

Multi-species Grazing

Peggy and her husband Pete have been property owners in the Concow area since 1965, located in the foothills of Butte County. The Moak family has a long tradition of cattle ranching in Butte County dating back to the 1900s. In 2008, the Lightning Complex Fire burned most of the area surrounding the Moak home and property – right up to their back door! The family has always maintained defensible space and irrigated areas, which safeguarded their property with minimal loss in 2008.



Following the 2008 fire, the adjacent property owner logged and chipped the burnt forest on his land. Then Peggy and Pete purchased the adjacent 40 acres with an eye to controlling future wildfire vulnerability. Over the next several years they fenced the land and added some goats. Pete worked diligently to clear the remaining woody debris and brush that had grown up, first on the area closest to their home, then out from there. He cut back the dead brush, piled and burned, and limbed up the oaks and dogwood flourishing on the land.

Goats were a new addition for the Moaks, and like any landowner they had to take into consideration a number of factors before venturing into animal ownership, or leasing out their land for grazing. Infrastructure costs for fencing, irrigation, sheds and/or barns can be pricey – it's a long term investment. Some grant funding may be available through entities such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Once you have the animals, someone must be around to watch over them daily, especially if goats are kidding or cows are calving. There are feed bills in the winter, vet bills, and caring for weak or sickly animals.



The Moaks constructed sheds to house the goats, and smaller fenced enclosures to contain the goats at night. The herd grew to 35 or so, and they would sell off the yearlings at auction annually. After a few years, they experienced increasing issues with predation, beginning with local dogs, then bears, coyotes and mountain lions. In the summer of 2018, they decided to sell the goats and use cattle to control vegetation, since they are larger and less prone to predation, yet still consume grass and brush to maintain defensible space. When the Moaks decided to switch to cattle, they took a different approach. Now, they lease out the land to a local rancher, who manages 13 head on the property during the winter and spring. The Moaks provide fencing, livestock drinking water and the lessee is responsible for cattle health and management.

“On November 8, 2018, the Camp Fire hit Concow early in the morning,” recalls Peggy Moak. “The lack of dense forest or heavy brush fuel in the grazed area on our property lowered the fire intensity and flame height. We are confident our land management, which included livestock grazing and timber management, saved our home and outbuildings, along with my mother’s home and barns, a neighbor’s home, and my sister’s house across the road.”

In the aftermath of the fire, the pasture area greened up when the rain came two weeks later, and the dogwood, oaks and most conifers in the cleared areas survived. In the brushier areas with manzanita, which had not yet been cleared, the fire damage was more extensive. The Moaks are strong advocates when it comes to the merits of grazing to reduce fuels and mitigate fire danger in a way that is beneficial and self-sustaining when compared to other methods.

“Livestock grazing can be a very cost effective, long term means of reducing the fuel load, controlling brush, and maintaining defensible space on a larger scale,” states Peggy. “We are believers!”

Photos provided by Peggy Moak.