Grazing and Wildfires: A Win-Win Solution
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Governor Herbert recently petitioned the federal government to reconsider Utah’s inventory of roadless areas, which is a vital step to improve Utah’s fight against wildfires. Reducing the number of roadless areas could lead to increased logging in areas with high amounts of dead lumber, which are a primary source of fuel for catastrophic wildfires. Congressman Rob Bishop is also fighting on the federal level to improve forest management through the House’s passage of the Resilient Federal Forests Act, which, unfortunately, has not passed the Senate. However, along with increased logging, there are additional tools that not only reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, but do so in a manner that stimulates local economies, creates jobs, and produces important sources of both food and fiber.
Domestic livestock grazing is one of the many tools that has been proven to limit the risk of wildfire and should be better utilized today to reduce the severity and size of the fuel loads upon which wildfires depend. Studies show that livestock grazing reduces both the risk and the intensity of wildfires by reducing fuel loads.\(^1\) Rather than leaving new growth to dry up and act as tinder for a wildfire, livestock consumes that new growth, invigorates vegetation, and limit the amount of fuel that is available to burn. Responsible livestock grazing is an ecologically and economically sustainable management tool that produces forage for the agricultural industry and economic benefits to local communities.\(^2\) When wildfires burn properly grazed areas, the vegetation recovers quicker than ungrazed landscapes because they do not burn as hot and result in less soil sterilization.\(^3\)

Research also shows that grazing can reduce the severity and speed of wildfires in areas that are infested with one of Utah’s most prevalent invasive species, Cheatgrass.\(^4\) If not grazed, these infested areas would otherwise require expensive treatments to fight the spread of Cheatgrass and the risk of wildfire that it brings as well.

Every year western states face the reality of living in an arid, fire-prone climate. Although the causes are nuanced and debated, we can all agree that action needs to be taken now. Federal budgets are going up in smoke fighting wildfires instead of preventing them.

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For example, wildfire budgets will have grown from 16% of the Forest Service’s total annual budget in 1995 to an estimated 67% by the year 2025.\(^5\) Total wildfire costs for federal agencies have increased from $239 million in 1985 to $2.9 billion in 2017. The total costs to federal agencies to suppress wildfires once they had started burning has increased from $239 million in 1985 to $2.9 billion in 2017.\(^6\)

Despite all the land that has burned in the west, there is still 60-80 million acres of public land at immediate risk of catastrophic wildfire - an area larger than the entire state of Utah.\(^7\) Furthermore, wildfire threat to populated areas is also growing. In the past two decades, the Wildland Urban Interface (neighborhoods and communities directly adjacent to wildlands) has rapidly grown by more than 40%.\(^8\) These areas are most susceptible to wildfires and as we have tragically witnessed in California recently, can result in the loss of homes, property, and the lives of citizens.

Yes, Utah is a land prone to wildfires, but domestic livestock grazing is a tool that, if used correctly, can limit the size and severity of wildfires while producing economic and ecological benefits. With federal budgets stretched so thin it is vital that we utilize grazing to fight wildfires and stimulate our economy rather than watching our taxpayer dollars go up in smoke. Let’s join Governor Herbert and Rep. Rob Bishop to encourage sensible and cost-effective solutions to combat wildfire to save our forests from catastrophic fires that are destructive rather than regenerative.


