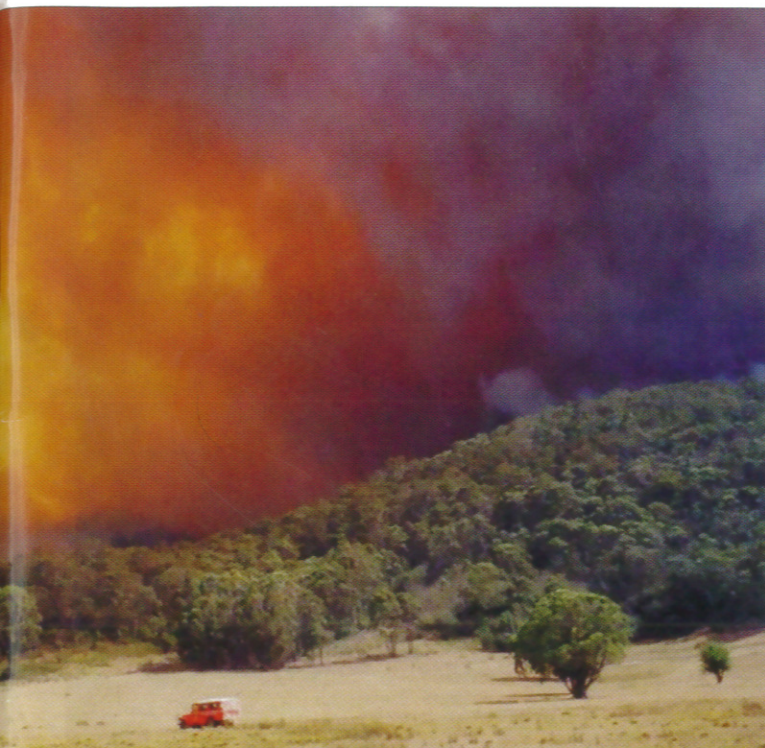


RURAL ISSUES - Preventing the effects of wild fires



A high intensity fire at the Southern end of the Brindabella Valley in January, 2003, before it joined with other fires to march on Canberra. Correct grazing reduces fuel load accumulation.

intensity fire into a certainty - a regular certainty at that!

The detrimental effects of fuel load build up is now widely accepted. But a debate is now taking place about whether the best way to control this is by fire - regular burning off - or by grazing - occasional high impact grazing with long intervening periods of rest to allow plant regrowth.

In this debate this writer comes down on the side of grazing because:-

■ Regular low intensity fire may have the same cumulative effect in interrupting the nutrient cycle as does a one-off high intensity fire. In the practice of burning off the land manager succeeds in turning ground nutrients into gasses in little penny packets each year. Burning off may reduce fuel loads and may create the illusion of stimulating regrowth, but it does this at the expense of the long term nutrient value of the land.

■ Grazing not only reduces the fuel load but it recycles the nutrients in the form of animal manure on the surface of the ground where they can be reused by other plants and biological processes. The stimulated regrowth caused by the impact of a high load of grazing animals for a short period is not an illusion because it is based on completion of the nutrient cycle rather than a breaking of it.

■ Grazing improves the natural health and viability of the land.

■ Correctly managed grazing creates a higher degree of ground cover and reduces the likelihood of erosion.

■ Grazing creates food for humans as well as economic value for graziers.

Considering the beneficial effects of grazing in alpine regions, its ordered reintroduction - as a high priority over burning off - is an urgent matter. ■



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