

## **Fire Prevention on American Rangelands**

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President Theodore Roosevelt once said, “The conservation of natural resources is the fundamental problem. Unless we solve that problem, it will avail us little to solve all others.” Now, listen...Do you hear that crackling in the distance? Can you smell a monster’s potent fumes wafting in the summer breeze? This wild monster lies quietly in wait for ripe conditions of drought, heat, and circumstance. It is one of nature’s most powerful forces. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, the monster ravages an average 6.6 million acres in the United States annually. Sweeping through urban communities and across American rangelands, it goes by the name of fire. In the United States, wildfire suppression costs 1.1 billion dollars a year! Even more astounding is that over half of these costly fires could be prevented—saving communities, livestock, resources, and the hard-earned American dollar.

To start off, sustainability in fire prevention begins with the individual. Remember how I said that over half of wildfires could be prevented? That’s because 84 percent of wildfires are human caused! The United States—including Oregon, California, Idaho and Texas—have seen the damaging effects of such human action throughout the 2018 fire season. In addition, valuable rangeland has been reduced to little more than cinders due to wildfire. With around 40 percent of all federal land classified as “rangeland,” it is easy to conclude that hundreds of thousands of acres burn, destroying these famous steppes. Luckily, public education programs, produced by government conservation agencies, have helped many of us realize the dangers of what we can do. Mascot Smokey the Bear is a prime example of what education can do to reduce the fire threat to our natural resources. As a little girl, I vividly remember driving past signs where Smokey indicated the fire danger level to nearby recreationalists. Many of these recreation areas

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are considered a part of the rangeland we know and love. Growing up with fire wise education programs allowed me to consciously reflect on the decisions I made, and how it would impact my surroundings. Education is one of the most crucial ways to prevent catastrophic wildfires from decimating rangelands.

Additionally, livestock grazing is a fantastic means of fire prevention because the animals consume flammable range plants. As reported by Idaho State University, “Livestock grazing was the most effective means to reduce fuel load,” and “provides a viable management tool for fuel load reduction.” This symbiotic relationship between livestock and rangelands efficiently manages land health while providing forage for animals. Livestock grazing also reduces wildfire risk and promotes ecological growth when properly managed. Grazing allows ranchers to feed their animals in an economically sound way, as well as foster federal contracts, which draw in and keep money used to conserve public lands.

Nevertheless, there are preservationists who challenge this simple truth, claiming that most, if not all, wildfires self-extinguish whether or not we do anything about it! They also declare that fire prevention methods should only be used around human structures, without taking into consideration the effect humans have on natural resources by causing the majority of these fires. Yet in reality, grazing helps boost perennial plant growth, establish wildlife habitat, diminish fuel load, and lower fire intensity.

In contrast, fire isn't a completely negative and cataclysmic force. In fact, controlled burning is another means of prevention. Imagine that pasture full of wolfy, old plants your Great Uncle Bill keeps behind the house. Well, Bill knows that if he wants to get any decent forage value off his land, he needs to get rid of the excess. Management services, such as the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service, use controlled burns for two main reasons. First,

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controlled burns prevent wildfires, much in the same way grazing does. Fighting fire with fire reduces the fuel load so a larger, more devastating fire doesn't reach it first, therefore helping control it. Second, Tallgrass Restoration says prescribed burns "help restore nutrients and help lead to more desirable plant growth in the future." Come next spring, Uncle Bill doesn't seem so crazy when you look out back and see healthy, lush land he'd be hard pressed to try and burn again. Thus, we see how using controlled burns to prevent catastrophic wildfires is a crucial part of managing American rangelands.

In conclusion, our current fire management practices are unsustainable. If we allow them to continue to spiral out of control, the brooding monster will fully release its vengeance upon America's beloved rangelands. Practicing sustainable prevention methods like education, grazing and controlled burns protects human development, wildlife habitat and natural resource land. Research shows the most efficient way to fight fire is to stop it before it happens. Only then can we tame the beast.

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