

WILDLIFE ABUNDANCE IN REPOSE TO LEAFY SPURGE CONTROL WITH SHEEP^{TWS}

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Although much research has been completed on impacts of cattle grazing on wildlife habitat, available information documenting effects of sheep grazing on wildlife habitat is limited. In cooperation with the Montana Sustainable Rangeland Livestock Task Force, the MSU Extension Wildlife Program began a long-term monitoring effort in 2003 to determine impacts on wildlife habitat and wildlife abundance in response to control of leafy spurge with

sheep. Data were collected during spring and fall of 2003 and 2004 at 3 locations. Each site consisted of a grazed and non-grazed area at which we sampled small mammal abundance with Sherman live traps in a mark-recapture protocol. Avian survey were conducted from a fixed point at each site. Preliminary results indicated no differences in abundance of small mammals and birds after the first year of sheep presence. In 2003, leafy spurge was reduced by an average of 61 percent in areas where sheep grazed. Vegetative data will also be used to evaluate forage availability for large ungulates. Although sheep grazing has been demonstrated to be an effective and economical means of controlling leafy spurge, what effect this may have on wildlife habitat remains unclear. Trends in wildlife populations will not become apparent immediately following grazing by sheep as native plant communities may take years to recover after removal of an invasive weed.