



Out of the Ashes

Western ranchers and Angus producers share their story of the Soda Fire, which burned more than 280,000 acres of public and private grazing lands for cattle and sheep, recreational areas and prime sage grouse habitat in southwest Idaho and eastern Oregon.

Story by *Maggie Malson*

It was a hot, dry August day, typical of the Idaho summer, when lightning struck a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) grazing allotment in Owyhee County.

"We got the call on Monday, Aug. 10, 2015, that Cow Creek was on fire," says Angus breeder Doug Burgess. "I ran up there because we had commercial heifers in a deeded pasture about 5 miles from where it started. It didn't look like fire was coming that way, so I left them and went up to the fire line and stayed until 1 a.m., helping neighbors move cattle."

Doug and his wife, Janice, raise purebred and commercial Angus cattle in Homedale, Idaho, and Jordan Valley, Ore., on both deeded and public lands. They market 70 bulls annually to commercial cattlemen, many of them within 150 miles of their place and also affected by the fire.

The fire started 3 miles from the Burgess's place in Jordan Valley, Ore., which is right

on the state line. It burned around 6,500 acres the first day. Fire crews appeared to have the fire under control, but Tuesday things took a turn for the worse when the wind picked up and fire burned another 78,000 acres that day.

"The fire turned around; it didn't go the same direction, but started up again," Doug says.

He had gone back on Tuesday to turn cows out to pasture, but quickly realized he needed help to move the cows instead.

"Our daughter, Michelle, came up with horses, along with others who were there and helped us get the heifers out," he says. "The fire was coming."

The fire burned about 5-6 air miles in 30 minutes.

"It was right there in our BLM field within a mile of our house," Doug says, explaining they were surrounded by a BLM field, a deeded field then another BLM field,

with one 12-foot-wide road going around the far field.

"We started moving the other cows into the meadows," he says. "I left my cows I was pushing and helped Michelle get cows across another county road. I thought if we had to we could cut fences and keep going. I didn't think I'd ever see my cows again as the fire looked like it was right there, but it stopped at that road. The wind turned it around."

"We got all the cows across," says Doug, with relief in his voice.

At that point, the fire jumped across Highway 95 into Oregon. The Burgesses began gathering the cows on the west side of the highway and put them into a neighbor's meadow, working through the night.

"The roads were closed by this time, but Michelle and her son, Michael, got through the roadblocks because they had to get the horses home," Janice Burgess recalls. "Michael took a cell phone video of them



PHOTO BY MARY BLACKSTOCK

► Utah and Alaska Hot Shot crews were at Wilson Creek, Idaho, Aug. 12 around 10:30 p.m. The Blackstocks are members of the Owyhee RFPA and along with fire departments were on hand to help.

driving through with fire on both sides of the highway. By the next day, the fire was going everywhere.”

On Wednesday, the fire reached the family’s home place southwest of Homedale, about 35 miles north of where it started. With green hay fields and stacks of hay, pens with some early-weaned calves, and their home, the Burgesses felt the tension of the situation and wondered if the fire would stop.

“To the north, it burned up to the canal that comes from the Owyhee Reservoir,” Doug says. “It’s only 10 feet wide. It jumped a few little places, but we got it out.”

Pushing through the black

Another ranching family directly involved with the Soda Fire was that of Tony and Brenda Richards of Reynolds, Idaho. These fourth-generation ranchers manage 55,000 acres of public lands, where they manage their Angus-based cow herd through the Chipmunk Grazing Association. Brenda has a long-standing history of public service through local, regional and national organizations, and is currently serving as the president of the Public Lands Council (PLC).

The Richards’ allotment is ¼ mile away from where lightning ignited the fire. The family moved their cattle off the BLM ground, and the fire quickly burned through the allotment. At one point, it seemed the fire was contained, but by Tuesday night it had gotten out of control due to high winds, heavy fuel loads and dry conditions.

BLM firefighters, area fire departments and members of local Rangeland Fire Protection associations (RFPA) were fighting the fire. RFPAs consist of ranchers who have been professionally trained by the BLM and who are certified to help fight fires on rangelands.

