

A99 22, 2000

Ira Hansen

Nevada's burning up: Livestock to the rescue?

I recently read the book, "The Central Pacific Railroad Across Nevada 1868 & 1997," a comparative pictorial made up of photos of the route of the railroad through Nevada. About one-third of the photos were of the Reno-Sparks and Truckee Canyon area. I was startled by the dramatic changes in the vegetation, and how deeply altered the plant communities have become.

With all the fires in the last couple of years, and the heightened public interest created, the word "cheatgrass" is on everyone's lips. Cheatgrass has changed the landscape, and entire mountain ranges once covered in sage, greasewood, shadscale and various native bunchgrasses and forbs are today covered almost monotypically by cheatgrass.

Look at the hills around Reno, especially east towards Sparks, and see for yourself. Notice how the mountains behind the Northern Nevada Medical Center look yellow; now, look a bit more to the south, on the other side of the Truckee River. Those sage covered hills on the south side are a remnant of how all the hills in this area once looked.

But looks can be deceiving. If you wander around a bit in the sagebrush, you find the cheatgrass is widespread and almost everywhere, a blanket of bone-dry tinder just waiting for a match, a cigarette butt, a bolt of lightning.

Once an area burns, the native plants come back very slowly, if at all. I've watched several areas for over 20 years, and the native plants struggle in fierce competition for water and minerals with the cheatgrass. Then, when things seem to be close to coming back to native dominance, a fire sends everything right back to square one.

I've been an amateur naturalist for as far back as I can remember and studying the plants of Nevada and their interaction has always appealed to me. Watching the changes I've described has been a bit painful; some of the most beautiful areas (that

is, if you like the high desert, as I do) of Nevada have been destroyed. Scenic canyons once covered by sage and junipers, with willows along the creek bottoms are today eyesores, with cheatgrass and only cheatgrass seen in every direction.

Cheatgrass does not do well above about 6,000 feet in elevation, so some of Nevada, especially Eastern Nevada, is less threatened. But for the 3,500-6,000 foot areas, the changes seem to be almost inevitable.

*...the native plants
struggle in fierce com-
petition for water and
minerals with the
cheatgrass.*

Everywhere you go, cheatgrass is found in abundance. Last year I spent some time hunting around Denio, and looking at the ranges over there, especially the Bilkcreek-Double H Mountains, was disheartening. Yellow from top to bottom, an almost unbroken sea of cheatgrass, and a scene becoming commonplace on most Nevada ranges.

For years along the Pyramid Highway just outside of Sparks a fence created a unique boundary between grazed and ungrazed areas that had been burned over years earlier. The fence ran east-west, and on the south side of the fence a local rancher ran cattle. On the north side of this east-west running fence was a sea of nothing but cheatgrass; on the south grazed area, a heavily grazed area I might add, a sagebrush-rabbitbrush-horsebrush community existed. The difference was visibly sharp and unmistakable; no one could miss it. The cows had grazed the cheatgrass down to nothing, allowing the native shrubs to reestablish themselves. With consistent grazing year after year, the biological diversity of the

plant community was greatly enhanced, especially when compared to the monotypical cheatgrass community on the other side of the fence. For a couple of years now the cattle have been removed, and a thick undergrowth of cheatgrass is now seen amongst the shrubs. And the fire danger has expanded right along with the cheatgrass.

With the now decades old Federal policy of year by year cutbacks in grazing on the public domain, the non-native cheatgrass, once fodder for sheep and cattle, is taking over. Destructive fires follow in its wake, and once an area is burned and the native plant communities are removed, the likelihood of future and more widespread burns is almost guaranteed. The problem is self-perpetuating.

Paradoxically, the cutbacks were based on the complaint of overgrazing and the corresponding destruction of native plants especially grasses. But today, in hindsight, which would you prefer, a plant community dominated by various native shrubs, or monocultures of endless miles of cheatgrass? And huge tax bills for fighting range fires?

The BLM and U.S. Forest Service, responding to public outrage over the massive fires, have declared "war," but unless they can develop a very inexpensive herbicide exclusively lethal to cheatgrass and inexpensive enough to spread over most of Nevada, the war will be remarkably one sided.

It is time to rethink our government's policies of hostility to grazing on the public domain. Livestock grazing has its flaws, but is there a feasible alternative? If we want to stop and even roll back the cheatgrass invasion and the huge fires, its time to allow the rapid expansion of the livestock industry in Nevada and throughout the West.

Ira Hansen is a Sparks Tribune columnist and produces a radio talk show for KKOH.