

Four-Legged Fire Fighters

While Nero fiddled, Rome burned, and while the foresters were drumming their drums, forests were flaming. Same result . . . different instruments! As more and more livestock are removed from this country's vast inventory of public lands, areas previously dominated by grasses are being invaded by brush and woody plants. And in the process the West is turning into one giant tinderbox. The black pall that hangs over the West from this summer's fires is a smoke signal that the federal government's grazing and forest policy is a dismal failure.

Just about the time the public lands rancher is totally evicted from this nation's fields and forests because he was not paying enough rent, the feds will see the error of their ways and start paying ranchers for the same privilege. It's already happening.

- Sabastien Minaberri is paid by the Forest Service to graze his sheep on the Angeles Forest fire breaks in Southern California. Six thousand sheep control brush and mow the grass on more than 13,000 acres of ridge-top fire breaks built to stop advancing fires. The breaks are bulldozed eight to 16 feet wide along the ridge top for miles. Then the sheep take over to keep the breaks clear of tall grass and other potential fire fuels.

Such was the value of the pro-

gram that when the Forest Service found out the program was in danger because Minaberri was losing money, they decided to pay him to run his sheep on the land. "For us it's a simple, low-cost, low-tech approach," says Bernice Bigelow, forest resource planning officer for the Angeles National Forest. Sheep are less expensive than herbicides to control brush and less expensive than mechanical means to uproot future fuel for fires.

- Remember the devastating Oakland fire that destroyed the equivalent of a small town? Livestock is now being used by the East Bay Regional Parks Department in Oakland to eat down the vegetation on the site of that devastating 1991 blaze in the Oakland Hills. Perhaps if the livestock would have been there sooner, hundreds of people would not have had to sift through ashes to find some charred remnant of their former lives.

- Some sheep producers in Canada are being paid an average of \$5 per sheep per month to graze their animals in newly planted forests. In Canada 60,000 sheep have replaced herbicides on reforestation projects. "People tend to look at this as an environmentally green project since we are not using herbicides to manage the vegetation," said Dan Lousier of the Ministry of Forests.

- In Oregon's coastal forests, forest managers have waived grazing fees and actually paid

\$10 per acre in trucking and herding costs to encourage ranchers to graze their sheep in newly planted forests. Over the three-year period needed for the new trees to become fully established, sheep grazing costs \$80 per acre less than the use of herbicides to control brush and forest undergrowth.

Everyone benefits. Studies have proven that when properly applied, livestock grazing can increase the growth of trees by 44 percent in the case of western white pine and 13-15 percent for ponderosa pine. Washington Department of Natural Resources found that as a direct result of sheep grazing, Douglas fir grew 26 percent more in diameter and 18 percent more in height over a 20-year period.

- In Alberta 20 percent of the elk habitat has been lost to brush encroachment. Their answer? Bring back the livestock.

- In Virginia the National Parks Service is using livestock to control brush invasions on Civil War battlefields.

- In Vermont sheep are used to stop the brush on ski slopes during summer months. From June through August, 60 sheep are put on the payroll.

You would think that the Sierra Club would prefer a natural alternative like animals to gas-powered mowers, herbicides and smoky fires. Evidently not.