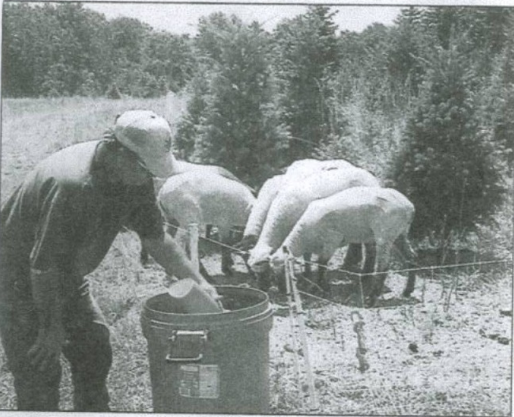


Sheep Browsing Draws Two Farmers Closer

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HAMBURG, Pa. — With a few bucks, a few sheep, and a lot of grass, two Berks County farmers have each rediscovered the virtues of being good neighbors.



Hartman feeds the sheep grain in the Christmas tree farm. Photos by Chris Torres

Mike Hartman, a sheep and goat farmer, and Jeremy Freymoyer, a fourth generation Christmas farmer, have forged a partnership that uses the best assets of Hartman's farm and gives Hartman more room for his growing herd of 70 sheep.



The sheep can clear an area of almost an acre in a little more than two weeks.

Through a \$4,500 grant, Freymoyer uses six of Hartman's sheep to browse and graze weeds on his Christmas tree farm.

Weeds and grasses are part of sheep and goat's diet. Many farmers, in fact, use the animals as a substitute for herbicides and pesticides and as a way to generate more cash.

For Freymoyer, using the sheep is more about helping out a friend than putting more money in his pocket.

Two years ago, he returned to Berks County after the death of his father, a lifelong Christmas tree farmer.

For most of his life, farming was not in the cards. He spent many years in Argentina as a tour guide in some of the world's best flyfishing grounds. Compared to the hustle and bustle life of Pennsylvania, Argentina was like living on another planet. Freymoyer lived on 250,000 acre ranches with livestock-wrangling Gauchos. Making a phone call was an adventure. He noted a typical call to the U.S. would require having to go through four different exchanges to finally get a call through.

When his father died, Freymoyer had the reins of the farm handed to him. But what he saw when he came back home was quite a scene. Weeds, weeds, and more weeds, growing alongside the Christmas trees.

"The place was a mess," he recalls.

Freymoyer spent a lot of time and a lot of money cleaning the place up by mowing grasses and applying herbicides and pesticides.

He heard a little about sheep being used as browsers in California. But he never thought it would be beneficial to his operation.

Why? Freymoyer explained a typical Christmas tree farm requires a lot of herbicide treatment, depending on its location, to prevent weeds and other invasive plants from competing with the trees for ground nutrients. His location, however, in northern Berks County, is a place he said is less conducive to it.

There was also the worry of damage. In the Christmas tree business, damaged trees can set a farmer back many years. So the risk of having his trees damaged by browsing sheep is something he doesn't like to think about.

Still, putting sheep on the fields was some-

than for his neighbor's. "Mike needed some room for his sheep and I wanted to help him out," Freymoyer said.

Hartman already had success using sheep on other land he farmed, so he knew the animals could be useful.

He convinced his friend and this past spring, Freymoyer applied for a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to get things going. In April, the grant was approved and six sheep were moved in.

Freymoyer bought portable solar powered fences to keep the sheep in certain areas. The animals have already been rotated to several plots and the differences between a browsed plot and one that is not can already be seen. "They can eat," Hartman said.

But it's had its challenges too. Some of the trees have been nearly destroyed because of the browsing animals and for a Christmas tree farmer, destroyed trees can set you back many years.

According to Dan Ludwig, coordinator for project grass and grazing specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the project is the first of its kind that he knows of in the state. It makes it particularly unique he said, considering the sheep are browsing in a Christmas tree farm—something he said he has never seen before. Ludwig is organizing a pasture field walk later this month to highlight the farm. "I can't say I've ever seen it anywhere else," Ludwig said. "I hope farmers learn that there are other options out there besides spending money on herbicides and pesticides."

Freymoyer is not totally sold on the idea of having sheep on his farm. But he said he will give it time. "It's a challenge, but we'll see how everything works out in the end," he said. "It's too early to say anything because it hasn't been a lot of time."

If anything, the partnership has brought he and Hartman closer together.

In an area where encroaching development has eaten up hundreds of acres of farms, the two say they see their friendship and partnership as something that is needed to keep each other in business.

For Hartman, it's what being a neighbor is all about. "We're neighbors working together and that's what neighbors should be doing."