

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 woolly 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.”

