
Browsing Academy
FIRE – PREPARATION IS
PANIC INTERVENTION



I recently watched the news – not something I do often as it goes against my philosophy of not expending energy on something I can't do anything about. But...they were reporting an out-of-control fire in Florida. At the same instant, I remembered reading an article in the Goat Rancher (Sept 2000, What do you do when fire threatens? Panic!!!) about an individual with goats in the state of Florida and an encroaching fire experience. Got my attention immediately! Now, there is something you can do about it.....

Goats Unlimited (GU) is located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in north central California – prime fire country – always on the verge of fire. At this writing, the Poe Powerhouse Incident, just north of Oroville, CA is raging – 6,885 acres burned, 26 homes destroyed, 10 buildings consumed and only 20% containment at this time. A definite concern should the fire turn southeast, we are in its path. What will be the final cost to control this fire? Private home and land owners, along with timber companies, the National Forest Service, CA Department of Forestry and State/National Park employees are 'hoping' they make it through another fire season (Goat Rancher, March 2000 – CA homeowners using goats to fight wildfire threat and August 2000 – Using meat goats to create firebreaks).

Those of us with livestock (cattle, sheep, hogs, deer, elk, horses, llamas, goats, etc.) are responsible for providing a 'fire safe' area for our animals during fire season; be it our own home base, a neighbors or another facility at a location miles away from home. Goats are advantageous in an area conducive to fires. Managing the goats to mitigate fire offers protection for homes and surrounding facilities, the landscape and even towns. The goats are used to create firebreaks, reduce fuel load and understory, decrease ladder fuels, establish fuel discontinuity and create defensible space.

Goats Unlimited (GU) has been using GU KIKO meat goats for fire mitigation in California and Hawaii. We selected the KIKO breed for its intense desire to survive under harsh vegetative and climatic conditions, growth rate on native vegetation and ability to produce a consistently high quality carcass. The KIKO is an aggressive browser and very athletic.

Getting organized to establish a secure area begins with mapping the property. Identify the property corners, map the different vegetation covering the area and the topography (hills, rock outcroppings, draws, canyons, etc.). Place the facilities (house, barn, corrals), water sources (ponds, ditches, streams and the main water source when under pressure), fences (identify gates) and roadways on the map. The vegetative cover on neighboring properties needs to be evaluated and partial mapping completed.

Your property has to be accessible to the fire company. The main entrance should be easily identified - number, ranch name, family name – and large enough for a fire truck and water tanker to enter. The entrance road should be in good repair with a turn around large enough to facilitate the fire trucks and other fire fighting equipment.

After completing the above (mapping and property accessibility), make an appointment to visit your local fire station. Let them know who you are, where you live and that you are a livestock producer. Invite the inspector to your farm to do an “Interagency Fire Hazard Inspection” because this inspection will give you a professional review/opinion of your fire safety preparedness. Provide them with the map of your farm and a list of all of the ponds in the area that are available water sources for water tankers and helicopters. Make it a point to visit the individuals owning the ponds and know what their capabilities are of keeping ponds full during fire season, especially if irrigation water is an option.

There are meetings that you need to attend starting with your local volunteer (or paid) fire department. Attend all functions related to fire and fire ecology. Agencies to contact to get that information are the Department of Forestry, National Forestry Service, National Parks, and your local Fire Safe Council (FSC). If there is not a FSC in your immediate area, then start one. The Nevada County Fire Safe Council, in Nevada City, CA is an excellent example of what needs to be provided to land and homeowners. Another valuable resource to contact is the “Neighbors for Defensible Space” in the state of Nevada.

Start a list of all pertinent phone numbers. This should include but is not limited to 1) the local fire company, the Forest Service, state Department of Forestry, and the Fire Information Center’s number in use during a fire, 2) all of your neighbors, 3) friends and neighbors with available livestock transportation, 4) a radio operator that keeps in contact with spotters flying a fire site, and 5) the number(s) at the location of your temporary ‘fire safe’ livestock facility. This list needs to be updated annually before fire season. Contact every individual on the list and ask them for help in locating other individuals to contact. These numbers should be posted near a phone along with your fire extinguisher(s). If you are in a fire prone area, you need a cell phone. Remember, fire takes out electricity and other services cutting you off from the rest of the world.

Electricity is important for running water pumps. Do not depend on electricity to remain available when a fire comes roaring through draws and canyons, across steep slopes to ridges and up natural chimneys. You need your own generator hooked to your water source (water pump, well, spring or submersible in a pond) so that you can continue pumping water, filling metal tanks (plastic melts), running sprinklers, etc. If at all possible, have tanks in an elevated area and use gravity to help with the pumping. Besure the hoses are commercial grade to handle the additional pressure. We keep all of our vehicle fuel tanks topped-off during fire season and generator fuel on hand.

The livestock need to be prepared. Stock, under stress, react differently as a group (mob, herd, flock) as do the different livestock species. Stress is not only created by the panic of an unprepared stockman but, Smoke! Fire! Noise! – and the unpreparedness of the

stock. Before fire season, portable corrals should be set up and the animals herded into the area. Make it a slow, pleasant, uneventful move to the portable corral facility with some supplement upon arrival in a small portable hay feeder. If you use your herding dogs, use them in practice and use your own dogs during a fire. I know there are neighbors that want to help, but by adding a strange working dog, you are adding another fear factor. And if you use livestock guardian dogs, you are adding a threat to your stock that the guardian now has to defend against. That can become a problem if your guardians herd with the mob (as they should have been taught when young) and during a fire, they now have to break out of the mob and guard against an unknown dog. Our portable facilities are 10' metal stock panels we had fabricated specifically for our goat operation; remember, portable polywire and electronetting fencing melts. The panels load easily onto our pickup, can be hauled anywhere and setup in a matter of minutes should the need arise.

As you are planning all of the above, remember that you need to have an escape exit identified that can be completed in a controlled manner. With livestock, you need to be able to leave a fire area in two different directions. Wind, crown firing and climatology, can change the direction of a fire in minutes. You have to have TWO ways out. Make sure the routes are identified before fire season and individuals on your help list know the routes. Smoke, fire and urgency change familiar surroundings and landmarks. This is of utmost importance for project managers doing firebreaking, fuel load reduction and weed abatement projects with livestock.

Now that you are heading away from the fire with your stock loaded in trailers, you will be heading to a previously established 'safe-place' for the goats. You need to have two safe sites established; their usage will depend upon the direction of the fire and the escape route that you used. At your fire-safe place, the portable corrals are ready for the goats and guardian dogs, tie lines for the herding dogs (or kennels) setup and if you have horses or other large livestock species, a separate pen to prevent trampling of smaller stock is needed. Feed and fresh water needs to be readily available.

Now that you have planned a controlled and flexible exit from an encroaching fire, Part II will take you through establishing and creating a defensible space, firebreaks, greenbelt vegetation management, fuel load reduction, fuel discontinuity and an understanding of wildfire landscaping. The urban/wildland interface expands yearly with subdivisions and people wanting to experience what we already 'live'.

Suggested References

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On the Web:

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