

April 17, 2014 - 4:20pm

Have 4 feet, will eat — and prevent wildfires

By SEAN WHALEY

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL CAPITAL BUREAU

CARSON CITY — Hundreds of woolly four-footed fire suppression units, along with their bleating offspring, were unloaded into the hills west of the capital here Thursday in what has become an annual program to reduce the risk of wildfires.

The 750 or so ewes and their lambs will spend the next four weeks literally eating a firebreak between wildlands and urban areas as part of Carson City's fire suppression efforts.

This is the ninth year of the program, which involves cooperation from private landowners, state officials, the city and the U.S. Forest Service. The sheep belong to the Borda Land and Sheep Co.

Ann Bollinger, natural resource specialist for the city's Parks and Recreation Department, displayed a photograph she took Wednesday that demonstrated tangible results of the grazing program from past years.

The city has fenced off several small areas of the hillsides to allow for comparisons of vegetation growth. She showed a picture of one such enclosure, which had significantly more vegetation growing than the surrounding areas where the sheep have grazed now for nearly a decade.

The grazing program was initiated after the devastating 2004 Waterfall Fire, which started from a campfire up Kings Canyon to the west of the city. Before it was put out, the fire burned 8,000 acres and destroyed 18 homes.

The main focus of the grazing program is cheat grass, which dries out early and becomes a fire hazard, Bollinger said. Getting the invasive grass under control allows native grasses, which are more resistant to fire, to grow and expand, she said.

The animals will consume about 4,000 pounds of fuel each day as they move along the hills, accompanied by sheep herders and their dogs, Pyrenees and border collies.

Anna Belle Monti, a forester with the Forest Service, said a similar program is getting underway Friday with 1,000 sheep in the Timberline Drive area of southwest Reno.

Outlying areas of Reno have seen their share of devastating wildfires as well over the past few years due in part to the severe drought conditions that persist this year as well in western Nevada. One of the worst was the Caughlin Ranch Fire in November 2011 that destroyed 30 homes.

Bollinger said the costs to the city involve the transportation of the sheep, as well as staff time to monitor the program and from the city Fire Department which provides drinking water for the animals.

The city has had the benefit of a multi-year \$500,000 grant from the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act for fuels reduction efforts, including the grazing component, she said.

Those funds will run out in March of 2015, but Bollinger said the grazing program could continue with only about \$5,000 to cover transportation and other out-of-pocket costs.

Contact Capital Bureau reporter Sean Whaley at swhaley@reviewjournal.com or 775-687-3900. Find him on Twitter: @seanw801.