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## Lack of grazing, prescribed burns adds fuel to California's wildfires, say experts and stakeholders



### SLIDE 1 OF 6

Beefing up the level of grazing, as shown here on Highway 121 early this year, may avert more disastrous infernos. (Susan Wood / North Bay Business Journal photo)

**SUSAN WOOD**

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It broke Soul Food Farm owner Alexis Koefold's heart to lose 80% of her Solano County homestead at the fury of [the Hennessey Fire](#).

She was forced to evacuate at 1 a.m. Wednesday when the eastern portion of the raging LNU Lightning Complex fire exploded over from Napa County's Lake Berryessa, descending on her Pleasants Valley Road neighborhood north of Vacaville.

With 10 minutes to evacuate, she couldn't even get her animals out.

"I wouldn't leave the farm. I was afraid I couldn't get back in," she told the Business Journal.

It didn't have to be this way, according to many land management experts and stakeholders. They believe these types of catastrophic fires could be prevented with more prescribed burns and natural grazing by sheep, goats and cows.

Miraculously, Koefold's olive orchard, lavender field and house remained standing and all the livestock found a way to survive. The sheep and cows scattered, and the chickens flew the coup. When she returned on Friday, she found them all gathered, as if they knew where home was.

"So many friends lost everything — a litany of them. The fire skipped around. There was no time," she said, while pondering the future of her 20-year-old farm.

The Solano County Farm Bureau states that the Hennessey Fire has consumed at least 120 barns. The organization is beefing up its website in its efforts to be a one-stop resource for farmers and ranchers trying to navigate loss on such a massive scale. In particular, hay is needed to help feed the livestock that survived.

"We've lost multiple farms," Solano County Agricultural Commissioner Ed King told the Business Journal. These farms and ranches, which include horses, sheep, goats and alpacas that perished, represent livestock in a state defined as the largest agricultural economy in the world.

Still, King tried to remain upbeat. Agriculture, California's cash-cow industry, is resilient enough to come back, as it has every time a gigantic wildfire mows down an area filled with diverse produce and livestock.

California Farm Bureau spokesman Dave Kranz is also convinced the state's ag reputation should not be placed in jeopardy if year after year devastating fires consume the landscape and infrastructure along with them.



"I think we're a long way from that. It's such a big state. No other state has this variety of conditions and soils like California. Also, it has the expertise and resilience that's hard to have in the middle of a crisis," he said, adding that livestock and "certainly a lot" of grazing land were affected. "Everybody is concerned about the grapes. Fortunately, the vines tend to add firebreaks, and they're more fire resistant. Unfortunately, they've had a fair amount of experience in this."

What kind of long-term impact these raging infernos will have on the environment and ecology of California remains to be seen, Kranz pointed out.

"Fire is just a part of the ecology here," he said.

## Research on fire prevention

*California's departure from livestock grazing to manage lands has 'added fuel to the fire,' says Leslie Roche, UC Davis.*

But how can California keep fire in check?

Two top academic natural resources experts believe it's time for government and private enterprise to get serious about managing lands by eliminating barriers to additional prescribed burns and more grazing.

"Unfortunately, we have to go through these kinds of disasters to draw attention to this. We have to bring more tools to the table. We do this by reducing their probability and building more productive, resilient communities because there's always going to be fire," said Leslie Roche, a cooperative extension specialist in rangeland science and management at UC Davis.

Roche insists that the state's departure from livestock grazing to manage lands has "added fuel to the fire," with its negative assumptions on environmental impacts starting in the 1960s.

The academic cites the "cultural burns" Native Americans conducted in the pre-1800s that worked well to manage the ranch lands. Plus, more grazing animals roamed the pasturelands, keeping the vegetation to a more manageable height and context.

For one thing, the "brush lands" consist of invasive scrub brush like madrone and Manzanita, which firefighters refer to as "fire bush," that overtake the grasslands. But even the high grass presents a problem if it's allowed to grow over 4 feet high without prescribed burns reducing its size, Sheila Barry, a UC Santa Clara cooperative extension director and natural resources adviser contends.

Barry estimated large losses in not only the infrastructure that supports the farming but in the soils the livestock feeds on. When fire burns so hot taking a massive amount of structures in its wake, the ground is consumed and robbed for up to two years of the biomass necessary for recovery of the soils the animals forage on. The scarred landscape leaves an uninhabitable white ash and opportunity for brush to take over.

