

## Profile On Sustainability:



This summer, Police Point Park in Medicine Hat, AB, hosted a herd of about 170 goats. No, they were not a petting zoo. These four-footed vegetation managers had an important role to play.

These goats were contracted to remove Leafy Spurge, a designated noxious weed that landowners should keep from spreading.

### The Problem

Leafy Spurge crowds out more palatable species of plants. It has foul-tasting (to humans and cattle) milky sap that discourages grazing, and gives off poisonous chemicals that keep other plants from growing nearby.

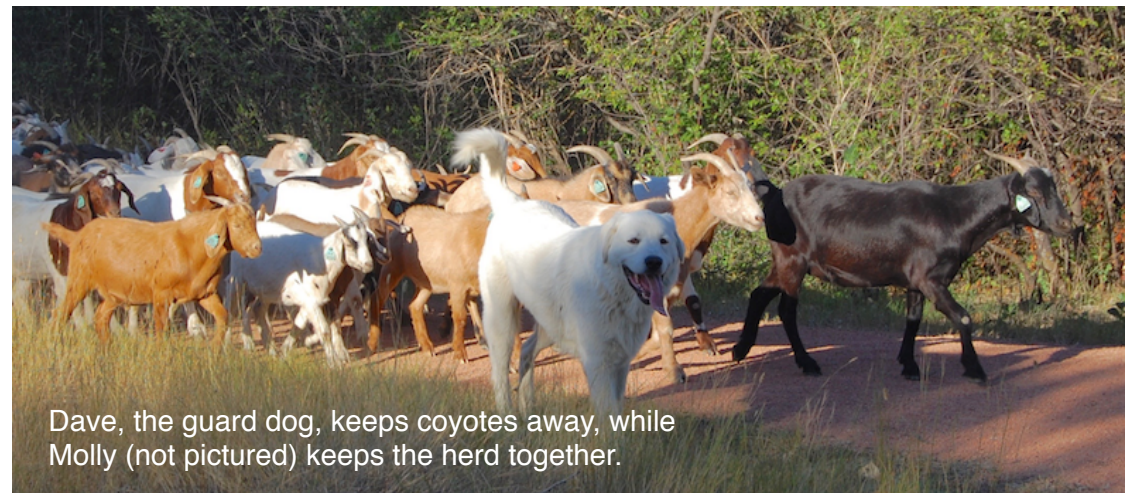
It requires a bit more moisture than is generally found in our dry mixedgrass prairie, so around here, it is confined to the river valley. In more humid areas like the foothills and in Saskatchewan, spurge spreads across the grassland. In these areas, beetles that specialize on eating spurge can be released. Although slow to reproduce, these tiny bugs eventually have a good impact.

However, the beetles are not strong swimmers. These beetles have been released in Medicine Hat, too. However, the South Saskatchewan River generally floods before the beetle numbers can build up.

Chemicals strong enough to kill the spurge also kill nearby vegetation, leaving space that the spurge quickly re-colonizes. And no spray crew can find all the plants among the grass and shrubs.



Leafy Spurge's greenish-yellow flowers and milky sap make ID easy.



Dave, the guard dog, keeps coyotes away, while Molly (not pictured) keeps the herd together.

### **The Solution**

Goats naturally prefer rougher vegetation for food. Shrubs and small trees are their specialty. However, they easily develop a taste for leafy spurge.

Herding dogs, under the guidance of a herder, keep the goats browsing in the most impacted areas. Some small shrubs like snowberry will be eaten along the way, but the spurge is significantly reduced.

With roots reaching several metres into the soil, the spurge does not die after a single setback. The plants gradually lose strength with each session. After about three years, the density of weeds will be greatly reduced and the surrounding grasses can start to recover.

The goats' preference for shrubs can be used to restore grassland that is being overtaken by spreading wolf willow, buckbrush or other shrubs. This has the added benefit of reducing the fire hazard.

The City of Lethbridge has used goats to chew a fireguard between their natural coulees and residential areas. Goats are both more effective and more aesthetically pleasing than either mechanical or chemical removal, and do not require an investment in equipment.

Robert Finck, owner of Magrath-based Creekside Goat Company, is still building up his herd to meet demand. However, he sees significant opportunities for value-added products, particularly halal meat for our growing Islamic population that enjoys eating goat.

### **The Future**

Medicine Hat and nearby areas have enough spurge to keep a herd of goats eating all summer. With considerable need for brush control both in the city and nearby ranches, an opportunity for a local herd seems possible.

Perhaps this could be a local "franchise" for Creekside Goats, or perhaps an independent business. Either way, it would mean better vegetation management.

This could also be an economical entry into ranching for young people.

### **Contact**

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