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## II. Development, or Green Genocide?

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INTERVIEW WITH KRIS STEWART

# What Is Causing Massive Wildfires In the U.S. West: The Environment —Or Environmentalism?

*EIR contacted Kris Stewart in Washington, D.C., where she was discussing with the White House and Members of Congress, the real cause of the Martin Fire—and of many other devastating wildfires—and the urgent changes needed in Federal land management practices. Mrs. Stewart was interviewed by EIR editor, Paul Gallagher on May 12 after her return to Nevada.*

In the summer of 2018, people across America read, saw and heard constant news about tremendous wildfires in California, such as the deadly Camp Fire, the Woolsey Fire, and the Mendocino Complex Fire. It appeared that all sources, from California state officials to Wikipedia and the *New York Times*, focussed on these widespread and fierce wildfires being “linked to climate change” or “the new normal of global warming.” As usual, these phrases were repeated as truisms without evidence, particularly since the most recent period of extended drought and heat across the state had broken in 2016, giving way to two years of very significant rain and snowpack.

Although sparking from PG&E’s high-voltage lines, crossing land full of summer-dry vegetation, was publicized as a fire trigger, there was *no media coverage* of the issue of land management of public lands in California, beset by cuts in funds since Arnold Schwarzenegger was governor of California, and by the environmental policy of leaving public forest and range lands completely alone. Only President Trump brought this issue of poor land management up during the 2018 fire season, and the only mention of it in national media was in—generally dismissive—coverage of the President.

In fact, the biggest fire in the West in 2018 was not



BLM Nevada/Sebastian Christensen

*Sawtooth National Forest Interagency Hotshot Crew deploy to the Martin Fire on July 5, 2018.*



NPS

*A firefighter protecting a fence from fire during a prescribed burn.*

in California, and it is difficult to find any notices of it in national media coverage last summer. This was the Martin Fire, which burned half a million acres of ranch, rangeland, and ranch structures and improvements across eight counties in northwestern Nevada. Burned bare were large private ranch lands, and even larger areas of Federal land on which those ranches have had grazing permits for their herds for many decades, but with progressively more limitations imposed by the Federal Bureau of Land Management, to a few months each spring and summer. Environmental lawsuits under the Environmental Protection Act have been allowed to characterize livestock grazing as “dangerous fuel reduction activity and development.”

One major victim was the well-known “Ninety-Six Ranch” of Paradise Valley, Nevada, established in Nevada’s statehood year, 1864, and operated continuously by the Stock and Stewart families for 155 years. The Stewart family has issued an “Urgent Call to Save the Great American West.”



BLM

*The Martin Fire grows to almost 400,000 acres, as a specially-equipped DC-10 drops a retardant to limit the fire on June 5, 2018.*

**EIR:** Please tell us about the Martin Fire.

**Kris Stewart:** The Martin Fire started in the early hours of July 5, 2018 up Martin Creek in Paradise Valley, Nevada. The ignition was linked to fireworks. While our ranch posted a \$10,000 reward within 3 days, and other individuals as well as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Humboldt County followed suit, no suspects were ever identified or arrested. Had the fire been called in early, it is very likely that it could have been extinguished by our local volunteer fire department; however, no call was made and by the time firefighters responded, the fire had taken hold, due to extreme levels of dangerous fuels—excessive vegetation—on the rangeland. When daylight came, the fire had already taken

