

Sat Aug 30, 2008

Christmas tree farm highlights research project

From our news staff

A pasture walk Sept. 9 at 7 p.m. will showcase an Upper Bern Township research project using sheep in place of mowers on a Christmas tree farm.

The Freymoyer Christmas Tree Farm, 3006 Mountain Road, on the border between Upper Bern and Tilden townships, is studying how grazing sheep can be used in mature Christmas tree fields.

The walk is sponsored by Southeast Project Grass and Penn State Extension-Berks County.

For more information, contact Dan Ludwig at 717-274-2597, extension 119; or e-mail him at dan.ludwig@pa.usda.gov.

FARM AID - KEEP AMERICA GROWING!

Jeremy Freymoyer

Hamburg, PA



Jeremy Freymoyer of Freymoyer Christmas Tree Farm in Hamburg, PA, took some time out of one of the busiest weeks of the year to talk with Farm Aid about diversification, innovation and keeping a family tradition alive. Jeremy is a member of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), a Farm Aid-funded group that is one

of the largest member-based sustainable farming organizations in the country. PASA will be having its 18th annual Farming for the Future conference, hosted by Pennsylvania State University, in early February 2009.

When Jeremy Freymoyer's great grandfather began planting Christmas trees seventy-five years ago, he may not have imagined that the farm would be thriving today; but four generations later, it remains a large and successful farm, still in the hands of his family.

Although Jeremy manages the 125 acre Freymoyer Christmas Tree Farm in Hamburg, PA, it's very much a family business, owned by his mother and operated with lots of help from his sister.

"It's a way to keep the farm in the family," Jeremy said about his choice to devote his livelihood to the family business

Consumers generally see these trees in December, looking like, well, a Christmas tree. Sometimes they pick them out and cut their own, while other times they buy pre-cut trees from a lot. The Freymoyer Farm offers both options. Jeremy explained what the process of growing trees throughout the rest of their lives entails, exactly.

"Our trees are planted as four year olds," Jeremy said, "so they're grown from seed [in a nursery], and then transplanted [to the field in the spring] and grown for another three to four years."

During the spring, Jeremy also practices integrated pest management to keep the trees healthy, and applies mulch. In early July, the trees begin to get sheared, which means that they gradually get cut into more of a Christmas tree shape.



While primarily a farm devoted to growing Christmas trees, Jeremy and his family have diversified the farm far beyond spruces and firs. Currently, there are twelve acres of trees, twenty acres of hay, and some space devoted to small grain production. The hay and grains act as a steady source of income throughout the year, since Christmas

trees are the quintessential seasonal crop.

Jeremy also has used some creative solutions toward making the family farm more sustainable. Most recently, using a grant from Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), he has started using sheep and goats to graze the weeds and keep the grass trimmed right around the trees.

"It was really a marriage of utility," Jeremy said. "My neighbor down the road has sheep and goats so we came up with trying to pasture the sheep in the Christmas trees." When asked if there are any drawbacks, Jeremy laughed; "When they eat the trees!"

Normally, Jeremy explained, a Christmas tree would not be a sheep or a goat's first choice of food. He has to move them around and make sure there's always a fresh supply of grass and clover on the ground, which they'll happily eat. When the animals are pastured, Jeremy keeps them enclosed with an electric fence around the Christmas trees. By the time people come to shop, however, the fence is gone, and the sheep are enclosed in a pen. However, for interested customers, the animals are an added attraction to their tree picking expedition.

"There are a lot of people who have not had that sort of interaction," Jeremy said. "[They] are excited to see where food comes from, how things are grown, that carrots come out of the ground!"

The project with the sheep and goats is just a few years old, and soon Jeremy hopes to expand to pasturing them in other areas of the farm with other types of vegetation. In today's changing agricultural climate, Jeremy's creative innovations towards sustainability should keep his great grandfather's farm strong and thriving -- maybe for another four generations!

Sheep Industry News

Sheep Help Usher in the Holiday Season

By: Becky Talley

(December 1, 2008) “Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree, of all the trees most lovely...”

Whether decorating a Christmas tree, singing about one in a carol or just enjoying the many displays that contain one, there is no doubt that the Christmas tree is the most recognized symbols of the holiday season.

For those lucky enough to visit a farm this year to find a tree, a surprise may be in store. In between rows of trees waiting to be taken home, there may be some interesting hoof prints- no, they didn't come from eight tiny reindeer. They actually came from sheep going their job to keep vegetation down and the trees healthy for another holiday season.

Jeremy Freymoyer, of Freymoyer Tree Farm in Hamburg, PA., is no stranger to the sight of wooly weed eaters roaming through his lots-he is now in his second year of a grant that is allowing him to use sheep and goats for a targeted grazing project in his tree stands.

