



Re: 2014/15 Sierra Nevada Foothill Annual Forage Production

The University of California Cooperative Extension monitors annual rangeland forage production throughout the foothills to accurately gauge the total forage production on an annual basis. Data is gathered at eight locations throughout the central Sierra Nevada foothills in El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras and Tuolumne counties.

For the 2014/15 season, our data showed that annual peak forage production (gathered May 15th, 2015) throughout the four county area was predominantly close to the long term average at each site. The Paloma site in Calaveras County was the only site significantly below the long term average. We attribute this difference to the local grazing practices the previous year. This site was overgrazed in the 2013/14 season which resulted in less forage this year.



The drought continues to have significant impacts to annual rangelands. The dry winter months of January and February negatively impacted total forage samples taken on February 19th, 2015. Many of the sites were some of the lowest on record; Keystone site in Tuolumne County had 248 lbs./acre and the Copperopolis site in Calaveras County had 450 lbs./acre. This is nearly identical to the 2013/14 season which also had some of the lowest preliminary forage clippings on record. Two years in a row of limited winter feed has weighed heavy on the livestock industry as many ranchers continued to rely on purchasing winter feed and or culling their herd.

Although the winter drought greatly impacted the amount of available feed during the winter months, the early spring months which consisted of unseasonably warm weather and occasional rainstorms greatly improved total productivity for the year. By peak standing, annual forage amounts quickly recovered and nearly all sites were at or above their long term average. The Sutter Creek site in Amador County saw the greatest increase going from 1,137 lbs./acre in mid-February to a record high of 6,428 lbs./acre by May 15th, 2015.

We continue to see an increase in the amount of noxious weeds on annual rangeland. Medusahead (*Taeniantherum caput-medusae*) is becoming more widespread and in some pastures it may represent up to 80% of the total biomass. Medusahead is a non-desirable forage species and most livestock will selectively graze around it late in the season. We are seeing increased levels of medusahead in our forage plots. To date we have not taken into account the amount of non-desirable species in total forage production. However, in the future, we will begin to take this into account so we can better determine desirable versus non-desirable vegetation as it relates to total forage production.