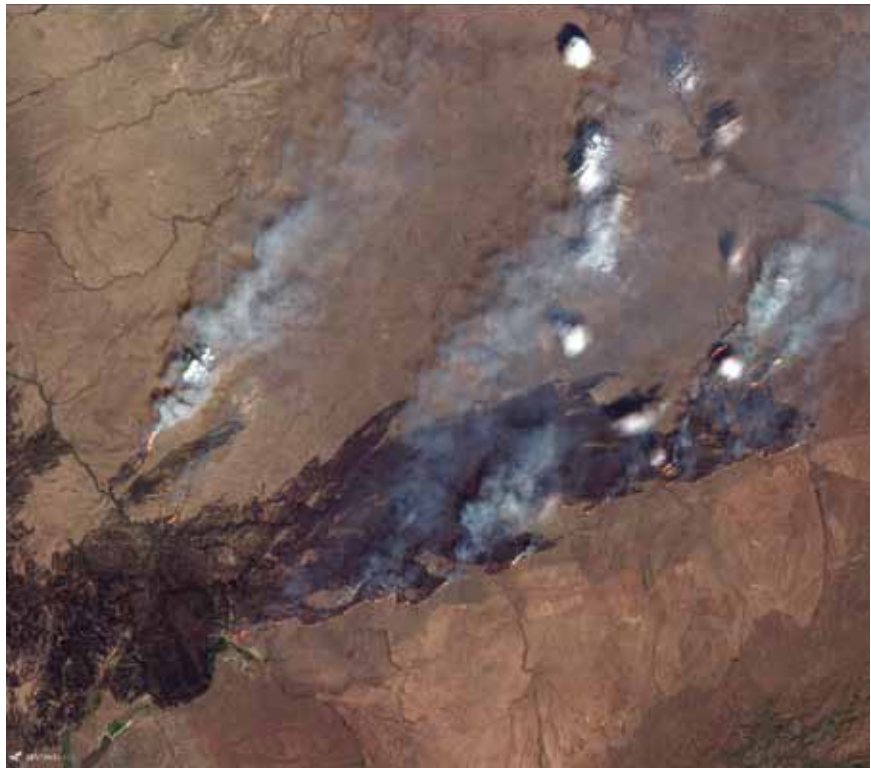
over 25,000 acres and went on to take between 430,000 and 460,000 acres. Vegetative fuel levels on the rangeland taken by the Martin Fire had been allowed to reach levels of 1,000% of normal, by the BLM's own estimates. Further, even the usable forage was at record levels, and this was after the ranches with permits had finished the grazing they were allowed.

In the specific case of our range, we completed monitoring our use two weeks prior to the ignition of the fire, and our records indicate that we had used just 18-20% of allowed forage [in the allowed time], and that overall fuel levels exceeded 1,000% of normal levels. We had requested additional time to graze off these fuels but were denied. We moved our cattle on the schedule dictated by our permit. The Martin Fire took more than 64,000 acres of our 73,000-acre grazing permit as well as over 6,300 acres of our private ranch lands.

The Ninety-Six Ranch is Nevada's oldest ranch. We ... have grazed our cattle on these same rangelands for 155 years. Our use predates federal land management agencies' involvement by many decades. The USFS [United States Forest Service] became involved in lands more than 5,000 feet above sea level in 1906, and the BLM [came in] with the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. Our grazing levels and use schedules were not cut or altered by that act—showing that our use, moderated by weather and conditions, was in keeping with best practices and good stewardship standards. This use and these standards continued through both world wars and into the 1960s.

Then, the modern environmental movement began to inform range management studies and policy, and environmental lawsuits caused a shift in grazing policies. Once considered engaged partners, ranchers were viewed as the enemy, as environmental radicals began to portray *any* human-guided use on the range as negative, and as a negative impact on the plant communities and wildlife.

Our records indicate that in the 154 years preceding



CC/Pierre Markuse

*An aerial view of the eastern part of the Martin Fire in Nevada, July 8, 2018.*

the Martin Fire, our lands have never burned like this. This is due to diligent and careful management. But today, we graze at levels less than 30% of historic levels. By the BLM's own admission, fuel levels on our permits were allowed to grow to from 200% to 1,000% of normal. We and many other permittees have discussed and warned of the impending fire danger with the agency's personnel for decades, but no changes have been allowed to our amount of use or seasons of use.

Each year more of the West burns. Federal land managers have allowed land management to become political and a bureaucratic nightmare, rather than a common-sense, science-based exercise.

**EIR:** What did the Martin Fire do to your ranching operation?

**Stewart:** Our operations have been devastated by the Martin Fire. We are left with over a half-million acres of charred black ground, scattered with burned-up animals. A cheatgrass monoculture will quickly establish itself on the range.

