

Cleaning up land

Goats fill unique niche in plant control

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When Ron and Cheryl Searcy returned to their family farm near Horse Shoe, N.C., they had a number of crop and livestock options in mind — none of them involved goats.

The farm, Wells Farm, has been in Cheryl's family since 1938, having survived most of those years as a dairy operation. In more recent times the land had been rented for pastures, but had not been maintained.

They came back to the farm intending to get into the cattle business. Searcy says they first brought goats to the farm to help clean up some of the areas that had been left to grow up — mostly in blackberry briars.

They tried raising goats for what can be a thriving goat meat market. Thriving wasn't exactly how it worked for the Searcys. Now he and his wife Cheryl having a thriving goat business, but these goats are too valuable to send to slaughter.

For rent

Instead, Searcy literally rents out the goats for environmentally, fuel efficient control of weeds, shrubs and other invasive plants that need a good cleaning.

"We used the goats some around the farm, but we didn't really get the idea to use them for vegetation control until my son sent me an article from the New York Times. The article described how the city of Chattanooga, Tenn., had hired someone with a herd of goats to help get rid of kudzu.

A couple of years ago we helped our neighbor clean up a really overgrown area on his farm — that got us started thinking about using our goats to clean up urban landscapes. Then, the New York Times article gave us more inspiration, Searcy says.

"For most of the past couple of years we have been trying to come up with an efficient way to fence the goats in, but maintain an economical way of taking the fence down and moving it to a new location.

Grant money

"We received an AgOptions grant last year, which allowed us to purchase some new fencing equipment," Searcy says. The AgOptions program is financed by the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, based in Raleigh.

The lightweight, portable fence post system was



HORSE SHOE, N.C., farmer Ron Searcy checks on the progress of his goats at a mountain home near Weaverville, N.C.

like the missing link — it allowed us the flexibility to put fencing up and take it down quickly, efficiently and economically.

The lightweight pneumatic fence post device is powered by an air compressor that runs off a gas-powered generator. The device, affectionately called 'the pounder' allows Searcy to construct a fencing area for his goats in a matter of hours, rather than days, using a heavy mallet to drive the fence posts.

Once the fence posts are installed, he attaches five strands of 14 gauge wire. The wire is electrified using a solar system that provides a series of electrical pulses to the fence. "So far the goats have reacted well to the electric fence. We have had no problem with escapes," Searcy says.

In some cases, electricity for the fencing system is provided by the home or landowner, but most areas that need his goats don't have access to a power supply, he adds.

The goats are usually watered by the home or landowner using a 50-gallon drum and a garden hose. In other cases, the land has a spring or creek which is just fine for the goats. In extreme cases, Searcy says he can haul water in to the goats.

"In August of 2007 we unveiled our system at the Southern Energy and Environmental Expo in Asheville," he notes. "Cheryl thought I was crazy. She said no one is going to rent a goat to clean up their property," Searcy laughs.

Excellent response

The response has grown well beyond anything Ron or Cheryl Searcy ever imagined. Now, they say, they don't have enough goats or enough manpower to accept all the offers they get to rent their goats.

When it comes to cleaning up the landscape, size doesn't matter much to the goats. Searcy says they currently have goats on lots as small as a half acre and on tracts as large

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Goats used for weed, brush control

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as 10 acres.

The goats they use are a crossbreed of four different breeds, producing goats that are as near as possible to wild goats, Searcy contends. These goats seem to be heartier than more domesticated goats and less prone to parasites.

"We typically go check on the goats once a week. We provide supplemental feed for the goats when it's needed and make sure they get plenty of water. Otherwise, they are maintenance free.

"In some cases in which we are leaving the goats at a place for an extended period of time, we leave a guard dog with them. These dogs are a mixture of Kangall—a Turkish herding dog and a Pyrenees. They are very social and very docile around people, but absolutely vicious when a predator comes around the goats."

The goats seem to thrive on the most

heavily vegetated areas — they eat everything, Searcy says. Landowners are usually a bit skeptical, but after a few days they see parts of their property they've never seen before, without the noise and cost of heavy equipment usually associated with clearing land.

Searcy charges \$30 per goat per month, plus a setup fee. The setup fee can range from \$100 for an easy setup to several hundred dollars, if they have to go in and clear places to put their temporary fencing.

In heavy brush, Searcy says he typically uses 10 goats per acre that will take 3-4 weeks to clear an acre. It's like having 10 quiet weed eaters going nearly 24 hours a day. If it's green and in reach of the goats, it's gone, he stresses.

Kudzu is a major landscape problem in most areas of the Southeast — western North Carolina included. These goats continually eat all the green foliage on kudzu and eventually the plant dies, Searcy explains.

Though he gets requests for his goats to clean up all kinds of vegetative growth, Searcy says cleaning up areas inundated with kudzu, bittersweet vine, English ivy, and privet hedge are the most common requests he gets.

Searcy has nearly 200 goats and 170 are available to rent. The limitations are space to raise more goats and fencing. Goats are



RON SEARCY, Horse Shoe, N.C., farmer, explains how his portable fencing equipment works.

browsers, not grazers, so this hilly land and scattered brush and weeds are ideal.

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“Our landmark job has been to clean up a two-acre site at a city park in Tryon, N.C.,” he says. Since the city posted results of his goats work on their Web site, Searcy says more municipalities have contacted him. He is now looking at city-owned clean up sites as far away as Greenville, S.C.

The Searcys are now considering moving to a remote area of western North Carolina to expand their goat operation. Land is too valuable here for what we are doing, he says. To expand, or even to continue to come close to meeting demand for their service, he says, will require a new location.

In the meantime, Cheryl Searcy says they just keep answering the phone as more and more people want to know how these natural born weed eaters work.