

CARSON CITY, Nev.--Firefighters have responded in the past three months to a multitude of lightning and human-caused wildfires across Nevada with Elko County suffering the brunt of this year's devastation.

Nevada has lost more than 1.2 million acres to wildfire this summer and more than 5 million acres during the last seven years, according to Pete Anderson, state forester/firewarden with the Nevada Division of Forestry.

The social, economic and natural resource impacts will continue for many years to come, he said.

Significant fine-fuel growth during the last two years and the rapid drying of vegetation have combined to produce the ongoing explosive conditions. Wildfires have been started primarily by lightning, but human starts include grinding, welding, target shooting and vehicle exhaust systems.

Unfortunately, conditions remain extreme and the public must be extremely careful while engaged in any heat-producing activity, he said. "It is critical that every homeowner create defensible space around their property. Defensible space not only improves the chances that structures will survive a wildfire it provides an area for firefighters to suppress oncoming flames.

State, federal and local firefighters, paid and volunteer, have exhibited dedicated, professionalism

## Fire danger still critical statewide

and courage as they repeatedly saved lives, homes and property, Anderson said. "Heroic stands against the fires have been made as suppression opportunities were used to stop fires from spreading. The potential for the catastrophic loss of life and property has been very real and thanks to the courageous effort of your firefighters, no lives have been lost and many properties saved."

"..fire damage an environmental disaster.."

- Pete Anderson, State Forester

Still, many of Nevada's agricultural and ranching communities have lost critical rangeland, water developments, fencing and even homes.

Some family ranching operations may be forced out of business because of the extensive damage from wildfires, he said. Wildlife resources have also been severely impacted, potentially resulting in the loss of thousands of animals due to a lack of feed and

thermal cover this winter.

The rapid and continued spread of cheatgrass, a highly flammable, invasive annual grass, impacts native vegetation and increases the potential for more frequent fires.

While the Division of Forestry and our federal partners are preparing for extensive rehabilitation efforts on fire-damaged lands, only a small percentage may actually be treated, he said. "The magnitude of this year's devastation far exceeds available rehabilitation resources.

In addition, Anderson said that skyrocketing fire-suppression costs have severely impacted federal, state and local government budgets.

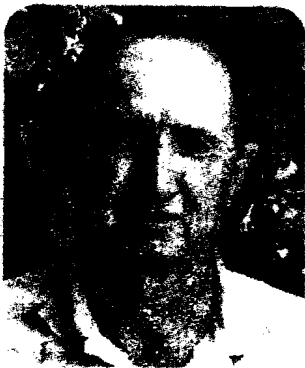
Nevada and all of us who live and enjoy our beautiful and diverse environment are faced with a real environmental disaster, he said. "As we approach the Labor Day holiday, it is imperative that every Nevada resident be cautious while enjoying our wonderful outdoors. I implore people to stay on designated roads, carry water, a shovel and to please prevent wildfires."

For more information:

Citizens are encouraged to visit Living with Fire at [www.livingwithfire.com](http://www.livingwithfire.com) <<http://www.livingwithfire.com/>> Nevada Division of Forestry: [www.forestry.nv.gov](http://www.forestry.nv.gov) <<http://www.forestry.nv.gov/>>



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## PAUL TUELLER

THERE ARE FIVE IMPORTANT AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION in addressing wildfire issues. The first has to do with potentially changing public land policy and creating new laws that reduce litigation. The annual budget cycle is a major culprit in preventing success in rangeland enhancement efforts.

A second important consideration is the need to use grazing management to help solve the fire problem. The extreme fire years in the recent past must be due, in part, to the noted reduction in grazing the forage base, resulting in significant fuel buildup. The lower and sometimes upper reaches of the mountain ranges have turned yellow as a result of post-fire cheatgrass establishment. The buildup of cheatgrass has tended to shorten the grazing season across the state, as this grass is only green with a sufficient biomass for a short time—one month or less in the spring. **Development of intensive grazing management strategies is needed to allow utilization of cheatgrass and reduce future fuel loads. Grazing animal will be the tools that must be used to make desirable changes in vegetation.**

A third area is seeding with species that are known to be effective. It is important to highlight the scientific evidence that the most adapted and useful species have heretofore been non-native species. The argument about native versus non-native species is not useful and must be resolved based on available scientific findings. There is no good reason why the best and most useful species should not be used independent of origin.

