

Experts agree - sheep benefit the environment

It used to be that unfavorable publicity was about the only type of coverage the U.S. sheep industry got. But the tide has changed, say noted authorities, especially when it comes to the impact of sheep on the environment.

In his Jan. 16 address at the American Sheep Industry Convention in Nashville, Dr. Hudson Glimp, range specialist, University of Nevada, told attendees that sheep are increasingly being viewed as environmental enhancers in his home state.

"If you want a sheep grazing permit in Nevada, I can get it for you in two weeks, and you'll get an increase in animal unit months," said Glimp. "But if you're trying to get cattle on federal land, or increase the number of cattle you're currently running, forget it... they're begging people to bring on the sheep."

Federally owned lands aren't the only ones which benefit from sheep. Glimp said sustainable agriculture research confirms that including sheep pastures in crop rotation systems increases soil fertility, decreases soil erosion and interrupts pest cycles.

Grazing sheep on wheat pastures, turnip plants at least 60-days-old, and alfalfa aftermath has a two-fold effect; the sheep enrich the soil with their manure and add lean meat to their frames by eating unbelievably cheap feed.

(Turnips yield 1,500 grazing days per acre at a cost of \$45 or 3 cents per head per day at a time of year - November and December - when producers typically have to feed their sheep or feed them out.)

"Remember: You are in the land-use business, not ranching... you have to have that attitude," said Glimp. "Through the use of crop rotation and pasture, soil erosion is a non-problem on our farm. Some people count crops per acre. I count 'rear ends' per acre. I want that (sheep) manure."

Large companies, wildlife and sheep producers all stand to profit when sheep and silviculture are mixed. Dr. Steve Sharrow, professor of rangeland resources, Oregon State University, said sheep are favored over herbicides when it comes to reducing the amount and growth of weeds in forests.

In Canada, sheep producers are paid \$5 per month per ewe for the use of an estimated 80,000 sheep which graze timber harvested areas where fast-growing weeds threaten to deprive young trees of life-sustaining sunlight.

Although cattle can do the job, sheep are preferred because they do it more efficiently by getting to places cattle cannot. Furthermore, replacing spraying with sheep saves money.

Sharrow said studies have proven that trees in areas where sheep graze have a greater growth rate, ranging from nine to 61 percent above average. Wildlife such as elk and deer also benefit from the improved quality of forage, a fact confirmed by their higher bone marrow fat content.

Studies continue to allay any fears surrounding the impact of sheep on the environment and its wild inhabitants. Sharrow said the most commonly asked questions are: "Do sheep transmit diseases to wildlife, will they increase the hunger of wildlife by eating too much of the feedstuffs (that wildlife eat), and will they eat the trees?" The answer to all, said Sharrow, is "No."

Sheep can be employed in more than forestry. Pacific Gas & Electric is considering the use of sheep to keep weeds under its transmission lines under control, a chore which currently costs the company \$100 million annually.

Dr. John Walker of the Agriculture Research Service U.S. Sheep Experiment Station, Dubois, Idaho, said that proof of potential grazing opportunities for U. S. sheep exists. An estimated \$200 million is spent annually on vegetation control in the

United States with the Bureau of Land Management spending \$3 million per year and the U.S. Forest Service spending \$4 million per year.

Walker said sheep also could be employed to fight the war on noxious weeds, especially leafy spurge which infests 4,600 additional acres every day for a total of 1,500,000 of infested acreage annually.

"Industrial companies will pay for sheep (grazing) services," added Walker. "It's not only cost effective, it also makes them look 'green'. It's about appearances somewhat."