

## **A rancher's thoughts on wildfires and sage grouse**

Written by Gregg Simonds



Gregg Simonds

Squaw Valley Ranch is a large livestock operation (370,000 acres) located mostly in Elko County. It was part of the Spanish Ranch until 1993 when Barrick purchased it. I've been involved with the ranch's management since 2002 and currently lease it with my partners.

Frequent large fires are the single greatest threat to our rangeland health, and the economic viability of the ranch's operations. They are the major contributing factor toward the loss of sagebrush habitat and the potential listing of sage grouse as an endangered species.

Fires in the sagebrush historically were infrequent, occurring every 75 to 100 years. In the last four decades fire has become so frequent that sagebrush habitat is being lost. Since 1990 nearly all the ranch's sagebrush habitat has burned once and over 40% has burned twice. The areas that have burned twice do not seem to be naturally reestablishing sagebrush. The land management agencies reaction to these fires has been significant. I estimate that the suppression cost on the ranch has been over \$70 million. The cost to the ranch operation has been \$100,000 per year in loss forage value.

However substantial these suppression efforts have been, they have not been effective in preventing fire. In fact, little or nothing has been spent on prevention on the public lands. On our private ranch lands where we totally control the management, we have taken preventive measures to reduce the potential of fires. We have reduced fuel loads and broken the continuity of fuel by grazing. We have

seeded fire retardant greenstrips (with the help of NRCS and USF&W) along our boundary with the BLM-administered lands. Only 4% of our private lands have burned since 1990.

I believe that there needs to be a change in the federal land policies/priorities if we are going to preserve the sage grouse habitat. Grazing when the plants are not growing should be allowed immediately following fires. We've found that it promotes regeneration of vegetation, reduces fuel loads, breaks the continuity of fuel (much like a fire line) and thereby reduces the risk of large wildfires. Further, greenstrip barriers need to be established since they provide passive control of fires. They also promote fire-fighting efforts which can be conducted safely during the cool part of the day when flame length are suppressed and fire fighting efforts are most effective.

Over the last 10 years we at the ranch have teamed up with many local public partners (including the BLM) along with Nevada Big Horn Unlimited to improve the ranch's natural resources through implementing many projects but especially by changing our grazing. Our grazing has been focused on developing a balance between the time of use and periods of rest from grazing. The sage grouse have increased and fires have been minimal on our private land.

Large fires threaten our values of ranching, outdoor recreation and mining. If we don't change our fire management policies/priorities and if sage grouse are listed as endangered, the mining industry will be affected and many in the community will suffer.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 12/14/2012

© Gray Jay Press, Elko, NV

Return to [Elko Nature Notes](#)