

Late-season grazing on cheatgrass: Taking one scientific step at a time

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 24, 2014

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*A research project on an allotment in southeastern Oregon
has provided intriguing results so far*

DREWSEY, Ore. -- Just because Bill Wilber's family has been in the Drewsey area for two generations before him, it doesn't mean that he is stuck in the past. As a matter of fact, Wilber is doing his best to be on the forefront of science.

Wilber, 72, has taken part in a cooperative project between the University of Nevada-Reno, the Burns District Bureau of Land Management, the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and the Harney County Court. The project summarized the findings of two years of late-season grazing on pastures with heavy concentrations of cheatgrass and medusahead in southeastern Oregon. Sounds pretty progressive, right?

"It was a no-brainer to get involved in this project because on the surface, at least, it looked like there was only an upside in attempting to deal with the forage build-up that is created by cheatgrass and medusahead," Wilber said. "We had the ideal laboratory here, truthfully ... All of this area had burned and because of that, the proliferation of cheatgrass and medusahead was significant. When opportunity knocks, you have to take advantage of it."

[Read the original case study](#)

Growing up as the eldest of four boys in his family, nearby neighbors were as prevalent as good internet connections back then. Still, he enjoyed growing up there on the land that filtered down from Wilber's great-grandfather, who was an attorney in Albany. Wilber's great-grandfather took ownership of the property through his legal practice.

"I was told that it was an exchange for fees, but I don't know that for sure," he said. "My grandfather and my grandmother ended up living in a beautiful white house where they had a barn, corrals, shop, chicken coops and they raised a lot of rye and hay. So my mom and dad lived there after my grandfather and grandmother moved to Texas."

Wilber never moved to Texas with his grandparents, but stayed behind to tend to the cattle and the land. Now, Wilber is doing his best to make the land and cattle the best they can be.

"Well, I have an incredible interest in the land in ensuring that it's as productive as possible," Wilber said. "Also, it's a family business, so the interest in making it successful for the family is also important to me. I'm also interested in applying current science, which is needed to take advantage of better ways to manage the land."

Part of that is using the Burns District BLM Upton Mountain allotment and seeing how cattle react to fall season grazing on cheatgrass, a nonnative annual grass.

"The significance of this allotment is that you don't have to buy hay to feed your cows," Wilber said. "They have this forage that they're utilizing, in particular in this research project, and you save a lot of money not having to buy hay for all of the cattle that's out here then."

Another part of the project was that the removal of cheatgrass through grazing would reduce fuel loads, lowering the potential for devastating wildfires.

In October of 2012, more than 300 head of cattle was moved into the 14,000-acre pasture and they were removed 90 days later. Researchers found that animal performance for some of the herd was positive while others left the pasture with the same body condition score. However, most of the cattle's body condition scores dipped slightly, dropping 0.1 point less after eating dead cheatgrass and medusahead for those 90 days. The cattle had been supplemented with Anipro and consumed between 1-1.25 pounds per day at a cost of 28 cents per pound. This is equivalent to about \$10.50 per head per month -- a sharp decrease when compared to feeding cattle hay during the same time, which would have been \$66 per head per month. Researchers said this demonstrated that using this late-season forage and avoiding the feeding of hay would save ranchers significant money.

In 2013, more than 400 head of cattle grazed the same pasture for 114 days beginning in September. This time, SweetPro supplement was used, costing approximately \$6.75 per head per month. During this period, 16 percent blocks were used before increasing to 18 percent as the weather got cold before ending with 20 percent blocks in the final two weeks. Body condition scores went up .09 and all of the cows gained weight. Researchers found that ranchers could save more than \$50 per head per month using this method instead of feeding them hay.

"To advance science, you have to be a risk-taker and you have to get out in front of the crowd," Wilber said. "Potentially, this will create a thought process for people in the valley that have not the same situation, but to some degree, a similar situation. They can be ahead of the crowd and try something different. The other part of this is that it will make for a better product of beef, which is the business we're in."

Late-season grazing is not something to which most ranchers are accustomed. In the right place and in the right conditions, cattle have preferred cheatgrass and medusahead to rank bunch grass.

"These are really well-performing, naturally-fed, grass-fed beef that are performing well on this and are coming off after grazing on this stuff -- which everyone considers generally worthless -- looking really good with high body condition score, which means they're robust, quality animals with good flesh content and good meat marketability," said Bob Alverts, a University of Nevada-Reno instructor in the College of Ag, who was involved with the project.

According to Barry Perryman, a PhD at the University of Nevada-Reno who was also involved with the project, this fall grazing tool's greatest utility is in areas that have high resource value.

"We're always concerned that we're going to get a lightning strike down here in the cheatgrass and it's going to burn up into some critical resource value habitat, so if we can reduce the fuel loads down here to where we change the attack from indirect to direct or we change the attack from a Type 3 fire crew to a Type 1 fire crew, then we've lowered that risk," he said. "We can't fireproof it, but we've lowered that risk

of getting a fire that's going to burn this high resource value area."

However, there are some logistical issues some producers have that don't allow them to take advantage of cheatgrass and medusahead in the fall. Some producers may not have an area they can graze in the fall. Others may have quite a bit of BLM with cheatgrass on it, but they only have a spring permit. Also, it's not ideal for cows in their third trimester or similar conditions, officials said, but prior to that, research has shown that cows gain weight in earlier trimesters when they're grazing this material. When grazing takes place in October and November and by not feeding them hay, it's a boon for ranchers, the wildlife, the habitat and the American taxpayer and consumer.

"For the last two decades, the western United States has been burning 5-10 million acres of forest or rangeland every year," Alverts said. "And suppression costs for the American taxpayer are in the trillions of dollars. That straps the budgets of the management agencies like the Forest Service and the BLM. Because of that, they've had to go back to Congress for extra appropriations in an economic downturn time. The fuel build-ups are so extensive, and so using animals to manage vegetation is Old Testament stuff. It truly is. This type of thing is being used around the world today and we know it to work and we think it's a viable tool here in the Great Basin. So we can reduce the suppression costs, we can reduce the tax burden to the American taxpayer, we can reduce beef prices to the American consumer and we can enhance productivity and the condition of the land. It's a win-win outcome for everybody."

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The Oregon Cattlemen's Association (OCA) works to promote environmentally and socially sound industry practices, improve and strengthen the economics of the industry, and protect its industry communities and private property rights. For more information, please contact Kay Teisl, Executive Director at kayteisl@orcattle.com or 503-361-8941. Visit the OCA website at <http://www.orcattle.com/>

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