Fourth, there is a need to maintain or develop strong rangeland management programs at universities that graduate well-trained, competent students who can enter into careers leading to management of these landscapes. In addition, increased support for herbaria is critical since individual plant species form the basis of sound rangeland management. Every good manager must be able to identify these species and have knowledge of their characteristics.

Fifth, the final area of concern relates to the under-utilized technology of remote sensing. Remote sensing, Global Positioning Systems and Geographic Information Systems can be used to provide important information to help refine our understanding of Great Basin vegetation and soil ecosystems in relation to fire ecology. Remotely obtained imagery can be used to follow greenness and maturation of vegetation for grazing management plans and a general consideration of fuel loads across large landscape areas. Remote sensing data would be useful for the design of experiments related to fire management efforts both pre- and post-fire. These data could also assist in the design of grazing management plans and the selection of sites that have the highest probability for success in revegetation efforts.

## *A continuation of the SCIENTIST CONTRIBUTIONS from the Great Basin Wildfire Forum.*

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### KEN SANDERS

THE INVASION OF GREAT BASIN RANGELANDS by undesirable invasive species, especially highly flammable annual grasses, as well as the continued spread and increasing density of juniper, coupled with the resulting increase in wildfire frequency, pose the greatest threat to the sustainability and restoration of these rangelands. In southern Idaho, cheatgrass and medusahead wildrye grass have evolved to grow under a wider range of soils and environmental conditions, resulting in a great expansion of their range. Cheatgrass is starting to dominate salt desert shrub communities. Once these communities burn, which is inevitable, it will be extremely difficult to restore them.

The restoration of cheatgrass-infested rangelands, while challenging in the best of circumstances, has been doomed to failure ever since the Bureau of Land Management put emphasis on seeding native species instead of what we know has the best chance of becoming established (i.e., crested wheatgrass). Millions of dollars of taxpayer money have been wasted on high-priced native seed mixes, with very little success. The result has been increased fire frequency, increased spread and dominance of cheatgrass and loss of livestock forage and wildlife habitat.

Increased recreational use of rangelands, especially off-road vehicle use, poses the second biggest threat to the sustainability of Great Basin rangelands. Much of the increased spread of noxious weeds is due to increased recreational traffic. Lightning is the primary ignition source of wildfires, but ignition from recreationists is second.

The third biggest threat is the reduction in grazing on public rangelands. **If the proposed sage grouse habitat management guideline that recommends leaving a grass stubble height of 18 centimeters is applied, it will not only result in an adverse economic impact on livestock producers, but it also will result in increased, higher intensity wildfire due to a larger fuel load.** Any adverse economic impact on livestock operators will lead to private ground being sold to developers, resulting in less open space, increased recreational use on rangelands and the resulting negative impacts mentioned above.

The greatest administrative threat to the long term stability and productivity of Great Basin ecosystems is "analysis paralysis." Both the courts and the public agencies managing Great Basin rangelands have made a far more restrictive interpretation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) than Congress ever intended. When he first became Idaho BLM Director, K. Lynn Bennett documented that in 2003 Idaho alone had 74 active administrative appeals and

18 district court cases, resulting in direct litigation costs of \$677,000. However, the greatest costs were indirect: deferred work such as monitoring, permit renewal, range improvements, etc., loss of public trust and loss of employee morale. Environmental organizations filed 61 percent of the cases, with the challenges primarily based on the BLM not following established procedures—not the condition of the resource.

There are numerous other policies that also threaten the long term stability of Great Basin ecosystems. These include disposal limitations on the management of wild horses, a blanket policy of at least two growing seasons of rest following wildfire, rangeland restoration using only native species, suitability and capability standards of the U.S. Forest Service, stubble height requirements on riparian areas, Threatened and Endangered Species Act listings and resulting management restrictions. Such policies give agency wildlife and fisheries biologists, botanists and cultural and recreation specialists equal—or greater—say on monitoring, grazing management and restoration than knowledgeable range conservationists.

The first and perhaps most achievable step in policy change is to get more range conservationists back on the ground monitoring and actively managing rangelands. Range conservationists should be given a more prominent role interpreting monitoring data, grazing management and rangeland restoration decisions.