With the winds picking up and changing directions so quickly, friends and neighbors; the Richards’ oldest son, Daniel; and middle son, Tom, had to move the cattle again.

“Everyone helped move cattle, took fences down, made sure gates were open,” Brenda explains. “At one time, we pushed cattle through a burning 3-inch-high fire line. We got them to an enclosure that we use during branding time, which had already been grazed.”

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► Tony Richards, Reynolds, Idaho, surveys the blackened landscape and fence damage after the Soda Fire.



PHOTO BY BRENDA RICHARDS

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The group included several grazing association members' cows that had come down the mountain as the fire progressed.

"At the time, we weren't worried about whose cattle they were," she says. "We just wanted to keep them safe. We pushed 600-700 cows across that line to safety."

Brenda recalls her most vivid memory: "We could see through the smoke the little shack on the other side of the fence burning, but we knew the cows were safe. They say a safe place is where it's already black and burned."

Describing the fire as a little old lady who forgets her purse then has to turn around to get it again, Brenda brings some lightheartedness to what was a stressful situation at the time. She and daughter-in-law Bailey sat by the phone in Reynolds, waiting for any updates in the days to come.

"The fire moved on past us toward Highway 78, then three hours later it came back into the valley again," she says. "Just when you thought there was a reprieve, it would start back up again."

On Friday, the fire was moving east toward Murphy, and Saturday was the first morning the Richards could go out on 4-wheelers to check on things.

"We were fortunate to not lose any cows, but we know several ranchers who did," Brenda shares.

Officials considered the Soda Fire contained on Aug. 23 and controlled on Aug. 25 at 283,182 acres.

"After about two weeks, we felt some relief when the fire was officially contained," Brenda recalls, "but there were still hot spots, and you just sucked in your breath when the wind would pick up and you'd see a dust devil in the air, praying it didn't start the fire up again."

On the front lines

Ted and Mary Blackstock, Givens Hot Springs, Idaho, have purchased Angus bulls from the Burgess family and are also Owyhee County ranchers raising commercial Angus cattle. The Blackstock Ranch has been in the family since 1901. They were on the front lines defending their property and those of neighbors as members of the Owyhee RFPFA.

"The fire came over the back side of the hills where the cows were grazing," Mary Blackstock remembers. "It came so fast there was hardly time to get some gates open and fences cut."

She describes being in the middle of chaos.

"The fire would make a run one way fanned by high winds, switch direction, then circle around and burn what it missed," she says. "At the ranch above us, we held the



PHOTO BY MARY BLACKSTOCK

► The fire started on Aug. 10, 2015. On Aug. 11, the fire fanned across the lower McBride Creek area. Fire already came through where the cows grazed in upper McBride.

greener meadows for awhile where 60 or so cows had been pushed for safety. Then the wind picked up and fire exploded again taking it all. Flames were 30 feet in the air."

Mary remembers the cowboys were in front of the flames pushing the cows to safety as others stayed and tried to protect the structures.

"We saved the cabin, but 40 feet away the shop burned," she adds. "Power poles burned, so there was no electricity to run well water."

For three days, the fire moved through the family's public grazing land, surrounding allotments, private ground, ranches and cabins.

"We were feeling anxious, and it was pretty gloomy wondering how the other cows fared in the upper allotments," Mary says. "We could not go check, as the fire was so sporadic."

The Owyhee RFPFA, along with the Marsing Rural Fire Department, helped fight the fire all week.

"We used equipment, 4-wheelers with spray tanks and all that we could to protect property," she adds.

Utah and Alaska Hot Shot fire crews were in the Wilson Creek area to help fight fires with Wilson, Reynolds and Melba Fire departments all on hand. Mary explains they had arrived back at their ranch at 10:30 p.m. Thursday night feeling optimistic that with the already blackened area surrounding them and the roads, they would be safe. However, at 2:30 a.m. Friday, after only two hours of sleep, the Blackstocks awakened to more flames. The

fire doubled back around and had jumped Sommercamp Road into their ranch.

