Patch Burning

History

Patch burning is a relatively new concept to range management; however, it has been occurring naturally for hundreds of years from lightning strikes. Native Americans purposely started fires to drive out enemies, herd wild animals, and manage fuel loads. Herbivores such as bison and antelope were attracted to the new lush, green vegetation and began to seek out these burned areas. As a result, these animals would travel from burned area to burned area to graze. This heavy concentration of animals on a seasonal basis is one of the first examples of grazing systems utilizing prescribed fire.

Process

Today most producers focus patch burning into particular seasons of the year and on particular locations of their rangeland depending on the desired results from the burn (i.e. shift from cool season to warm season grasses, control of invasive species). It is important to consider biological and economical implications of patch burning. Burning during a drought situation or a time when plants are stressed may not be ideal for seedling re-establishment or control of invasive species. Also, stocking rates must be adjusted accordingly to ensure proper stocking rates on the burned area as well as the rest of the ranch post-burn.

Potential Effects

Patch burning can improve vegetation dynamics on rangelands by causing a shift in from cool to warm season grasses or by altering species composition. It can be utilized to reduce ground cover in the form of litter and create openings for forb establishment while lowering browse lines of preferred shrubs thereby improving wildlife habitat. Animal production can also be improved with increased palatability of grasses. It can also aid producers in reducing fuel loads helping to prevent wildfires.

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