

Goats Provide Healthy, Economical Weed Control

KIRKSVILLE, MO. Goats are natural brush control agents, according to Charlotte Clifford-Rathert, assistant professor and state extension small ruminant specialist with Lincoln University Cooperative Extension and Research.

The veterinarian spoke at the recent Missouri Livestock Symposium in Kirksville. University of Missouri Extension and the Missouri Livestock Symposium Committee organize the annual event.

Landowners are seeing the value of small ruminants for many reasons. According to the 2007 USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service census, the number of goats in the U.S. increased by 24 percent from 2002 to 2007, making this the fastest-growing segment of the livestock industry.

Clifford-Rathert, a graduate of the MU College of Veterinary Medicine, is conducting a three-year study on the value of goats in controlling noxious weeds and invasive exotic plant species while improving wildlife habitat. She uses four breeds at four sites: an organic farm at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, the USDA's Elsberry Plant Materials Center in Lincoln County, and Crowder College in southwestern Missouri. She also plans to examine the effect goats have

on weed control in orchards, vineyards, around chicken houses and in lagoon lots.

Goats reduce the need for mowing while providing an environmentally friendly alternative to herbicides. They save on fuel costs and can control weeds in poor terrains that cannot be reached by machines. As a general rule, goats prefer browsing on brush rather than grass, making them complementary to cow herds that prefer grass.

By using rotational grazing, goat owners can manage grazing heights and reduce parasite levels, she said.

How many goats should you stock? Rates vary by pasture quality, rainfall, time of the year, soil fertility and other considerations, including predators.

For predator control, Clifford-Rathert and other goat owners are finding donkeys and llamas to be alternatives to dogs. She said donkeys should be less than a year old when chosen to guard goat herds and males should be castrated.

Goats are known for their climbing ability and curiosity, making them a fencing challenge. Portable fencing is needed to allow rotational grazing. Fence types include electric netting and poly-wire electric fences. Δ