"Winds about 45 miles per hour brought the fire toward the ranch corrals and structures, but we were able to save them," Mary says.

Not until Saturday morning was the family able to saddle up and look for their cows that may have survived, fearing the worst as the fire had come so fast.

"Some of our cattle, along with other ranchers' cattle, did not survive or had to be put down due to the extent of their burns," Mary says. "We started gathering the cows who survived and pushing them through the burned area where we could hold and feed them while we rebuilt the corrals."

As they rode along the blackened landscape, the sight of Ted and Mary's daughter Kate rescuing an orphaned calf out of the burned remains of sagebrush and grassland gave the family some hope. Mary captured the image with her camera, and the photo can be purchased with proceeds going to the Owyhee Cattlemen's Heritage Fund, which helps ranchers affected by the fire.

"Ranchers have a lot of tenacity," says Mary, who grew up in Washington, showing Angus cattle. "We just deal with the conditions and weather we get. We will make this work."

Assessing damages, issues and impacts

Once the Soda Fire was contained, the families assessed the damage. Fortunately,



Fig. 1: 2015 Soda fire and vicinity

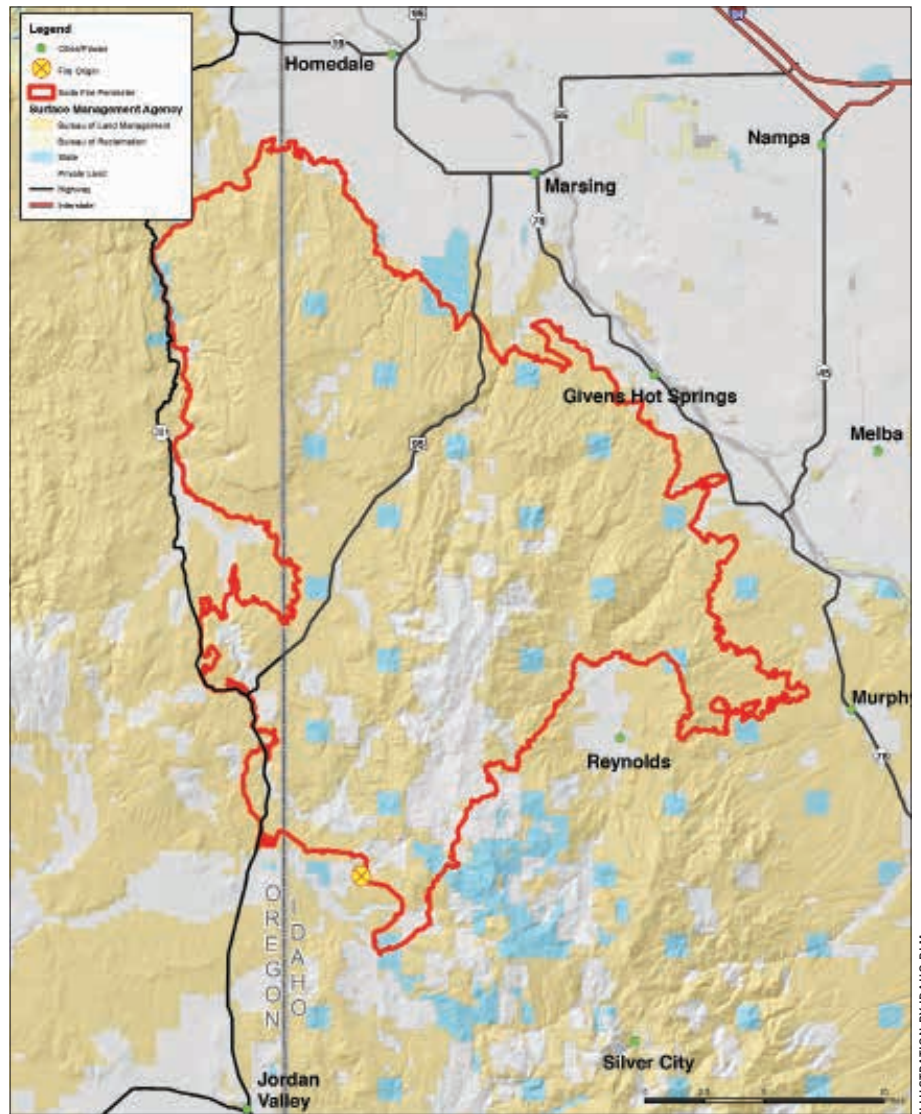


ILLUSTRATION BY IDAHO BLM

no housing structures were lost, but each suffered partial or complete loss of public grazing lands for years to come.

