

Four-legged Fire Fighters Help Save California Communities from Wildfire

By Dan Macon, President
California Wool Growers Association

When it comes to preventing wildfires, local communities throughout California are rediscovering the value of grazing. Large flocks of sheep and goats are an increasingly common sight in urban communities like San Rafael, Simi Valley, Oakland, Roseville and Pebble Beach – all in the name of reducing fire danger. As *USA Today* reports, goats hired by the Ventura County Fire Department helped save the Reagan Library in Simi Valley from the Easy Fire last October. Even the Sierra Club has endorsed sheep and goat grazing as an effective tool in California's fight against catastrophic wildfire.

As the President of California's oldest statewide livestock organization, representing sheep and goat producers throughout the Golden State, I'm thrilled to see our communities once again embracing the importance of grazing! However, these flocks don't simply show up on their own – and they can't be stored away like a piece of equipment once the job is completed. Managing livestock takes extensive knowledge and experience, which are even more critical in urban communities.

Caring for these four-legged firefighters takes a practiced eye by highly skilled herders who are paid a state established monthly salary. Employers also provide housing and meals. These jobs have a significant multiplier effect in our rural communities; according to the American Sheep Industry Association, each herding job supports eight additional non-herder jobs.

Well-managed targeted grazing has numerous environmental benefits beyond reducing fire danger. Grazing helps maintain the carbon sequestration abilities of healthy soils. In many cases, grazing replaces costly herbicide applications, providing an ecologically sensitive alternative to chemicals. And grazing animals can work on steep slopes and rugged terrain inaccessible to motorized equipment.

But recent changes in California's agricultural overtime rules have had the unintended consequence of increasing herder wages by an unrealistic 50 percent. Without a doubt, this compensation level is unaffordable for our producers and for many California communities looking for options to costly chemicals with potential environmental and health consequences. Environmentally sensitive practices performed by sheep and goats, and the herders who manage them, are at stake. So is our climate and the air we breathe.

The members of my Association are asking the Governor to correct this untenable situation as soon as possible by aligning state regulations with federal guidelines adopted by the Obama administration and embraced in federal court rulings. This will realign wages to an affordable level and keep our "firefighters" on the job.

We thank the Governor for recognizing in past comments the value of sheep and goat grazing to reduce fire danger. And, we agree with Todd Lando of FireSafe Marin who says, "The sheep and goats are a fantastic way to reduce fire danger. They are a very cost-effective way to treat large landscapes and protect our communities."