Grazing and wildfire risk on federal land in California

Katherine Siegel, Van Butsic, Claudia Herbert, Theresa Becchetti, Stephanie Larson, Luke Macaulay, Matthew Shapero, Fadzayi Mashiri

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Fires in California

After decades of fire suppression and reduced grazing, we are seeing
- grasslands turning into shrublands
- increased fire frequency, extent, and severity
The link between grazing & fire

- Livestock grazing removes fine fuels, reducing fire ignitions and spread of fires
- Grazing may also prevent grassland transition to shrubland, reducing the risk of high severity fires in shrublands
Questions

1. Do grazed areas burn less frequently than non-grazed federal land?

2. Does grazing impact the probability that grasslands will transition to other vegetation types?
Our methods

Compared inside and outside of grazing allotments on federal land in California

Included fires from 2001-2016
Our methods

Included 4 vegetation types: grassland, shrubland, conifer forest, and non-conifer forest
Our methods

- Compared each point inside an allotment to a non-allotment point with similar
  - vegetation type
  - landscape characteristics
  - remoteness and population density
  - climate
Did grazing reduce the probability of burning at least once between 2001-2016?

No effect

No

Yes

Yes
Are grazed grasslands are more likely to persist?

- Allotments were slightly more likely to maintain grasslands
- Grasslands that burned were also less likely to switch to shrub or forest
Conclusions

1. Grazing reduces wildfire probability in some vegetation types
2. Grazing can keep grasslands from transitioning to shrubland or forest
3. Because fires in shrublands and forests tend to be more severe, maintaining grasslands may reduce the risk of intense wildfires
Limitations & next steps

● We assume that allotments had livestock grazing from 2001-2016

● We want to see if these patterns are also true for grazing on private lands
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