1668

Report on the Habitat Clearing Project for Fannin Sheep in Faro, Yukon

by:
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Background

The Mount Mye coloured sheep population winters at Sheep Mountain, Faro, Yukon, the lower slopes and outlying areas of which are more or less covered by down timber and aspen-willow regeneration resulting from the fire of 1969. The down timber obstructs free access of the sheep when they are passing from escape terrain on the upper slopes of Sheep Mountain to the lick and grazing area above Blind Creek (South Bluff), and also inhibits use of the area in between for grazing. Removal of the down timber and brush would improve the grazing potential of the area and also enhance sheep passage.

Therefore, a pilot project was conducted in 1989 to determine the feasibility of sheep habitat improvement in the area by hand-clearing. The project was a cooperative effort between the Ross River Indian Band, the Department of Renewable Resources, and the Faro Fish and Game Club. Funding for the project was provided by the Community Development Fund.

The Project

Starting on the 1st of November, four men using chain saws and hand tools cleared a strip varying between 15 to 30 metres wide and approximately 1.0 kilometres long. The strip extended from the base of Sheep Mountain along the main travel route to South Bluff and west along the top of South Bluff (Figure 1). All down timber was either burned or salvaged depending upon quality, and all brush was cut at ground level and burned. Large pine and spruce growing along the route were left standing but the lower branches were pruned to afford good visibility. The work terminated on 20 December.

Sheep Reaction to the Project

Sheep had already returned to the winter range when the project started and the disturbance caused a major difference in range use compared to the previous year (1988). The lower slopes of Sheep Mountain and the key areas along South Bluff were almost completely avoided by sheep while the clearing was going on and even afterward. They did not return to the South Bluff until the second week of January, and even now as this is written (end of January 1990) they are only using the area on a weekly basis. The previous year, however, they used

South Bluff area during November and December on a daily basis and passed between South Bluff and Sheep Mountain sometimes two and three times a day. Sheep were only seen on the work area approximately three times while the clearing was in progress. Although they showed no undue fear of the workers, they did not stay in the area and their tracks indicated that they just came down and turned around when the encountered the workers. They did not wander, loiter, or bed down after encountering the workers, but went directly up Sheep Mountain. Even while on Sheep Mountain, when above the work area, most of the sheep observed were high up on the mountain. The previous year they used the lower slopes and benches to a much greater degree. I attribute the observed difference in range use between the two years to be caused by the presence of the workers and their activity. This was the most dramatic evidence I have seen in two years of sheep passively avoiding a disturbed area. Had I not seen the range use patterns of the previous year, I would not even have noticed it. Even the almost calm attitude of the sheep when they were near the workers was counter-indicative of the true situation.

When the sheep began reusing the area, they did so tentatively. Even now they sometimes use the cleared area to pass from Sheep Mountain and sometimes prefer the down timber. During the last week, at least one band of sheep (identified by a marked sheep in the band) has been staying along South Bluff, even overnight, so I expect they will soon return to normal (as per 1988) use of the area.

Problems Encountered

The timing of the project could have been better. Besides disturbing the sheep, the workers encountered deep snow, cold temperatures (-50°C), high wind chills, short day length, and difficult living conditions; all of which detracted from efficiency. I estimate that at least twice as much could have been cleared had the project been done earlier. Burning could have been delayed until after the first snowfall. As it was, I feel as much was accomplished as could have been considering the adverse conditions.

The other problems related to the land use inspection. The workers should have been informed that all trees had to be completely cut up instead of half cut and the uncut portion left projecting along the side of the cleared area (a

requirement that I find picayune), and also that their camp had to be completely cleared up and left as it was before they found it.

Other than those two problems, the project was carried out efficiently and well considering the conditions.

Items to be Monitored

Besides observing how and when sheep return to the cleared area, and how they use it, it would be good to know if the clearing results in better foraging conditions (I have no doubt the clearing of down timber will improve passage conditions). Will the clearing promote grass growth or will the brush grow back denser due to suckering? (Willows cut off in the North Trap last year had produced numerous stems over a meter long after one summer's growth).

Recommendations

Clear more of the down timber, particularly around first and second knobs, at the base of Sheep Mountain below North Trap, and along lower ridges and benches, such as Cut Trail Ridge. These are all areas that are used by sheep during November and December, and again in the spring.

Clearing should be done in August and September before the sheep arrive in the area, if possible.

Workers should be clearly instructed, by the Land Use Inspector, about all land-use requirements before starting the project. Inspections should also go on while the workers are still there.

Conduct a literature search to determine if brush slashing is an effective way of improving northern grazing areas and to determine if there are other habitat improvement techniques that could be used at the Faro sheep winter range.

Some sample plots should be set up to determine the effects of this project on sheep range, particularly brush regeneration. The plots should be read and photographed for several years. It may also be desirable to set up a few

exclosures to monitor range conditions as the sheep population grows. Other means of brush clearance and range improvement could be tried, such as small early spring fires to kill brush and encourage grass growth.

It may be desirable to aerially fertilize the upper slopes of Sheep Mountain to encourage vegetation growth in the areas that sheep use the most during the coldest time of the year.

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