News Release

Texas Section Society for Range Management Speaks Out On Recent Wildfires

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AUSTIN – The rate at which rangelands recover following wildfire is uncertain, and the Texas Section Society for Range Management (TSSRM) is urging ranchers and land managers to take a conservative approach to grazing until plant communities are re-established.

The TSSRM is a group of rangeland management professionals, ranchers, wildlife enthusiasts, and others who manage and care for this valuable resource.

"Extreme drought and unplanned fires are very serious events for those who use and manage rangelands" said Matt Wagner, President of the TSSRM, and Deputy Director of the Wildlife Division at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "As folks rebuild, keeping natural resources at the forefront of their plans is important". The TSSRM extends the following guidance to those affected by the wildfires:

- Defer grazing on burned pastures until the grasses have fully recovered. This can take anywhere from a few months to many months, depending upon moisture received, location, and many other factors. If grasses are grazed closely too soon, the plants may be severely weakened and could die.
- If part of a pasture is burned, the burned area should be protected from grazing if livestock remain in the pasture. If livestock are not removed, they will tend to overgraze the new tender grass as it emerges from the burned area while ignoring the older grass that didn't burn.
- When grazing begins, ranchers should closely evaluate the stocking rate. It could take more than one growing season for the plants to completely recover. In the case of extremely hot fires, some plants may be lost, and stocking rate could be affected for the long term.
- Grazing pressure following a devastating fire could be tempered by using a well designed grazing system. If enough pastures are available to move livestock from area to area, then additional rest from grazing can be provided to encourage plant development.
- When rains finally come, some burned or heavily grazed pastures can become dominated by forbs (broad-leaved plants) that may compete with grass growth. These plants are often beneficial to wildlife, so manage according to landowner goals for the property.
- Rangelands serve not only as forage for grazing livestock and habitat for wildlife, but also as watersheds for our creeks, rivers, and reservoirs. Bare ground created by drought and especially wildfire is vulnerable to erosion when rains come again. A heavy rainstorm falling on bare ground can remove topsoil as the water flows across the land. In turn, this soil ends up in ponds and drinking water supplies for many towns and cities. Rangeland managers inherit the responsibility to protect these watersheds for the benefit and future wellbeing of all Texans. The key to reducing the erosion hazard is to get ground cover, especially grasses, back on the ground.
- All species of wildlife can be affected by extreme drought and fire. A critical factor to consider is adequate ground cover for fawning and nesting cover. This makes management of grazing an important tool in rebuilding wildlife habitat.
- The size and scale of many fires may create difficult conditions for grounding nesting birds such as quail, turkey, and lesser prairie chicken. These birds may have to fly miles outside the burn

area to find nesting habitat. Although all wildlife have adapted to naturally occurring wildfire, deferring grazing will help populations rebound more quickly.

- Fence construction following fire may present opportunities for re-configuration. Evaluate the former layout in term of current needs and conditions, and make modifications as appropriate. In pronghorn country, remember to place a barbless bottom wire at least 18 inches above the ground to allow movement between pastures.
- New plant growth that occurs after a fire is often of greater nutritional value. Animals are immediately drawn to burned sites and seek out the new forage.
- The Texas Section Society for Range Management encourages rangeland managers to get help in the rebuilding process. Go to http://www.rangelands.org/texas/index.htm. Through TSSRM, range and wildlife professionals are available for consultation. Financial and technical assistance is also available through public service agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (http://www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/news/releases/wildfires.html), Texas AgriLife Extension (http://texashelp.tamu.edu/004-natural/fires.php), Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/newsmedia/releases/?req=20110517a), Farm Service Agency (www.fsa.usda.gov; click on "Newsroom", then "Fact Sheets"), and Texas Department of Agriculture (http://www.agr.state.tx.us/agr/index/0,1911,1848_0_0_0,00.html; click on "Disaster Assistance").