For 155 years, our operations have been based on completing a “big circle” starting with calving in March-April on our home meadows, then branding and turning our cattle out a side gate to BLM rangeland, moving them through more private ground leading to the USFS mountain range, summering them on that higher elevation range, then coming home usually to home range and meadows and reusing new or residual vegetation on the BLM land in late fall to early winter. We generally pasture cattle on our private valley land during the winter



BLM/A. Hedrick

*An invasive winter annual weed, Cheatgrass was the primary fuel for the Martin Fire.*

and feed natural meadow hay during the hardest 100 days of winter. The fire took away the BLM land and transition range between the BLM and USFS. Without this, we have been forced to keep cattle home on meadows that would have been irrigated and grown for hay, leaving us without necessary fall pasture. This forced us to purchase hay for fall and winter consumption. Last year, that out-of-pocket cost exceeded \$160,000. It is likely that we will need to do the same for at least another 2-3 years, essentially exhausting our personal savings and retirement accounts.

Additionally, the re-seeding efforts conducted by the BLM have been largely ineffective. Larkspur, an alkaloid and killer of cattle, has taken hold on the range along with large amounts of thistle and cheatgrass. Aerially-seeded areas look like a complete failure and drill-seeded areas look only slightly better. We strongly advocate for our cattle to be allowed to graze beginning this fall and winter to remove the cheatgrass threat.

Before the Martin Fire our BLM and USFS permits were considered prime Sage Grouse habitat. Today, there is not a single living sage grouse left on our BLM permit. The birds cannot and will not come back until a healthy sage brush ecosystem is restored.

The bottom line is that restoration of rangeland health requires a strong and well-timed grazing component: To disturb the [fire-hardened soil] crust, deposit fertilizer,

spread seed, and remove plant matter including the invasive cheatgrass. It is the most natural and only effective means of restoring the soil to a healthy condition.

**EIR:** What is it that burned so fiercely over so large an area? What was the fuel?

**Stewart:** The main fuel that caused the Martin Fire to burn so hot is cheatgrass. This is an invasive annual, originally from the Eurasian steppe. It outcompetes native grasses, including perennial bunch grasses. This, combined with the native plant community—including several varieties of sage brush which had all been allowed to become overly pernicious through under grazing—allowed the fire to burn hot and literally take everything above ground, in some places sterilizing the soil and making rehabilitation difficult without animal fertilizer inputs.

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### ‘Ranchers Are the True Range Environmentalists’

**EIR:** How has the Stock/Stewart family historically managed your range land?

**Stewart:** Our goals are resource health for the long term. The fact that the Taylor Grazing Act was put into place to combat overuse of the grazing resource and our family faced *no* cuts or alteration of our use, illustrates that we were and continue to be good and responsible stewards of the resource.

We have pushed back against the cuts that the federal agencies have imposed over the past sixty years because the changes are politically driven rather than based on science and in the best interests of the resource or our operations. We have generally been rebuffed in our efforts to restore livestock grazing to historic or traditional levels.

But since the fire, our objections to the direction of federal land management over the past sixty years are



American Folklife Center/Carl Fleischhauer

*Moving cattle into a willow branding corral on the Ninety-Six Ranch.*

finally being heard. We take great interest in and give much credence to range scientists like Allan Savory, who has studied and observed that livestock grazing mimics the “hoof effect” of migrating herds throughout history. Their hooves disturb the soil in a healthy manner, allowing rain and snow water, seeds and fertilizer to be absorbed throughout the soil. They obviously also deposit some of those seeds as well as a completely natural and healthy fertilizer to the soil. . . . Without surface disruption, soil crusts and moisture and healthy microbes cannot penetrate the surface and build healthy soil communities.

**EIR:** Does preventing wildfires play a part in this historical management?

**Stewart:** We have worked hard to avoid devastating wildfires throughout our use of this rangeland. Rarely, that could mean limited, controlled burns, but generally it meant well-timed grazing of appropriate duration and fuel reduction levels.

