

CATASTROPHIC WILDFIRE



Ranchers know that fire is a normal part of ecosystem management. Fire can be useful for clearing debris, stimulating growth of certain forage, and supporting healthy soil carbon. Fire can be especially useful when it's used for certain land management objectives – ranchers and land management agencies use prescribed fire as part of their management routine.

The problem becomes when wildfire becomes catastrophic wildfire. Catastrophic conditions that now exist across the West have developed as a result of decades of suppression of the normal fire cycle, decreases in permitted grazing to control fuels, and a focus on preservation rather than conservation.

In 2020, the United States saw more than 10.3 million acres burned across the West, causing billions of dollars in property damage, natural resource damage, and loss of life. Catastrophic fires live up to their name, not only for the natural resources, but also the livestock and humans around them. Smoke compromises air quality for surrounding communities and can spread several states away. A 2021 study found that fine particulate matter found in the smoke from catastrophic wildfires can be up to 10 times more harmful to breathe than other pollution sources that typically receive more attention, like car exhaust and industrial emissions.



INTERRUPTING THE CATASTROPHIC FIRE CYCLE

Grazing is a nimble, effective tool to achieve resource objectives, including reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Ranchers are uniquely positioned to target the buildup of high-density grasses that make fires burn hotter and move faster. Federal agencies have recognized that grazing can be an effective tool to create fuel breaks, interruptions in dense fuels that seek to change the way a fire moves, in high-risk ecosystems. This is important in a variety of ecosystems, but especially in protecting high-priority areas that would be most susceptible to fire, like the sagebrush steppe, certain riparian areas, and native grasslands.

Grazing also prevents encroachment of invasive species – in multiple ways: grazing stimulates native grass growth to ensure that invasive species don't get a foothold in ecosystems. Invasive species, like cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), are more likely to encroach after a catastrophic fire, and grazing helps prevent fires from becoming catastrophic.

Grazing also can be used as a targeted tool to address established cheatgrass populations, so that catastrophic fire doesn't reoccur. Since cheatgrass grows so fast, browns so quickly, and crowds out other lush species, catastrophic fire is more common in cheatgrass monocultures. Grazing can prevent this, because grazing can do it all.

PLC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use of grazing as a nimble tool to achieve resource management objectives
- Use of the most efficient environmental analysis (see NEPA fact sheet) to ensure successful intervention in high-risk environments
- Development of supports so that when catastrophic fires occur, ranchers don't bear the majority of the burden
- Emphasis on relationships between federal agencies, ranchers, and emergency responders to ensure all have the information and access they need when they need it

Fire is compatible with grazing. Catastrophic wildfire isn't compatible with life. Livestock grazing is the best way to protect our public lands from this kind of devastation.

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