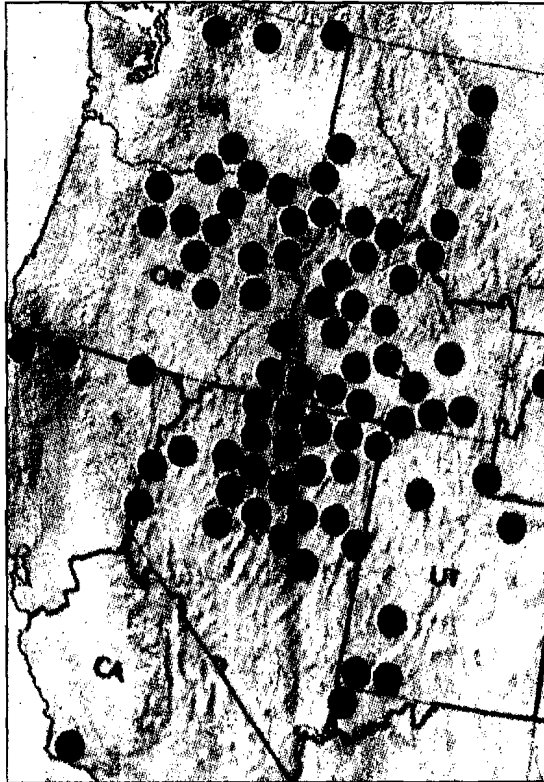
The first priority in rangeland restoration following wildfire should be to stabilize the soil, which means seeding species with the best chance of establishment. The same applies in trying to convert cheatgrass-infested rangelands to perennial grasses. The native species, which are more difficult to establish, should be seeded only after the soil is stabilized and cheatgrass competition is reduced.

Changes are needed in NEPA, the Threatened and Endangered Species Act and having the U.S. Attorney's Office representing the BLM in District Court cases. Changing the two acts is probably not realistic, but getting attorneys knowledgeable about natural resource issues representing the BLM in District

Court should be obtainable. It should be more difficult and expensive to file frivolous lawsuits. The Experimental Stewardship Program showed that the use of coordinated resource management not only reduced resource management conflict, but also resulted in improved management of the resources. The procedure should be more widely used. If individuals or groups are given the opportunity to participate in such a process but choose not to, they should lose their right to appeal the resulting decisions.

July 19, 2007

## Gibbons declares emergency, to tour Elko fires



A total of 85 "large" (more than 300 acres) fires were burning across the West this morning, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. Most were centered in northern Nevada, southern Idaho and eastern Oregon.

ELKO — Gov. Jim Gibbons planned an aerial tour of the wildfires blazing in Elko County and other counties in the eastern half of the state today, one day after making a statewide emergency declaration.

His declaration came just hours after Elko County issued an emergency declaration for the 2007 wildfire season.

Gibbons was scheduled to meet with the Elko County commissioners, fire officials and representatives from agriculture at the Elko Regional Airport prior to his tour, according to a statement from his office.

"We are experiencing an exceptionally dangerous fire season and I want to be sure that the communities affected by these fires have access to all necessary resources," said Gibbons in a statement.

"I understand that many have been evacuated to local shelters and safety continues to be our number one priority. While we have had minimal loss of infrastructure, critical grazing land, both private and federal, has suffered a tremendous blow.

"The unprecedented fire suppression costs will impact both state and local government and we are ready to take

the next step toward attaining a federal declaration of emergency if need be."

The move could help bring desperately needed resources and funding to Elko and other counties.

The declaration comes on the heels of 46 fire starts in the county Monday, 14 Tuesday and several Wednesday. The county estimated it had lost more than 200,000 acres to fire through Tuesday night. Fire officials estimated more than 100,000 acres were burning in the county Wednesday night.

"That is a dynamic number," Elko County Manager Rob Stokes said. "It is a number that continues to grow."

Elko County saw roughly 1 million acres burn last year — more than any known year on record.

Nevada will compete with other western states for federal fire resources.

National fire officials decided Wednesday to boost wildfire preparedness to its highest level. The level-five designation allows fire managers to request help from additional crews, including from Canada and Australia.

About 15,000 U.S. firefighters are currently battling fires across the nation.

*By John Sents*