

Rancher Activity in Wildfire Fighting

Lessons from SCU Complex Fire

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Introduction

Wildfires in California have become frequent and costly in the past ten years. Figures vary depending on the source, but for 2020 it is estimated that billions of dollars of economic loss were seen, and California spent billions fighting the wildfires that year.

In August 2020, the Santa Clara Unit Lightning Fire Complex began when the area was hit by over 12,000 lightning strikes, mostly in inaccessible areas. Suppression was also hampered by the limited availability of firefighting resources which were needed to fight other lightning complex fires across the state. The SCU Fire burned nearly 400,000 acres across five counties predominately on rangelands. This fire is distinct from others because of the large number of cattle ranchers in the fire footprint. While livestock grazing may have reduced the fire hazard and severity of the burn, ranchers also participated in the fire suppression activities. We wanted to learn the extent of their participation prior to the fire as well as during the fire.

Methods

We contacted landowners of parcels in the SCU footprint to determine their participation in fire fighting efforts. Every effort was made to contact each property owner, or sometimes the property manager, to determine grazing and non-grazing ranch management practices.

Results

From our research we found:

- Ranchers every year maintain roads that act as fire breaks and access points
- Ranchers provided equipment and labor to fight the SCU Fire
- Infrastructure such as ponds were utilized.
- Ranchers were often asked by Cal Fire to create more fire breaks
- One rancher was told by Cal Fire that his efforts “100% reduced the spread of the fire.”
- There was mixed interaction with Cal Fire, some ranchers had support while others did not.



Next Steps

In addition to providing a value of reducing fire fuel loads through grazing, ranching infrastructure provides fuel breaks, access and other fire fighting resources. This infrastructure is regularly maintained by ranchers. They also own and maintain equipment that can be used in fighting a wildfire. They know the landscape better than firefighters who often come from out of the area.

The economic value and effectiveness of ranchers in fighting wildfires should be determined and valued.

