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## When a fence is not a fence... pilot testing of Norway's virtual containment system underway

A herd of lively, hungry goats collectively known as The Munch Bunch, seemed totally unfazed last week as an audience gathered to view their performance as 'experimental service livestock.'



Featured in a pilot project in rural Center City, these goats were the star attraction last Friday as some 30 visitors gathered at a farmstead on Little Lake.

The acres within the Stig Larson Family Partnership parcel have stands of prickly ash and buckthorn that the owners really want to eradicate, and these animals were only too happy to help out.

The Munch Bunch business co-owner, Allyse Sorensen, led the crowd on a hike through spotty rain showers to where the herd was collectively chowing down. They had cleared a small area between a grassland and a wetland. Nobody was roaming or wandering off. Sorensen pointed out how the collar device worn by each goat emits a tone that the goats pay attention to. Once the electronic fenceline was breached, the collar will be giving the goat a small shock if he doesn't dash back to the herd.



Sorensen explained Munch Bunch goats are being used in a grant-funded evaluation of the technology of "Nofence" a company born in Norway about five years ago. There are hopes of having the virtual containment system available commercially here by summer 2023.

The demonstration site on Little Lake was hosted by the Sustainable Farming Association along with the U of M and the Ecological Service Livestock Network.

Think of how reliance on herbicides can be reduced if invasives can be eradicated using browsing animals. Portions of land no longer viable ecologically will heal themselves from the negatives of artificially introduced invasives. The hassles and expense putting up and taking down fenceline will be a thing of the past.

Sorensen said she hoped this session would be inspirational as people wander throughout the landscape and observe no fencing.

Attendees for the workshop came from Wisconsin, Iowa and southern Minnesota. All are seriously giving thought to whether virtual fencing would work for their livestock operations and/or land management plans. Most of the attendees indicated they own goats, but a couple said they raise sheep and about a third of the group were considering virtual fence for their cattle and dairy cows.

One participant was representing the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The Munch Bunch won a grant from SARE, with support from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and USDA.

An independent consultant will crunch the numbers and make a report on the practicality and benefits of the Nofence system in a summary due February 2023.

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The Munch Bunch has been hired out for years already, to do “targeted grazing” on federal, city and county parks and other open lands. They have a spotless resume of enthusiastically browsing invasive vegetation in dozens of locations in Minnesota and west Wisconsin.

On this rolling, wood and grass-covered farmstead the goat herd was contained and controlled using one cellphone and a special app.

Seversen spoke of no longer having to spend hours erecting portable fencing, battling the undergrowth and being bitten by bugs. There’s no sloshing through low ground or getting your clothes snagged and ripped.

Because the individual collars have a GPS inside, the herder knows exactly where animals are. They appear on the phone screen as icons and the humans in charge can track each signal.

The grazing area, (also outlined on the app monitor in bottom photo,) can be reduced or enlarged drawing with your fingertip. Sorensen explained there are a maximum of 39 electronic “posts” the containment system is connected by and showed how easily the grazing zone can be enlarged or reduced. There is no manual labor involved.

Sorensen further explained that it doesn’t take long for the animals to learn the system. They quickly figure out the tone foretells a small shock, if they don’t change positions and get back with the group.

There are 35,000 collars purchased at this time, which are assigned to animals in the U.K., Europe and Scandinavia mostly.

The Scottish Farmer publication awarded Nofence its AgriScot Innovation Award last year.

## Life



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