MAKE PEACE NOT WAR

Ken Conley, Manager, Gund Ranch, Nevada Ag Experiment Station, University of Nevada, Reno

I know that sounds like a slogan straight from the sixties, but when I hear about a "war on cheatgrass" it makes me wonder if perhaps a kinder, gentler approach would not be in order. War is not always the best answer. Sometimes it's better to tolerate the existing rather than face the alternative. It's similar to foreign policy. Why do we sometimes lend support to unfriendly nations? We support them because we realize that the alternative could be much more difficult to deal with. The same can be said of the war on cheatgrass—if we could get rid of it, what would take its place, something worse? It is certainly possible. Maybe it is best if we learn to live with cheatgrass-- treat it as a resource, use it to the benefit of the range livestock industry. In doing so, we should be able to reduce the incidence of wildfires caused by cheatgrass and improve the native resource.

For the past several decades, cheatgrass has escaped the embrace of federal policies by never having been assigned a forage value or AUM adjudication. It has been scorned and blamed for many of our range management failures. Now, with declining livestock numbers on public lands and catastrophic wildfires of massive size and increasing frequency (a direct correlation?) we recognize cheatgrass as some three-headed monster that must be destroyed at any cost. We need to change our perception of cheatgrass and look at it as a resource—something to use and reap economic benefit from. Use it to our advantage instead of spending billions trying to eradicate it. I am not suggesting that we manage for cheatgrass, we just need to learn to live with it.

During the past few years I have heard statements, on several occasions, that cows will not eat cheatgrass, that grazing applications to control or reduce cheatgrass are seldom, if ever, successful. Unfortunately, these comments have come from many people who should know better. Consequently, grazing programs that could be effective in controlling wildfires never happen. We have long known that cattle will eat cheatgrass but we have done a poor job in conveying these facts to the folks who need to know them. Changing the mindset of an uninformed or misinformed public is paramount to effecting change. If we are to declare war on anything it should be on these myths and misconceptions associated with cheatgrass.

In an effort to do just that, a research project has been initiated at the Gund Ranch. The project was designed to provide effective cheatgrass reduction in a fall-winter grazing program using cattle. Additionally, the project will evaluate the performance of cattle grazing cheatgrass in conjunction with protein supplementation. Why graze cheatgrass during the dormant season? The window for grazing cheatgrass in the fall is much longer when compared to spring grazing. While it is very effective, six weeks may be only as long as we have for grazing of cheatgrass in the spring. When cheatgrass begins to turn purple in late spring, seedheads are forming. These seedheads, because of their coarse nature, can be injurious to the mouths of cattle. It is at this time that cattle often turn their preference toward more desirable native species. Additionally, during this short time

period, a very high number of animals are needed to provide the grazing intensity necessary for significant cheatgrass reduction and it may be impossible to provide these numbers of cattle to obtain the desired results. By mid-September, however, seedheads have fallen from the plant and the fine texture of cheatgrass makes it very palatable. Higher fall humidity and any additional moisture increases its palatability. By grazing during the dormant season, several months of effective cheatgrass removal can be realized with less concern about harm to the native component.

Can a fall grazing application actually reduce the occurrence and intensity of cheatgrass wildfires? This study addresses that question with the following rationale:
The intensity of fires in cheatgrass dominated rangelands is increased dramatically by the buildup of residues over several years. Cheatgrass decomposes slowly and a multi-year buildup can accumulate on the ground, enhancing the opportunity for major wildfires. Reducing or eliminating this buildup should lessen fire intensity and should, at least, make the fires easier to suppress when they do occur. Additionally, this multi-year buildup of organic matter provides an excellent environment for cheatgrass seeds to germinate. Cheatgrass seeds do not germinate as easily on bare ground. By reducing this buildup we may actually be able to reduce the number of cheatgrass plants, thereby reducing competition. If these objectives are achieved to any degree of success we should be able to improve the potential for native plant establishment.

Achieving effective cheatgrass reduction through grazing without evaluating animal performance would provide meaningless research. Providing range livestock operators and land managers with data that will encourage grazing programs that provide economic incentive are paramount to success. Realizing that dry cows in the mid trimester of pregnancy provide the greatest opportunity to utilize low nutritional forage without harming production, researchers have concentrated their efforts on this class of livestock. Cattle in this stage of production are common during the fall and winter in the Great Basin. Encouraging fall-winter grazing of cheatgrass may also help fill a very important void in many cattle operations in the intermountain West by alleviating a portion of the winter feed bill, a very attractive proposal in light of skyrocketing winter feed costs.

Cheatgrass has adequate energy (46%) but is low in protein (3.5%). In this study, providing free-choice liquid protein supplementation to cattle grazing rangelands with substantive cheatgrass stands is showing encouraging preliminary results. A 45 day pilot project conducted during the fall of 2006 revealed no change in cow body condition after project completion. Cheatgrass was reduced from an estimated 490 lbs/acre to just under 100 lbs/acre. At completion of a 37 day project on November 3, 2007 cows actually gained weight and maintained or improved body condition. Measurements of cheatgrass reduction are not available at this time but will be reported at a later date. Visual observation shows substantial cheatgrass reduction. Additionally, high intensity, short duration grazing on green cheatgrass in the spring by sheep on a portion of the treatment area may be conducted in 2008. This project is in the first year of a three year study and results will be reported periodically.

Too often we ignore or discount the value of the grazing animal in achieving an efficient and cost-effective solution to a common rangeland problem. Well managed range livestock operations offer the best opportunities to improve and sustain the health of our rangelands. The solution is simple, we need to ignore foolish misconceptions and get to work.