The Burgess family's Idaho BLM allotment was spared, but the fire burned all of their Oregon BLM and about 1,000 acres of private ground, which also happened to be prime habitat for sage grouse.

"The Oregon allotment has multiple users in it, probably totaling 6,000-7,000 AUMs," says Doug.

An animal unit month, or AUM, is the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow and her calf, one horse, or five sheep or goats for a month. The BLM reports 41 allotments were affected, including an estimated 35,000 AUMs, within the burned area.

"We trail our cows home in the fall so we won't be able to do that for at least a few years," he adds. "I don't think you'll see a cow on any of this land for at least three years."

Janice says the biggest long-term impact to the industry is ranchers have had cattle in their corrals longer than anticipated.

Everyone had to start feeding early, she says. "They were probably planning on feeding because of the drought we've been in, but weren't planning to start feeding in August. Cows would have stayed out longer than that."

The Richards and Blackstocks lost all fall, spring and summer grazing. They have been feeding hay and had to rent other pastures for the indefinite future.

Discussions about land management have taken place throughout the years, but with this last fire and a new fire season approaching, the urgency for changes sets in.

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PHOTO BY MARY BLACKSTOCK

► Out of the burned remains Kate Blackstock rescues a calf. The mother was not found. This picture can be purchased and proceeds will go to the Owyhee Cattlemen's Heritage Fund.

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“The BLM will send out a letter in March saying be prepared to take your cattle home at any time due to drought, and we understand that,” Doug says. “But they fail to recognize when there is a huge fuel build-up and don’t say, ‘Go get more cows,’ when there is more grass available. They need to manage both ends of the scale.”

Burgess says, with the late spring rains the area received in 2015, lots of grass was left even after cattle had grazed.

“Most of the country that burned had already been grazed,” Janice explains. “There was just that much fuel left. Ranchers had already used their allotted AUMs.”

Doug describes the pasture across the canal where the family winters their cows and feeds them at their place in Homedale. It had already been grazed when the fire came through and the fire stopped along the fence at the bottom of the foothills.

“It’s like you cut it with a knife,” he says. “The fire just snuffed out.”

The concern about these fires continues to grow, and the Burgesses worry about impacts of catastrophic wildfires, not only for the livelihood of area ranchers, but also for wildlife like sage grouse.

“There was sagebrush 10 inches in

diameter,” Doug says. “It was higher than your head when you were riding a horse. That field burned for three days; it burned like a forest. Usually it will just burn and leave a stump. This fire burned so hot in spots, it burned the sagebrush clear to the ground. It’s hard to get sagebrush to reestablish itself.”

Even before the smoke cleared, the BLM Owyhee Field Office and the state office hosted meetings in Owyhee County for ranchers and affected permittees to answer questions, as well as to talk about fire recovery.

“We’re taking an ‘all-hands, all-lands’ approach to this fire restoration,” says Tim Murphy, who has spent more than 35 years in public service as a firefighter, range conservationist, land manager and is now serving as the BLM state director in Idaho.

“The sheer size and effects of this fire were devastating,” he says. “From the impacts on the land to the displacement of livestock, wild horses and wildlife, and the short-term effects of the local economy in southwest Idaho. We were all stunned by what this fire took in a matter of a few days.”

Brenda says it was really good to have everyone all in one room to bring ideas and start conversations.

“We know they are bound by rules and regulations, but the BLM staff recognized the need for open discussions,” she adds. “We could get to some middle ground.”

