

LIVESTOCK CAN HELP STOP DEER DECLINE

Proper management of livestock grazing is one of the most promising methods for improving deer food supplies and halting the population decline in Western deer herds, says a University of California agricultural researcher.

"Deer mainly eat browse--the tender tips of shrubs and other woody plants--and livestock mainly eat grass. Both types of animals are needed to make efficient use of all classes of forage," says William M. Longhurst, UC wildlife and range scientist.

Basing his comments on 19 years of research at the University's Hopland Field Station, Longhurst notes that livestock, particularly sheep, also help keep rangelands in shape for deer.

"For instance, deer prefer introduced grass species over native species. When sheep are excluded from these ranges, the native grasses tend to crowd out introduced annuals such as soft chess and filaree which deer depend on," explains Longhurst.

Research shows that there is little overlap in the diets of deer and sheep except when both are eating grass during the wet months of the year and that there is little competition anytime for browse and other non-grassy plants.

"Best results may well be achieved by using a combination of cattle and sheep, but sheep, especially when they are herded, can be controlled better than cattle," says Longhurst.

He adds that where competition does exist between deer and livestock--such as on migratory deer ranges in the Sierra and Siskiyou Mountains--it can usually be minimized by adjusting the stocking rates and season of use.

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