

Combining Tools for Success

The Hunters live in Yankee Hill, located in Butte County at the base of the Feather River Canyon where oak woodland grasslands transition to forested landscapes. The land has been in the family since 1948 and was inherited by Marie and her husband Scott in 2003. The decision to move to the 100-acre property was not easy; they knew it would come with lots of work and the threat of deadly fire – just three years earlier, Scott’s aunt had died in the Concow Fire in September 2000.

The couple spent weekends and holidays clearing overgrown vegetation on their property, including 10-foot high manzanita and poison oak. “When we started, we did not know the topography of the property, since it was so overgrown,” recalls Marie. In 2008, they added goats to their toolbox to manage the constant regrowth of vegetation following mechanical treatments. “My only livestock experience was raising rabbits as a youth, but I got a book and started studying goats, and I continue to watch and learn from them,” states Marie. At one point, she had over 90 goats. Today, the Hunters use a combination of cattle (seven cows with calves and a bull), goats (35 head), a bulldozer and a mower to reduce vegetation on their 100-acre property, minimizing the fuel loads. They have also invested in a water storage tank that can provide gravity flow water to livestock when power is lost on the property.

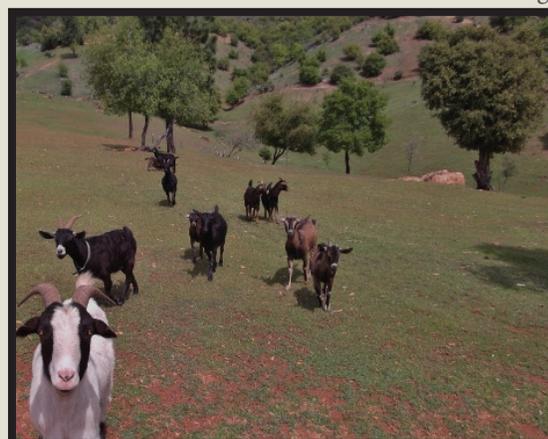
On November 8, 2018, Marie recalls seeing a plume of smoke rising early in the morning. That evening, the Camp Fire reached the Hunters’ property in Yankee Hill. It burned along two sides of the property through brush that had yet to be cleared. The fire meandered along on the ground floor where the Hunters had removed brush mechanically and grazed livestock. They had no loss of buildings, homes or trees despite 40-mph winds that drove the state’s most destructive fire. It was evident that their land management to reduce fire fuel loads worked!

Marie sold some of her hardy Spanish/Kiko/Boar goat offspring to others in the region looking to reduce fire danger by clearing brush on their own property. She enjoys sharing her lessons learned with new goat owners.

“Today we have a healthy piece of property, with defensible space, thanks to a combination of livestock and machinery, plus we have a reliable water supply,” states Marie. “We are prepared for fire and encourage others to be prepared, too!”



Before livestock and mowing



Goats at work



Following grazing and mechanical treatments

Marie’s Favorite Tips to Reduce Fire Fuel Loads

- Know your environment and the needs of the livestock, be prepared to provide supplemental minerals and feed when seasonal growth is low.
- Cattle that prefer grass and goats that typically browse on brush, are a perfect combination.
- The yellowstar thistle is reduced with cattle who eat it early in the season and the goats who eat it after it has headed out.
- For multiple species on smaller property, you can get a weaner steer to graze and then butcher it if desired.
- Sometimes you have to help the livestock to do their job by mowing the old brush, which allows the goats to be able to keep it under control.

Photos provided by Marie Hunter.