

Study: Cattle grazing significantly reduces wildfire spread

Researcher: ‘Cattle grazing directly impacts fuel load and fire behavior’

By Sierra Dawn McClain
EO Media Group

University of California Cooperative Extension researchers just completed a timely study showing cattle grazing is an essential tool in reducing wildfire — a tool they say should be expanded and refined.

Recent record-shattering wildfires across California, Oregon and Washington have demonstrated the need for better fire control.

Researchers say their study shows that without the 1.8 million beef cattle that graze California’s rangelands annually, the state would have hundreds to thousands of additional pounds per acre of fine fuels on the landscape, and this year’s wildfires would be even more devastating. Researchers say cattle grazing is underutilized on public and private lands and targeted grazing should be expanded.

“Cattle grazing directly impacts fuel load and fire behavior,” said Felix Ratcliff, a rangeland consultant who contributed to the research.

Researchers say more private landowners and public land agencies should contract for grazing.

About 40% of California is grazed, according to Sheila Barry, University of California natural resource and livestock adviser and researcher in the study.

But many grazable acres aren’t grazed, she said.

The public, said Barry, often don’t see benefits of grazing; they see short grass and cow paties. Cattle’s role in preventing wildfires, she said, is often overlooked.

Justin Oldfield, executive director of the California Cattle Council, which funded the research, told the Capital Press he hopes the study demonstrates grazing benefits.

Some public land agencies already use cattle.

Allison Rofe, rangeland specialist for East Bay Parks in Califor-



Contributed photo/UC Cooperative Extension
UC Cooperative Extension researchers found that across California, cattle remove, on average, 596 pounds per acre of fuel. This varied from about 174 pounds per acre in the southwest interior region to about 1,020 pounds per acre in the San Joaquin-Sierra region.

nia, said she considers cattle grazing of annual grasslands the “single most effective passive management tool” in fire control.

The East Bay Regional Park District, she said, leases 70% of its 123,000 acres for grazing.

Rofe said the district’s popular lease program has a waiting list.

Alan Renz, a cattle rancher with 20 leases, said leasing public land demands more driving time, diesel and employees. But it also provides financial opportunities, forage and security; if one property burns, he still has 19 others.

But grazing more land isn’t the end-all solution. Researchers say grazing needs to be targeted.

Statewide, researchers found cattle remove, on average, 596 pounds per acre of fuel. In some regions, cattle would need to consume another 180 pounds per acre to bring grass down to four feet, a critical threshold for accessibility to firefighters.

Not every area should be grazed to four feet, researchers say. Farmers have competing goals. Preventing erosion and promoting forage require more grass, while preventing fire requires less.

Renz, the rancher, called it a balancing act.

“If I don’t graze it enough, fire. If I graze it all the way down, nothing left to eat,” he said.

Devii Rao, livestock and natural resources adviser at the University of California Cooperative Extension and the study’s lead, said ranchers should target grazing around homes, infrastructure, roadsides and at the wildland-urban interface.

Researchers also encourage ranchers to consider mixed-species grazing.

“There are so many things we can do better. Cattle grazing is really important to fire safety, and it’s time we have more conversations about it,” said Rao.

SHOOTING THE BREEZE Forest chicken

As high school kids, my buddies and I would hit Tamarack Lookout area above Spray regularly in search of the ruffed and blue grouse indigenous to the area. We usually came home with a couple each after our small drives. The HIP validation for upland game birds was and is an economic addition to purchase when buying our hunting licenses. The grouse is one of my favorites to hunt because they are larger than quail or doves, and therefore easier to hit on the wing, but also provide more meat for the table.



Dale Valade

I, like everyone else, enjoy a nice trophy to hang on the wall. But hunting at its core for me is about the meat. In these current troubling times, I feel we are going to see a resurgence of interest in hunting as a method of gathering food. Grouse are nearly the size of a chicken when fully mature and, though more lean, they are just as tasty.

One memory I cherish took place when I was still a sophomore or junior in high school. We were hunting with our old family friends, the Owens. Hollis had been friends and schoolmates with both of my grandfathers, and he and his brother Marion both grew up in Dayville. His children and grandchildren are our friends to this day. On one of our many forays we saw nothing of the four-legged variety to shoot but were seeing grouse nearly everywhere. Before leaving his cabin to try again that evening, Hollis grabbed an old Stevens side-by-side 20 gauge shotgun and some cartridges to take along. He, my father and I set out for a short evening hunt. On our way back to the cabin, we saw two ruffed grouse graveling on the side of the old dirt road. I grabbed Hollis’s 20 gauge, and breaking it open, I saw that each barrel was loaded and ready.



Contributed photo
A ruffed grouse graveling in the road.

The two Bonasa umbellus had fled into the nearby brush, but as is typical for these birds, they hadn’t hidden themselves very well. After a brief pursuit and a well-placed head shot to each, the Stevens was empty and our dinner plates were filled. As I neared the truck proudly carrying both birds and the shotgun, Hollis told me that if I had truly wanted to impress him that I would’ve found a way to take both with a single cartridge. Ah, Hollis, boy do we miss you.

Back at the cabin we prepared a most succulent dish. After dressing the birds, we sliced the meat into strips and lightly dusted them with flour, salt and pepper. Some bacon had also been minced, and once it was halfway done, the grouse fillets were added to the bacon grease and both finished cooking together in the skillet. Maybe food tastes better in the outdoors, but grouse prepared thusly has yet to disappoint. It’s reason enough to bring a shotgun or .22 along when hunting big game!

Are grouse a favorite of yours? Write to us at shootingthebreezebme@gmail.com!

Dale Valade is a local country gent with a love for the outdoors, handloading, hunting and shooting.

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