Additional meetings included talks about the damages, reseeding, treatment of invasive species like cheatgrass and replacing more than 400 miles of fences. Staff from the Idaho Department of Lands, Fish & Wildlife, the Idaho Governor’s office, National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA) and more, along with affected ranchers, all came to the table for discussions.

When the agency specialists began to survey the damages, they realized very few unburned islands appeared across the more than 420 square miles affected.

“Very unique conditions caused this mega fire,” Murphy says. “The severity was moderate to low severity and there were only 900 acres considered high severity, yet much of the entire vegetation was wholly consumed.” Murphy says three-digit temperatures, very low humidity and 45+ mph winds created the extreme conditions. The fine fuels in the area are also more susceptible when the live fuel moisture is so low.



PHOTO BY MARY BLACKSTOCK

► Through the smoke and haze, the guys discuss which direction to take cattle off the blackened mountain.

“Our No. 1 objective with restoration is to stabilize the soil, mitigate erosion and preclude cheatgrass growth to the highest degree possible,” Murphy says.

A full-scale assessment of the burn area began once the fire was contained.

Aerial and drill application of seed commenced shortly after and continues as weather conditions permit.

“We were also able to get to work on our private ground and some state lands right away,” Brenda says. “We rented a bulldozer and ran it for six weeks straight to get the seed in the ground.”

Due to the large scale of the fire, the BLM prioritized areas, as some didn’t burn as hot and could regeminate on their own. Murphy points out that treatment plans include aerial and drill seeding, along with herbicide applications to stop invasive annual grasses. Each treatment has specific seed mixes in it based on the area it is applied. For example, at the lower, hotter elevations, a higher level of plant species that outcompete cheatgrass are included, while higher elevation mixes will contain more native grasses.

In addition to reseeding, the BLM is looking at fuel breaks, naturally occurring ones like roads and canals, as well as planting fire-resistant vegetation in specific areas.

“Crested wheatgrass and forage kochia are low-growing plants that stay greener longer into the summer,” Murphy says. “Kochia is high in protein and good for wildlife in winter. It’s competitive, and precludes cheatgrass and other invasive annual grasses from populating the interspace between plants.”

The width of the breaks will depend on the fuel type and fire behavior expected for the area. The BLM wants to create these breaks in areas where there is a high percentage of cheatgrass, not only in the Owyhees, but in other areas of the state, as well.

“Fires tend to start in lower elevations, and these fire breaks can give firefighters more opportunities to succeed and manage fires before they go into forested areas and timber,” Murphy explains.

He adds, “It is important agencies learn from the treatments and evaluate their effectiveness to reach the desired objectives.”

“If the treatments are not successful, we will want to know why and will be transparent,” he says. “We will also apply further treatments if needed.”

Finding the silver lining

“One bright spot of the fire was so many people rallied to give support,” Brenda says of the outpouring of the community. “The



► Due to the large scale of the fire, the BLM prioritized areas, as some didn’t burn as hot and could regeminate on their own. Tim Murphy, BLM state director in Idaho, points out that treatment plans include aerial and drill seeding, along with herbicide applications to stop invasive annual grasses.

support is ongoing. When people needed hay, a truckload would show up. Food, water and supplies came pouring in. We still have donated water and supplies.”

The Burgesses also recognize how the fire brought awareness to the public.

“The community really stepped up,” Janice says. “Neighbors brought meals and helped around the house. People from Montana and California we’d met through the Angus business called and asked if they could help.”

The Blackstocks also received many calls from neighboring states offering pasture and feed.

Local events were organized through the community and businesses to raise funds for the Owyhee Cattlemen’s Heritage Fund, which provides resources to ranchers affected by the fire.

“The initial response and concern while the fire was raging was first and foremost to keep the public, firefighters and resource personnel safe,” Murphy says. “The RFPAs are a continuing success story, and I’m proud that Idaho is leading the way to create opportunities for ranchers and landowners to be proactive in helping defend wildfires.”

By the start of the 2016 fire season, there will be eight RFPAs, which are strategically placed in remote areas where fine fuels are susceptible to fire and ranchers are closer to the initial source of the blaze.

