

Targeted Grazing Turns an Invasive Plant Problem into an Opportunity

Tara Mulhern Davidson

Prairie grasslands are resilient; however, invasive plants present a real threat to the biodiversity and productivity of Saskatchewan's rangelands. When managing invasive weeds like leafy spurge, it is better to use a combination of tools to combat the spread, rather than a single method. This is known as integrated pest management and includes prevention and monitoring; cultural control such as mowing; chemical control including herbicides; and biological control like grazing or using natural pests to keep weeds in check.

Lee Sexton, manager of Sexton Grazing and Consulting based out of Hanley, Saskatchewan says that targeted grazing is gaining traction as an effective way to mitigate unwanted plants. "You'll see leafy spurge and I see nothing but opportunities," Sexton says. "Grazing weeds can be nutritious and palatable. I get excited when I see an infestation," he adds.

Sexton says it's not always commonplace for the public to think of grazing for weed control. "For some folks, it's a real paradigm shift," he says.

He has set up targeted grazing everywhere from extensive prairie pastures in the South of the Divide area to city landscapes. He also notes that targeted grazing works on reclamation sites, gravel pits, oil fields and mining sites—particularly in areas where fire management is a concern.

"The places that I get called out to are the ones that are hard to get to," says Sexton. "Sensitive areas, high water tables, terrain that is unmanageable for spraying," he lists.

"Cities seem to be really receptive to [targeted grazing] but I see the need in the rangelands and that's where my focus is," he says. "You're helping people that actually care for the land and appreciate what you're doing."

Sexton uses a variety of livestock to eat weeds, including: sheep, goats, horses and cattle. He says it's surprising how cattle can and will eat weeds, but he finds goats are versatile for many areas and they usually eat a lower proportion of grass—a selling point with ranchers.

"Goats are better browsers and will take on more of the noxious-type weeds because they can withstand more tannins and alkaloids in their diet," Sexton affirms.

He also says you can push a sheep to graze a diet that is 60 to 65 per cent of leafy spurge, whereas a goat will eat up to 75 or 80 per cent of their diet or more. "I like to get at least two passes to get as much regrowth and stress the weedy species as much as possible," he says, which helps weaken the plants' root systems.

Sexton prefers to take the goats out twice a day to "power eat" for morning and evening intervals.



Lee Sexton herds goats along the Wood River in southern Saskatchewan where they are tasked with grazing leafy spurge. Photo courtesy of Tara Mulhern Davidson

"The goats tank up, then the animals settle and ruminate for a bit, then head out again to graze," he says and adds that it's a bit like a buffet.

Sexton notes that goats do need diversity in their diet to help with digestion. "I let them self-medicate. Once they get to a point where they are full of spurge and need something else, I'll point them to something that cattle don't eat as much—including snow berry and wolf willow," he says.

He uses simple and inexpensive electric fencing, often making use of what is already on-site. Sexton typically adds a single electric strand 10 inches up and 10 inches out around an existing three or four-strand fence. Premade fence insulators are available but he likes to bend black poly pipe, like previously-used water line, to extend the electric wire up and away from the fence.



Lee Sexton installs an electric wire 10 inches up and 10 inches out from existing barbed wire fence to help keep small ruminants in. Commercial posts and insulators exist; however, Sexton prefers to recycle used poly water line to bend into an effective wire holder. (Photos courtesy of Lee Sexton).

When he needs to pen his animals, he will set up a night pen made out of electrified net fence. He also uses livestock guard dogs to help keep his herd safe.

Sexton emphasizes that water availability for small ruminants is very important. "If there is water available in places where [the goats] can accommodate a lower trough, that makes it easier."

continued on page 52



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Targeted Grazing
cont. from pg. 51

While fencing is a good tool, Sexton prefers herding from horseback and relies on his border collie dogs to achieve results. "It's very low impact on horseback," he says. "The alternative is to be on foot and I'm too darn lazy to be doing that sort of thing," he chuckles.

There is funding available through Saskatchewan's Farm Stewardship Program for invasive plant biocontrol and targeted grazing. Sexton adds that, in the past, he has been open to trading things or making other arrangements with producers to help offset cash costs.

There are a lot of considerations for targeted grazing, including: animal health, stockmanship and negotiating agreements with land owners. Sexton takes his job seriously and is currently working to complete his Targeted Grazier

Certification offered through the Society for Range Management.


"It's a learning process and a teaching process," he explains. "It's quite a thing to go out on other people's lands and I try to respect that and keep things low impact and be as respectful to their lands as possible," he says.

Invasive species aren't disappearing anytime soon, however Sexton is working to change the way they may be viewed. "Targeted grazing is environmentally-friendly, natural and regenerative," he says. "Every time I go out, I try to learn more about how we can control weeds through grazing."

Sexton's Targeted Grazing Tips

- Not all species can co-graze. For

example, sheep should not graze bison pastures because there is a risk of transmission of malignant catarrhal fever (MCF) from sheep to bison.

- Use the right tool for the job. For example, some graziers may prefer to use sheep but if the job requires controlling a lot of woody vegetation, goats will be more effective.
- You need a landing spot where you can go if you don't have a job or if something gets cancelled. It is also important to isolate animals for 48 hours post-grazing to allow weed seeds to move through the rumen.
- Some argue electric fencing is ineffective, but the fence works as long as animals have adequate forage. If you leave enough to eat, it is not a problem. 

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