when this court order goes into effect at the end of June, it said.

"NPPC will continue to pursue all avenues to reverse a court decision that will lead to pork industry consolidation and increased packer market power," the council said.

Sarah Little, vice president of communications for the North American Meat Institute, said members affected by the court's ruling will continue to operate their facilities with the highest worker safety standards.

"There are significant unintended consequences associated with the judge's ruling, including workers who will now have increased workloads as companies attempt to make up for lost production and hundreds of processing positions that may be eliminated," she said.

In addition, Hayes' economic study estimated small pork producers could lose more than \$80 million, she said.

Email lori@wawg.org or call **509.659.0610** with questions.

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