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Written By: Jackie Denk,
Fire Information Officer
928-635-5607

A New Tool To Reduce Fuels?

Making a home defensible against wildfire requires a little time and effort and a lot of tools – everything from rakes and pruning sheers to chainsaws and lawnmowers. But for one local resident, those tools just wouldn't do. Her tool of choice in preparing for wildfire season 2004? Cows.

To increase the safety of her home, Shirley Strong called the Kaibab National Forest last spring to request that cows be put to pasture near her property in Pine-Aire Estates. She hoped that by the cows doing what comes naturally – eating – the amount of fuels near her property would be reduced.

“When I picked up the phone and she said she wanted to talk about cows, I immediately thought the worst,” said Paul Webber, range conservation specialist on the Williams Ranger District. “Usually, people call to complain about cows. It was refreshing to talk to someone who was really thinking about how they could use livestock to their benefit.”

Strong's home near Garland Prairie is surrounded by a sea of grass. With the prolonged drought, Strong has watched that grass get drier and drier. She has also watched

it grow so dense and matted that she feared the smallest flame could turn into a large inferno.

“Because there has been less and less water, we have been seeing less and less wildlife in this area,” said Strong, who has lived in Pine-Aire Estates since 1995. According to Strong, smaller numbers of wildlife have meant greater amounts of grass and an increasing concern on her part about the threat of wildland fire, especially during the spring and early summer when strong winds push across the prairie. “We live right on the edge of the prairie, and it is a concern for us with all of that grass out there.”

The Strong residence is on the north side of the Dutch Kid and Grey pastures, which make up about 1,300 acres of the 12,160-acre Bellemont Allotment. The Bellemont Allotment is permitted to Rex Maughan, who usually runs about 285 cows on it. Because of prolonged drought, Maughan voluntarily reduced his herd to 230 cows – a number that Webber said the allotment would be able to graze in 2004 given forage monitoring findings.

While the Dutch Kid and Grey pastures are used during summer grazing rotations, cows are not typically put to pasture there until later in the season. “The Strongs were concerned about the potential for fire to rip through the prairie,” Webber said. “They wanted the cattle out there as early as possible to help reduce some of the fuels.”

Because of Strong’s request, Webber worked with managers of the allotment – Mary and Neil Abbott – to place the cows there first. The 230 cows were on the Dutch Kid and Grey pastures near the Strong residence from May 15 through June 10.

“I thought it was a great idea because the corner of the pasture near their home hasn’t gotten much use,” Mary Abbott said. “The grass had become so overgrown and matted that it wasn’t really palatable to antelope or other wildlife anymore.”

The Strongs and Abbotts had two major objectives in putting cattle into the area. First, the cows would eat the overgrown, matted grasses thereby reducing the risk of a wildland fire moving through the area. Second, the movement of the cows would churn up compacted grasses and soils, allowing new grasses to sprout.

In order to help ensure those objectives were met, the Abbotts placed salt blocks near the Strong residence to attract the cows, which tend to avoid getting very close to homes. According to Webber, the salt did the trick, and the cows began feeding right along the Strong's fence line, reducing flammable material along the way.

"This was a winning situation for everyone," Webber said. "It resulted in greater safety for the Strongs, better relations between permittees and landowners, and an awareness of some of the positive aspects of grazing rather than the negative things people usually hear."

While everyone was pleased with the results, Webber said that the same arrangements can't be made again next year because of the rest-rotation grazing schedule that is in place on the Kaibab National Forest. Pastures are not used every year because of the importance of allowing the land to rest after use by cattle. However, both Strong and Abbott agree that they would like to do this again in the future.

"The keys to our survival [as ranchers] are education and community relations," Abbott said. "It is important to take any chance we get to show people that we are trying to be good stewards of the land. We all want to keep the range in the best condition that we can."

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