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"Managing the grass is better for the cattle," Barry said. "We kind of have to get over the idea people believe that natural land grazing doesn't belong. We could be more strategic about this."

*We need to decrease the fire danger. What we do know is we have healthy diverse landscapes when we graze.*

— Loren Poncia, Stemple Creek Ranch

Loren Poncia, who runs Stemple Creek Ranch, is convinced cattle on his 1,000 acres in Marin County has improved the ecological landscape of his surroundings. Stemple Creek Ranch is out of the Woodward Fire's path, but Poncia sees the smoke.

"It seems to me, in the '60s and '70s, we had more grazing and logging, but now they're gone to the wayside. I'm a fan of diverse habitat. Don't get me wrong. We need to decrease the fire danger. What we do know is we have healthy diverse

landscapes when we graze," Poncia said.

Solutions may require more cooperation.

"There needs to be more collaboration between government agencies," Sonoma County Farm Bureau Executive Director Tawny Tesconi said. "There are even riparian water sources affected by fire."

Tesconi singled out Oregon for its progressive land-management plans, with its more aggressive controlled burns and thinning operations.

"That's what California needs to do," she said.

In respect to the money awarded to Sonoma County by Pacific Gas & Electric for relief from its role in the devastating Wine Country fires of the last few years, Tesconi said she would like some of that compensatory relief to go toward contracting with grazing operations on public lands and assistance for private property owners.

"Nowhere did I hear from the Board of Supervisors to use this to better manage the wildfires," Tesconi said, referring to the proposals as simple in nature. "It's not like Sonoma County is going to fix climate change."

Some environmental groups don't necessarily prescribe to these types of policies when it comes to managing the land and the species that live there. They argue that the practice of grazing is destructive to the land.

## Burn up the bureaucracy, some contend

Much of the argument surrounding the use of more prescribed burns involves the bureaucracy of getting them and believing they spur poor air quality.

But when it comes to the pollution of a prescribed burn versus wildfires, the state agency in charge of monitoring the air quality prefers initiated burns.

"We're very supportive of prescribed burns," California Air Resources Board spokeswoman Amy MacPherson said. "If we can help, we recognize it as an important tool. We far prefer (these controlled burns) to these massive fires."

In the last few years, the state Legislature has shown it shares an appetite for increasing these critical land management policies.

*Cal Fire in January will introduce a streamlined permitting process for prescribed burns.*

California Senate Bill 1260, which was approved in September 2018, directs agencies to up the pace and scale of prescribed burns in California.

Still, getting prescribed burns on the schedule involves a cumbersome process. It requires not only a smoke management plan to be filed with the local air quality district, within the North Bay and beyond at the Yolo-Solano Air Quality Management District, Northern Sonoma County Air Pollution Control District, Lake County Air Quality District or Bay Area Air Quality Management District. It also mandates a burn plan be filed with the corresponding fire agency.

That's why the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection will introduce a streamlined process to the permitting process next January. The state's primary fire agency aims to increase the acreage of prescribed burns each year. In 2019, more than 25,000 acres had burned.

"It's been proven right now things are out of balance. The California forests have adapted to fire. It clears out the underbrush and brings light on the forest floor," said Christine McMorrow, Cal Fire's resource management spokeswoman.

Hurdles need to be circumvented. There needs to be more training of "burn bosses," who can specifically manage controlled fires, she noted. The U.S. Forest Service has a similar program.

In order to proceed with these prescribed burns, criteria has to be met that involves something no one can control — Mother Nature. Wind speeds, temperatures and fuel moistures are all factors.

Nevertheless, there's no contest to which type of fire is better for the land and the air to McMorrow.

"People are impacted heavily by these wildfires. Smoke drifts, and it's not just brush and timber that's burning. They're burning cars and homes and putting toxins in the air," she said. "So maybe we can open our windows a little more."

Otherwise, Northern California may be forced to live with constant devastation and bad air quality year after year.

Instead, one Wine Country county is taking matters into its own hands, albeit in small steps.

The Napa County Farm Bureau put on a prescribed fire workshop last February that brought out more than 75 people to teach private landowners and managers how to implement controlled burns on their property. The workshop highlighted successes in other counties that are geared toward the making of an association model for all in the state.

"We believe private landowners are excellent stewards of the land. This fire (year) has proven the point that prescribed burns are so necessary," Farm Bureau CEO Ryan Klobas said, advocating for more managed burns and grazing. "These types of techniques are absolutely necessary to take this type of fire defense, so that when we have fires, they don't burn so out of control."

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