“The RFPAs have strengthened relationships between agencies and landowners,” Murphy adds. “They are all out there together fighting a common cause — wildfire, and bound by risk involved and working together. Afterward, they have to continue conversations for adapted grazing management plans. The communication channels have opened, and I am grateful for that.”

What the future holds

The effects of the Soda Fire will be felt for years. While the BLM continues its restoration efforts, Murphy says everyone can help with the process by understanding that areas disturbed by drilling and seeding need to be left alone for the treatments to take effect.

“We urge the public to be mindful of the efforts to restore the land for everyone’s benefit,” he adds.

Ranchers remain hopeful for the future, want productive conversations with agencies to continue and want changes in land management that can help reverse this fire trend.

“A managed grazing treatment program is being looked at as a viable option to combat invasive species,” Brenda says. “There is some hope that if we can show success, this can be used on a larger scale. The dialogue has been open. We’re looking at that as a positive and to make a difference for the future of ranching and public lands management.”

Murphy agrees that the BLM is looking at the lowest and hottest elevations and considering targeted use of livestock to augment current fuel breaks around roads and canals.

“We haven’t attempted this before, but it’s worth identifying ways to use cattle to widen the fuel breaks and create more space for firefighters to manage fire,” he says. “We will be talking more with permittees soon to see if it’s operationally feasible for them to use livestock in this way.”

In the 35 years the Burgesses have been in the area, they have seen other wildfires, but the Soda Fire was by far the worst.

“We’re always going to get lightning,” Doug points out. “There are huge fires somewhere in the country every year, but

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we have to manage the land so we can slow down these fires. It would help cut the money it takes to fight these fires and keep fires more manageable for the people fighting them.”

Despite the effects of the fire, the Burgesses count their blessings and look forward to the future and continuing to raise Angus cattle.

“Cattle have to be moderate-framed and medium-milking cows,” Doug says. “They also have to have good feet and legs because they walk a long way. The elevation here is around 2,500 feet, with Jordan Valley at 4,600 and Cow Creek getting over 6,500. We want

a cow who is going to raise a good calf each year.

“This is [a] country of extreme weather patterns,” he adds. “It can be really cold, but can also get really hot and dry. The cattle can’t be extreme, though. The weather is bad enough, going from below 0° (F) in winter to over a 100° in the summer.”

Out of the ashes of the blackened Owyhee range rises a spirit and a desire by all involved to see the sagebrush-steppe habitat and beauty of the area fully restored.

“The long-term goal is to see a landscape

that supports wildlife and provides assurance livestock operators will have sustainable use of the land for the long run,” Murphy concludes. “Proper livestock grazing contributes to healthy rangeland, provides native grasses and helps with species diversification. And, healthy rangelands are good for the public, livestock producers, wildlife and recreationalists.”



Editor’s Note: *Maggie Malson is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Parma, Idaho.*

Grazing’s role in fire management

“In some areas when winds are 30 miles per hour or more, you can’t do anything about that; the fire is not going to be easily controlled,” Reynolds, Idaho, cattlemaster Brenda Richards says. “However, when the wind is low, using management tools like grazing can help. Grazing takes away the fine fuel loads. We have a better capability of getting the fires out when the fine fuels are minimized and conditions are moderate.”

As Public Lands Council (PLC) president, Richards has the opportunity to talk with the public about land management.

“I compare it to the defensible space around your home,” she says. “The fine fuels are found under the brush and carry the fire low and hot. Grazing will not prevent fires, but it certainly is a great tool to help with fire management. Grazing on cheatgrass in the spring is especially helpful to remove fine fuels. It will take adaptability in management and regulation changes.”

Karen Launchbaugh, University of Idaho (UI) professor and director of the UI Rangeland Center in Moscow, Idaho, has spent her career working on rangeland issues.

Launchbaugh explains that collaborative efforts are being made to research and answer questions like how can grazing be used as a management tool to help control the spread of wildfire, how grazing is beneficial, what goals besides livestock feed does grazing have, what are the effects of grazing on sagebrush and grasses, and when is grazing best utilized to decrease annuals, like cheatgrass.

