

Four-Legged Mowers: Goats are Green, Economical Alternative for Clearing Land

By CHRIS ALDRIDGE, *Kentucky Proud Connection*

CAMPBELLSBURG, Ky. - Before last spring, David Neville always cleaned up his farm the old-fashioned way.

Neville had invasive weeds to eradicate, but he didn't want to use herbicides.

"It took a lot of time and expense," he said. "I thought, 'There's got to be a better way.'"

So last spring, Neville called Tess Caudill, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's sheep and goat marketing specialist.

"I got some goats for my farm, and I talked to her about using them to clear out some invasive species," Neville said.

Caudill had used about 300 goats from Texas to clean up a 200-acre farm of her own.

"It is really amazing how goats can clean up land," Caudill said, calling the practice "very 'green' and pretty cool to see the difference they make."

Neville, who owns Capstone Angus farm and produce market, a Kentucky Proud member near Campbellsburg, said his goats did such a good job on his farm that it gave him the idea to start a new business using his goats to clean hard-to-mow properties.

"It just kinda made sense," he said. "It's a ready-made solution to a problem."

With his own goats too young for a commercial demonstration, Neville partnered with Al Dilley of Goat Browsers, a Kentucky Proud business in Glasgow, to clear a portion of Neville's Hillsboro Ranch in Henry County, which has a good mix of woodland and pasture.

"I brought Tess out to see if it was reasonable to do this," Neville said. "We were wading through briars and weeds up to our waists."

"This could be a great niche for a select few goat producers in our state," Caudill said. "It wouldn't have a huge impact on the industry. What it could have a huge impact on is the environment if we can use goats on

a regular basis to take the place of machines and chemicals."

Dilley and Neville fenced off a 1.74-acre demonstration plot with a portable electric fence, and Dilley left a herd of 19 goats inside for 20 days during October.

The difference was striking (see before-and-after photos).

Before (above) and after the nearly three-week project.

(Kentucky Department of Agriculture photos)

"The goats made a good, positive, significant difference," Neville said. "My wife, for example, who's kind of a layperson when it comes to goats, said, 'I can't believe what kind of job they did.'"

"It would've taken several men several days using a lot of chemicals and a lot of machine work to do what cost us 25 cents an hour."

The demonstration impressed Henry County extension agent Levi Berg, who told Neville he wants to hold a goat-clearing field day at Hillsboro Ranch this spring.

"It's a totally green project," Dilley said.

"The only fuel used is diesel to get [the goats] here and back."

Dr. Ken Andries, a small ruminant specialist at Kentucky State University specializing in goats, made the drive from Frankfort to see the ranch before and after the demonstration. He is currently working to



assess the potential of grazing as an organic weed management tactic.

Another guest was Jason Canuel, assistant director at Louisville Metro Parks, which is reportedly having trouble controlling invasive species, such as honeysuckle, at some of its older parks, like Cherokee.

"They looked, their eyes got big, and they said, 'We can't believe this!'" Neville said of the difference. "Once they see it with their own eyes, that will do the selling for us."

"Some folks think this is some new wild idea. But you can actually go on Amazon.com and rent goats. If it's on Amazon, it's pretty mainstream."



Last fall was just the first in the three-year project on the same tract at Hillsboro Ranch.

"We're gonna bring the goats back the next two years and evaluate the difference over three years," Neville said "That's what this project is about – generating interest.

"Al has the expertise; my background is marketing. The opportunity is out there. It's all around us, especially being this close to Louisville."

Dilley said potential customers include city and county governments, such as Metro Parks; state parks; cemeteries; and landfills.

"I want to show these folks what they [goats] can do," Dilley said. "It takes three browsing periods to clear an area for good."

Dilley said goats thrive on eating "undesirable" plants, such as kudzu, honeysuckle, poison ivy, and poison oak. They pull the plants up by the roots as they eat, which prevents their spread.

"They eat mostly bad stuff," Neville said. "Our theory is in two to three years, the pasture will look like grass you sowed. All the goldenrod and weeds will be gone."

Neville said goats are a green, cost-effective alternative to traditional weed control.

"What do you do to control invasive species?" Neville asked. "Do you spray chemicals on it, use fuel to cut it, or put goats on it?"

"We can take goats, contain them, and clean places you can't get to with a machine. Goats can go places even a helicopter can't go. And all they leave behind are hoof prints and 'organic fertilizer.'"

Neville said goats are used out West to keep the understory clear in forests to prevent fires. "They get rid of the fuel for the fire," he said.

"Goats also work for pennies on the hour," Neville added. "They're basically on the clock 24 hours a day without a cell phone or a Pabst Blue Ribbon in hand."

"We use wethers, which are castrated males, so they're not interested in girlfriends or making babies. They're just there to eat and sleep."



Questions

1. What is the main idea of this article?
2. How are goats a greener alternative to traditional land cleaning methods? Use two specific examples from the text.
3. How much do the goats cost to clear land?
4. How could goats be used in urban areas?
5. How do goats prevent forest fires?
6. Why do goats need to return to an area multiple times?

