

Destructive Wildfires Give Hay Donation Opportunity

It is no secret that Utah has experienced some destructive wildfires this summer. An estimated 500,000 acres of public and private rangeland have burned. Information from Utah Department of Agriculture shows that nearly 100 ranchers have been directly impacted with dead, injured or displaced livestock. Of necessity, producers are being forced to make difficult economic decisions that will influence their businesses now and for years to come. There have already been some partial herd liquidations, but most ranchers are still exploring their options before finalizing a plan. Local rural economies and wildlife populations have and will experience negative effects too. The economic and emotional impacts on individuals, businesses and communities cannot be fully measured.

An immediate concern has to do with the loss of fall and winter grazing for hundreds of cattle and sheep. It is estimated that nearly 38,500 tons of hay will be needed to maintain displaced livestock. Obviously, that is a major expense. Additionally, fences will need to be rebuilt, watering systems repaired, and thousands of acres of rangeland need to be reseeded. Even with concerted efforts to stabilize these areas, there is danger of massive dust storms, possible flooding, significant soil erosion and additional loss of limited resources.

State and Federal agencies have organized themselves under the title of Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (Utah PCD). This collaborative organization has come together to design and implement stabilization actions for the entire burned area, regardless of land ownership. Utah PCD agrees that future catastrophic fires can be prevented, or more easily controlled, with the proper range environment in place. A major goal is to reduce hazardous fuels, such as cheat grass, by replacing them with improved vegetation. The State of Utah has already purchased 1 million pounds of quality grass seed and BLM is trying to purchase 7.8 million pounds of seed. Aerial and land seeding will begin this month and will continue next spring. Invasive and noxious weeds will also be inventoried, infestations mapped, and treated mechanically or with herbicides. The rehabilitation of lost range land will be a long-term effort. Even at best, impacted ranchers must either sell their herds, move to other areas, or purchase expensive feeds to supplement their livestock.

Cache County producers have been wondering what we can do to assist. After much discussion, leaders of the Cache Cattlemen's Association and Cache County Farm Bureau have suggested each Cache County farmer/rancher donate at least one ton of hay to our southern Utah friends. It could be alfalfa, grass or oat hay, ton bales or medium sized. We may have difficulty trucking the small bales, but we will gladly accept them if that is what is available. We think we can easily donate at least 100 ton without hurting anyone in this county. We may potentially donate much more than that.

Cache Valley Bank has agreed to arrange for the trucking and organizers down south will coordinate the distribution of our donations when they arrive. We know that both givers and receivers will be happy with any forage donations that can be given. Cache Valley Bank is also willing to accept cash donations for individuals who may want to get involved that way.

Willing participants may deliver their hay at one of two collection sites on Wednesday, September 19 or Thursday, September 20. Producers in the north end of the county can deliver their hay to the Smithfield Livestock Auction. South end producers can take their donations to the USU Caine Dairy. Perhaps there can be some pooling of bales in communities so there will be less chasing for busy growers. We will have loaders at each location to unload the hay as it is donated. We will plan to load the semi trucks the following day to send our donations to southern Utah.

We all have troubles from time to time. It is much easier to deal with difficulties when we can help each other. Donations willingly given from this end of the state seems relatively easy. The hard part will come when our friends to the south try to methodically allocate a limited offering among all who need assistance there.

If you have additional questions or suggestions please call one of the following: Joe Fuhriman 770-0099, ValJay Rigby 757-4236, Lane Parker 757-4643, Clark Israelsen 752-6263.