

Rain does little to ease summer fire threat

Goats, sheep grazing fire prevention herds out early

Jon Brines, Placer Herald Correspondent



Sherry Meyerhoff/Special to the Placer Herald

The city's grazing program, which is in its third year, will begin early this year. Hundreds of sheep and goats will begin eating what they can in the not-so-green zones of the city in an effort to slow down dry grass and fuels stimulated by the rain.

Fear of an early start to the fire season has forced the city of Rocklin to bring its annual fire prevention measure — sheep and goats — in early. Hundreds of the hungry livestock will begin eating what they can in the not so green zones of the city later this month.

"Those goats and sheep do a fantastic job," Rocklin Fire Chief Bill Mikesell said. "Even if they don't eat it all, trampled down (weeds) don't burn as fast.

"Don't get a false sense of security because you have a couple days of rain."

The National Weather Service reports the Sacramento region only had five days of measurable rain in January — falling 1.32 inches below normal.

The grazing program, which is in its third year, is intended to slow down dry grass and fuels stimulated by the rain.

Rocklin Public Works Technician Nanette Herron helps get the program going and said the livestock graze in environmentally sensitive preserve areas where the city is restricted from using mechanical or chemical means of vegetation control by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"In past years, the city simply used string-trimming or other mechanical methods around the perimeter of these preserves, which did little to reduce the overall fuel load," Herron said.

Last year Rocklin spent \$77,000 to have livestock graze on 400 acres, according to Herron.

The sheep eat the grass, while the goats climb trees to get low hanging debris.

Herron said the grazing program "reflects the city's ongoing interest in conservation and preservation of its natural resources."

A study conducted last year by monitoring biologists with the city's contractor, ECORP, showed a reduction in thatch accumulation, an increase in plant diversity, reduction of the presence of some invasive plant species and better water flow within the preserves, according to Herron.

Residents living adjacent to open space areas should expect notifications of grazing livestock this week.

Mikesell said Rocklin residents need to be vigilant to prevent wildfires fires.

"It can happen in January. It's drying back out again. It doesn't take much," Mikesell said.

Last month Rocklin firefighters stopped a fire in an outbuilding behind a house on Midas Avenue. It was sparked by ashes taken from the home's fireplace.

"When the conditions are right, all you need is an ignition source," Mikesell said. "Don't be responsible for the ignition source."

The fire chief wants residents to properly dispose of cigarettes and to avoid placing fireplace ashes or charcoal in plastic garbage cans or as fertilizer in flower beds.

"You can't disperse it until you can put your hand in there," Mikesell said.

Mikesell also urged residents to be careful not to overheat electric devices or store oily rags in closed rooms.

"Oily rags can cause spontaneous combustion," Mikesell said "They get stored in metal containers instead of the plastic (garbage can)."

Finally, he wants property owners to be mindful of red flag days.

"They need to know that mowing dry grass can spark a fire. The blade hits a rock, then sparks," Mikesell said

While Rocklin has avoided devastating wildfires, a fire in Clover Valley two years ago burned 55 acres and threatened homes before it was contained.

Aircraft from Cal Fire was used to help put out the 2002 fire off Interstate 80 and Sierra College Boulevard that destroyed nearly 600 acres and 19 structures.

"There is always that scenario," Mikesell said. "We're being proactive and mitigating it."

Residents with questions or concerns can call the city of Rocklin at (916) 625-5300.