

USING GOATS, SHEEP AND CATTLE FOR WEED CONTROL

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"Birnam Wood"
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INTRODUCTION

I can't say that I was not warned about this talk, but the implications of the subject did not sink in for a while. It is an enormous subject and I have no intention of trying to cover all aspects, but rather will concentrate on problems in our own area, namely basalt hill country at Coolah, NSW.

I am not a "Greenie" but would like to be thought of as a conservationist and good manager of the land. The "good manager" part has been sorely tested by a very long battle with St John's wort with the wort winning a couple of major victories. We still plan to counter-attack again, using the aerial pasture establishment technology developed by Malcolm Campbell. Having already done trials on our property we know this is possible, but costly. What we have to decide is the point of cost effectiveness.

THE WEED PROBLEM ON "BIRNAM WOOD"

I should list our major weeds in order of their importance. St John's wort is by far the worst. Then follows Bathurst burr, Saffron thistle with Patersons curse a minor problem as is star thistle. Blackberry, sweet briar, dogwood and sifton bush, were problems but since the introduction of cashmere goats are now endangered species. If we were into blackberry jam we would have to remove the goats. Variegated thistle is also now of far less importance as the goats will select it as it runs to head.

In mountainous and hilly country it is difficult to achieve even grazing. Crash and rotational grazing programs are virtually impossible due to the size of the paddocks. It is difficult to subdivide the country into small enough areas for reasons of terrain and available water, so various weeds that can be controlled by heavy grazing in small areas will not respond to grazing management in larger paddocks. St John's wort thrives on rougher parts of a paddock which the stock do not pressure in their grazing and will continuously reappear in these places while the more accessible areas are kept grazed down. St John's wort does not like heavy grazing.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE WEED CONTROL

A balance of stock that will handle all the areas and vegetation in this environment is necessary. Some of our steepest country was very heavily covered with blackberry and briar, with wort underneath. The wort had very adverse affects on the sheep causing photosensitization. When the sheep were removed in the summer the blackberry and briar took over.

Cattle were being run reasonably successfully on this country but were avoiding the blackberry and briar. I knew that if we spent a fortune spraying the blackberry and briar then all we would end up with would be a paddock of wort only partially controlled. And the spraying would be an ANNUAL EVENT!

So cashmere goats were introduced. They are well suited for weed control as they are a hardy animal without needing excessive care and have the added advantage of producing a valuable fleece. The goats have proved

spectacular in controlling the blackberry, briar and variegated thistle amongst other things. They do not like short lush feed and so are very gentle on newly established pasture. They will not touch a phalaris seedling, for example, while there is other food available.

Currently the cashmeres are eating the blackberry, briar, thistle and some longer grasses. The cattle are moving through the wort causing physical damage and eating a bit of everything and pasture seed will germinate under and around the defoliated bushes. Sheep can also be grazed "on and off" if required.

All sheep or all cattle did not work. Cattle and sheep run together were better but still not right. Cashmeres and cattle are ideal, and sheep may be added as well if you want.

Cashmeres are ideal improved pasture renovators as they will trim up a phalaris paddock to look as though a slasher has been used. The cashmeres will do a tidier job and not miss any spots. "Bred on" domesticated wether cashmere goats are becoming available and these would be an easy way to start using goats in your pasture management program.

I was advocating using does to start with, but with a little more experience under my belt, I think the job is more like using wether sheep, as opposed to breeding ewes. I should hasten to add that I don't want to discourage anyone from becoming a cashmere breeder as it is a very worthwhile enterprise.

CONCLUSION

To sum-up, including a cashmere enterprise with cattle and sheep has improved our overall pasture performance and utilisation of available food. Goats when introduced can increase existing stocking rates by over 10%, in terms of DSE, with no effect on grazing pressure. As they totally remove certain weeds and have to rely more on annual weeds, there will of course be more competition. I have removed sheep from a rough paddock, when the grass cut out, but was able to put the same number of goats straight in after them, and run them well.

Don't be afraid of goats, they are very cost effective and rewarding.