“The late spring rains of 2015 created a lot more grass,” she says. “Cheatgrass comes out in early spring. When the rains come, cheatgrass really comes. Perennials were able to take advantage of the moisture as well. Cheatgrass reaches maturity and dries out in summer, becoming fuel for fires.”

Launchbaugh cites a study conducted by Barry Perryman,

University of Nevada–Reno, which found that targeted winter grazing reduced cheatgrass, stimulated perennial plant growth and provided enough nutrition for cattle when provided a protein supplement. Before the study, the general consensus was that cattle would only graze cheatgrass in the early spring.

Researchers continue to look at strategic ways to use grazing to stop or contain wildfires.

“There is going to be extreme weather,” Launchbaugh admits, “but even with extreme fire conditions we have seen places in the landscape where the fire stops. We need to look at the intensity and severity of the fire in these cases.”

In addition to looking at how grazing puts pounds on the cow, Launchbaugh points out the need to consider continuity or how much space is between the plants. In addition, she says we need to find ways livestock can be used to manage natural landscapes, which would include using grazing to reduce fuels.

“We can put cows where they can effectively graze cheatgrass in the spring and can combine grazing with other tools when cheatgrass is in abundance,” she adds.

“Ranchers are dang creative people,” Launchbaugh says. “They are on the ground working directly with the land and cattle. If we give them what we want the landscape to look like, they can make it happen.”

Launchbaugh admits that there is another side of this, and there are people who say no grazing at all is the answer to the wildfire issue, but she points out research proves a no-grazing policy can be as damaging as a mis-grazing one.

“Research has shown and more is being conducted to see how grazing at the right time, right place and right intensity can be very effective in helping contain wildfires,” she says. “We need to stop reacting and start being proactive.”

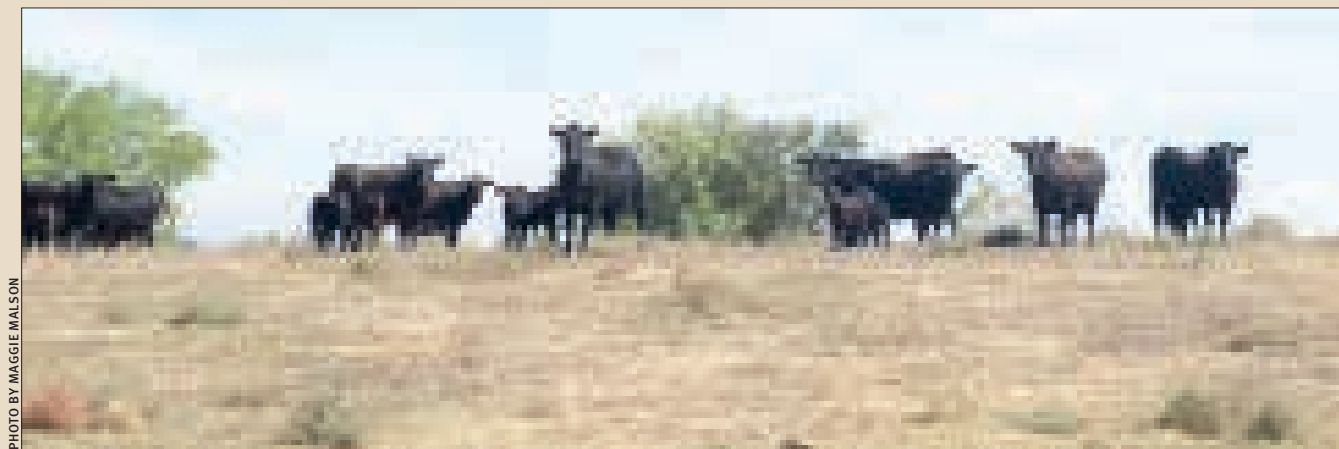


PHOTO BY MAGGIE MALSON

► The Burgesses calve in the spring and fall. They expect their Angus cows to be moderate-framed and have good feet and legs as they have miles of traveling to do when turned out on public lands in Owyhee County.