



(Ron Torell photo)

Ron Torell, Northeast Area Livestock Extension Specialist in Elko, offers this photo to illustrate the value of crested wheat grass and livestock grazing as a fire suppressant. The photo shows the boundary between the west and east Avenal pastures west of Elko, where Saturday's range fire encountered grazed crested wheat grass and changed course away from subdivisions on the west outskirts of Elko.

Cattle, crested wheat deserve credit in fire

ELKO — High winds, high temperatures, heavy fuel load, and low humidity are a dangerous combination when trying to control and suppress range fires, according to Ed Smith, UNR Cooperative Extension Natural Resource Specialist in Gardnerville. And when residential areas are in a fire's path, a potential for disaster exists.

All those conditions existed in Elko Saturday, according to Ron Torell, Northeast Area Livestock Extension Specialist.

"We had 30 mph winds, gusts up to 40 mph, temperatures in the 90s, low humidity, and a good fuel load."

At approximately noon, a fire was ignited near the Hunter Exit, about 10 miles west of Elko. The winds moved the fire at high speed toward nervous residents in Sundance and Crestview subdivisions, located on the western outskirts of Elko.

Sundance residents Kyle and Lauri Vogler said, "We were very nervous. The winds were moving the fire in our direction. We turned on the lawn sprinklers and were preparing to hose down the house. Fortunately the fire slowed and changed directions." The Voglers can thank cows and crested wheat grass for the fire's change of heart, Torell explains.

"The hard work of fire crews, bomber planes and dispatchers deserve much of the credit for extinguishing the July 3 fire. However, crest-

ed wheat grass and the cow should also be given credit for detouring the fire and keeping those residents of Sundance and Crestview subdivisions out of harm's way," Torell said.

"Cows and crested wheat helped fire crews, bombers and helicopters detour and slow the fire, alter its course, and remove the threat of fire to homeowners," Torell said. "The cows accomplished this task at no cost to residents and little effort."

According to Ken McAdoo, Rangeland Resources Specialist for the UNR Cooperative Extension service in Elko, "Crested wheat is an introduced grass species that has been planted on some rangeland areas to provide early spring grazing for livestock. Crested wheat is not as flammable as annual grasses, such as cheat grass, and is actually known to be fire-resistant. Because of this, it has also been planted in 'green strips' in some areas to slow down wildfires. In addition, native brush is removed from areas where crested wheat is planted. Removing the brush removes additional fuel load. Where cattle graze the crested wheat seedlings in early spring, even more of the fuel source is removed, thus further reducing the threat of fire."

The range lands that were charred Saturday are part of the Heguy and Maggie Creek grazing allotments managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Mitch and Rhonda

Heguy grazed their cattle on the west and east Avenal fields in early spring.

"The west Avenal is primarily annual cheat grass and brush in the lower elevations and native perennial grasses and brush in the higher elevation," stated Heguy. "The fire blew through the lower west Avenal in a matter of hours. The cheat grass and brush were like diesel soaked paper. Once the fire hit the fence line boundary to the east Avenal, where crested wheat grass is the primary vegetation, the fire stopped and changed directions to the north, away from the residential areas. We moved our cows out of the Avenal fields two weeks ago. The cows had removed much of the vegetation. Had we not grazed that area, the fire could have been much worse, and residential areas could have been threatened," Heguy concluded.

Residents seeking information about fire prevention and protecting their residence from fire can go to Nevada Cooperative Extension's website at <http://www.extension.unr.edu> and click on wildfires, Torell said.

"Reducing the fuel load as a preventive measure and establishing a vegetative, fire-resistant boundary around your home are the best methods available to protect your residence from wildfires. Both of these measures were in place on the Avenal fire," states Smith. — Submitted by Elko County Extension Office