

Kipuka Study Sites

Conservative Corner

By Cliff Gardner

Special to the Rancher

Dear Editor:

Recently I ran across a bit of information concerning cheat grass that I thought might be of interest to your readers.

Beginning in 1979 there was a 14-year study done in Southeastern Oregon soon after scientist found two isolated areas deep within large lava flow areas where livestock had never grazed, nor had cheat grass been introduced. Both of these areas were only accessible by helicopter or by arduous hiking across miles of lava.

During the study several important things were learned. First of all, contrary to popular belief, it was found that the frequency of plants per square yard of native grass and sagebrush within these pristine areas was not all that great. At the east "kipuka" (isolated study site), it was found that 59 percent of the ground was barren of vegetation. At the west kipuka, ground barren of vegetation ranged from 84 percent in 1980 to 76 percent in 1991.

This finding is very important, for it supports what the earliest explorers and trappers had to say about the country in its pristine state.

Most significant was the increase in cheat grass which occurred at the west kipuka beginning in 1980. Apparently, there was an unintended introduction of cheat grass by the scientist themselves. Soil previously barren of vegetation became populated by cheat grass, yet, no loss of perennial grasses, forbs or shrubs was noted during the remainder of the study.

These findings present a clear challenge to much of the conventional thinking that has prevailed over the last seventy or so years. Unfortunately, it is the

nature of mankind to be critical of effects of others. People for some reason want to believe that our rangelands have been degraded, and that all was wonderful before the coming of white man. In truth, the opposite has occurred. Our rangelands are not less productive. Cheat grass is not as bad as so many like to portray it. In fact in most instances, cheat grass has been complementary to the existing or native vegetation.

This is not to say that cheat grass can't be a problem, for it can be. As was pointed out in recent articles on cheat grass when wildfire occurs over much of the West, more often than not, it kills most native vegetation. In most instances it takes from 50 to 100 years for bitterbrush, and many native grasses to re-establish themselves. In the meantime, cheat grass takes over; setting the stage for more wildfire.

That is why it is so important that burned over areas be seeded as soon as possible after a fire. Hot summer fire kills nearly all cheat grass seed, creating an almost perfect seedbed for grasses which are conducive to the area.

But even more important, we need to understand why we're having so many more large fires than ever before. Cheat grass has been with us for a long, long time.

The problem of increasing fire is not cheat grass. The problem is reduced grazing. We need to be putting more livestock back on our rangelands. With little fuel, wildfire is at a disadvantage; it's easier to put out. That's why there were so few large wildfires in bygone years.

And oh yes, don't listen to all the talk about cattle not eating cheat grass. Over much of Nevada, if the cattle didn't eat cheat grass, they would lose two thirds of their diet. Every year there are hundreds of thousands of cattle that get fat on cheat grass throughout the western states.

Cliff Gardner has been a lifelong rancher in the Ruby Valley of Nevada.