But that goal has become less achievable over the past several decades, owing to increased pressure on the federal agencies by radical environmental groups whose stated goal is the complete removal of domestic livestock from the range and landscape.

**EIR:** What would you say has been the long-term or

fundamental cause of BLM and Forest Service officials’ hostility to your management of your range and particularly, your Federally permitted use of Federal land for livestock? Is the opposition ideological? Environmental?

**Stewart:** Federal agency hostility toward ranchers and grazing has been many decades in the making. Range management has been lumped into the environmental sciences—which in the United States, and much of the western world, has become politicized and nearly religious in nature. Many of those educated within this system, which vilifies human-guided use and active

management of land, sit at every level of the state and federal bureaucracy and decision-making apparatus. It is a tough uphill battle to push back and demonstrate that grazing and ranchers are the true environmentalists out on the range.

The agencies and well-funded environmental groups have the power and most of the funds for research and lawsuits. These environmental groups also exploit loopholes in the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) to collect tax dollars to fund their assault on ranchers, Federal agencies and grazing advocates. Our research, records and advocacy efforts are generally grass roots, and conducted by ranchers themselves, rather than by official range scientists.

We are Davids in cowboy hats battling Goliaths in the form of the Sierra Club, Western Watersheds, WWF [World Wide Fund for Nature], and the U.S. government.

### **Another Devastating Wildfire Season?**

**EIR:** You have appealed strongly to the White House to act on this situation, including the impact on county after ranching county across Nevada. Has the President responded?

**Stewart:** President Trump responded on December 21, 2018 with an [Executive Order](#), EO 13855, “Promoting Active Management of America’s Forests, Range-



Left to right: Paul Gallagher, ranchers Kris Stewart and Pat Trask, and Robert Baker meet in Washington, D.C.

lands, and Other Federal Lands To Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk,” followed on January 2, 2019 by Department of Interior [DOI] [Secretarial Order 3372](#), “Reducing Wildfire Risks on Department of the Interior Land Through Active Management,” aimed at practical, common sense reforms. The USFS has not followed suit with their own Secretarial order, but are slowly (very slowly) moving forward on similar reforms. The President has an excellent Secretary of Interior in David Bernhardt, and an absolute rock star at the helm of the BLM in Casey Hammond.

But bureaucracies are making roll-out of the reforms slow, and are really putting the West at great danger of another devastating wildfire season [from late spring until winter rains arrive at the end of the calendar year].

This fall, the BLM and other Federal agencies sought substantial supplemental funding to restore and rehab the lands burned in the Martin Fire and elsewhere. We applaud the fact that the Trump administration has recognized proper and proactive range and forest management as key to reducing fire danger in the West and has warned that future emergency funds after natural disasters may be reduced unless proactive strategies are used to better manage the resources.

**EIR:** What are your hopes of a change from the “environmentalist” Federal policy on managing western lands? Can the burning be stopped?

**Stewart:** Our family originally went back to D.C. to tell our story in the hopes that President Trump would

hear it and respond. He has, and we are thrilled. It will be an uphill battle to dismantle the bureaucracy that seeks to derail the reforms he has ordered. Whether our family operation will survive this battle is unclear, but if we have a part in saving U.S. cattle ranching and our way of life, it will have been worth the time, expense and trouble for the next generation.

But we must note that FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] awarded Nevada, and those of us harmed by the Martin Fire, zero dollars. Apparently not enough people were injured and most of the land was federally owned.

We will continue to speak out. I will conduct a speaking tour this summer to educate ranchers in each western state about the new tools made available by President Trump’s Executive Order and DOI Secretarial Order 3372, and how to implement those reforms on their own [Federal] permits before wildfire takes them.

Stewart's Ninety-Six Ranch  
Paradise Valley, Nevada  
Celebrating 150 Years  
1864-2014

[For History about the Ranch, Click Here](#)  
[For More on our Current Operation, Click Here](#)  
[To send us your Ninety-Six Ranch Story, Click Here](#)

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