Freymoyer, who puts a large focus on sustainable land management, grows both firs and spruce on 12 acres of his 125 acre farm. Each acre contains about 1,750 trees.

“We have a lot of trees,” Freymoyer relates.

But along with the large amount of trees comes management issues. The grass in those lots much be taken care of somehow, by either mowing or chemical control, neither of which Freymoyer feels are efficient practices for his operation.

“We don't use tillage or herbicides as intensively, unlike many tree farms, though we do use glyphosate (herbicide) around the small trees. As a function we have a lot of grass around the tree fields. Mowing can be a big expense,” he says.

Luckily, Freymoyer knew a sheep and goat farmer in the area, Mike Hartman, and together they came up with an innovative idea to use sheep and goats to control vegetation and invasive weed species on his property.

The project was funded through a grant offered through the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, which provided cost-share services to help with the project by providing fencing, etc.

As this is a fairly new concept in targeting grazing, it has been a learn-as-they-go process.

“The first year they were just learning how to make it work and manage the sheep” says Dan Ludwig, project advisor and National Resources Conservation Service’s grazing and grassland specialist in southeastern Pennsylvania

During the first year, Freymoyer and Hartman put yearlings out in the lots and found that they were fairly hard on the trees.

“Last year was warm with a lot of flies; they would bed under the trees and break the lower branches. As a Christmas tree producer, a limb of a tree a foot off the ground has value to me,” Freymoyer relates.

“It’s been interesting,” says Hartman, “One thing we learned real quick, you don’t put yearlings in Christmas trees. The body size is too big, especially in the trees that have a tendency to break branches.”

To solve this problem, the second year of the project used lambs that were born in early spring, which has less of an impact as they were smaller.

However, it was noticed this year that when the sheep began to run low on grasses they began to browse on the trees.

“This year we noticed some random browse. It seemed to be associated with a relationship to where they were watered. Browsing was heavier in that area,” he says.

To combat this, next year, the sheep will run in larger plots, giving them more room to roam and more accessibility to forage.

“I think bigger is better. They really need to move in for a couple of days and then get out,” Freymoyer says. “It’s subject to timing, moving them quickly and getting forage out at the right time.”

However, despite the challenges, both the land and the sheep were able to reap the benefits of the grazing project, which has been a factor for Freymoyer choosing to continue it for a third year.

“I have used the sheep as a means, at least in the large trees, we don’t have to worry about mowing in sections,” he relates.

According to Freymoyer, the sheep were successful in keeping the undesirable vegetation down in the tree fields, providing a natural fertilizer and were instrumental in encouraging more robust grass and native species growth.

He also used goats in other areas of his property for invasive species control and overgrown tree control in some of his more mature trees, which has opened up space in those lots without a lot of labor on Freymoyer’s part and provided a habitat for native birds.

“In the winter, the birds we release love it,” he says.

According to Ludwig, having success in the tree fields was only one of the goals of this project.

“The other spin of the project was while trying to keep the grass down, what would be the affect on the market lambs?” says Ludwig.

For Hartman, the project successfully gave him something that all producers need: cheap forage and a return on his lambs.

“It gave me more pasture land-free grass. The return on the lamb was decent after what we put in, which I don’t think is too shabby,” says Hartman, adding that, at most he spent 45 minutes per week on labor during the project. “Labor intensive it was not,” he relates.

In addition, the tree farm provided Hartman with a market for the lambs that were used in grazing.

“Most of the lambs were purchased by people who came to see the Christmas trees. Everybody that got lambs last year has put orders in already this year,” he says.

For Hartman, however, the project is also about helping out and informing as many people as possible about the uses of targeted grazing.

“The biggest thing was one neighbor helping another neighbor out and relaying the benefits and information to other producers,” he says.

Freymoyer has now hosted two pasture walk days on his property, one during each year of the project, to inform anyone interested in the use of small ruminants for grazing plans.

“Everyone from Menonites to urban farming folk came,” says Freymoyer.

According to Ludwig, these pasture walks also drew other Christmas tree farmers and producers that were looking at the different ways they can use their sheep and goats, a small, but growing, group of producers.

“It definitely had sparks of interest. Some were small backyard people looking to get into goats and sheep, thinking ‘this is an interesting way to use these guys’” he said, adding that he has heard of at least one other project that is planning on grazing sheep in orchards.

Freymoyer agrees that grazing in orchards or nurseries, where the branches are higher, and thus less susceptible to browse, may have greater promise.

As for his operation, he is hoping the third year of the project, and the knowledge from each previous year, will yield less browse damage, giving him more of a reason to make targeted grazing a permanent part of his operation.

“If we can get it (grazing) to point as something we don’t have to worry about, then it has value. Do I think we can do better? Yes. Are we going to try it again? Yes.”

