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Sheep to be used again in hills west of Carson City

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Next spring, four-legged firefighters will gather in the hills west of Carson City once again in the battle against an invading grass that's boosting the risk of wildfire.

For the fourth straight year, sheep will be used to munch away at fields of grasses growing in an area already seared by fire near Nevada's capital.

"The idea is to use sheep to hit that area a little harder," said Genny Wilson, chief of the U.S. Forest Service's Carson Ranger District.

The primary target is cheatgrass, an invasive annual grass that first appeared in Nevada in 1906 and has since spread across tens of millions of acres in the Great Basin, crowding out native vegetation on many hills and fields in Northern Nevada.

The stuff thrives in areas already burned by fire and when dry, can fuel future fires in the same place.

"Its flammability is like gasoline," Mike Dondero, state fire management officer, said.

Experts have mowed and used herbicides and toxic fungus to battle the spread of cheatgrass.

Sheep grazing is another tool being tried. After a successful 1999 test on Carson City's C Hill by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, sheep have been used to graze the region in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Plan set for May

The coming effort beginning in May targets 5,500 acres of land, most of it national forest land near Carson City's urban boundary. It's part of more than 17,000 acres that have burned in the area since 1980, including

8,799 acres consumed during the Waterfall Fire of 2004, according to a Forest Service report.

In addition to cheatgrass, the sheep, provided by rancher Ted Borda for only the cost of transportation, will also remove Medusahead, another non-native annual grass.

And these hungry critters will also be munching on wheatgrass, which was deliberately planted in the wake of the Waterfall Fire to help stabilize soil but is now flourishing in areas to the detriment of native vegetation.

"Now we want to take that plant out and get the natives back in," Wilson said.

That's particularly important because the affected area of the Carson Range serves as critical winter habitat for mule deer, which need native forage like bitterbrush to survive.

Open space management

The program builds upon Carson City's active program to protect open space, going beyond efforts to simply preserve scenery, said Juan Guzman, the city's open space manager.

"Now we're managing land and the emphasis is on reducing the fuels," Guzman said. "It's something really meaningful to our community, I hope."

While the effort looks promising, the long-term effectiveness of sheep controlling the spread of cheatgrass is unknown, Wilson said.

"We're not sure this will get done what we want long-term," Wilson said. "It's kind of experimental at this point."

Nevada State Forester Pete Anderson said the use of sheep, as well as goats, offers "a lot of potential" to reduce fire danger, particularly in places where communities abut wild areas such as at the targeted area of Carson City.

"It can be very effective," Anderson said. "One of the problems is we don't have the number of livestock we used to. They can be hard to get."
