Goats Used to Destroy Tamarisk on the Walker River Paiute Tribe Reservation

The Walker River Paiute Tribe is trying out an experimental method of eradicating tamarisk on their reservation. The tribe has been battling tamarisk for decades, putting everything from machines to insects to the task, without much luck. So far, it seems they may have found the best control in a herd of goats.

Tamarisk, or salt cedar, is one of the largest noxious weeds in the West. It is not a native plant, but it has adapted well to Nevada's desert climate. One tree can use up to 200 gallons of water per day. It is a deep-rooted plant that pulls salts out of the soil and exudes it out of its leaves, so nothing else can grow around it. For the Tribe's grazing land, that is bad news.

Chuck O'Rourke with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Ed Biggs and Tracey Jean Wolfe with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, joined the battle to help the Tribe combat the weed and restore native vegetation. Wolfe developed a conservation plan outlining the steps to follow, and O'Rourke was successful in obtaining funding to pay for the goats.

Goats have been used successfully on other weeds in the western U.S. Several years ago, one canyon in Idaho could feed 250 cows per month before leafy spurge was found. Leafy spurge crowded out the native grasses and reduced the grazing capacity to 12 cows per month. Chemicals were sprayed on the land, costing $150 per acre. The spray killed the leafy spurge as well as every broadleaf plant growing in the area. "When we looked at the canyon, the leafy spurge was four feet tall. The only animals living in it were snakes, mice and skunks. There were no deer or anything else," said Hugh Bunten of Lakeview, Ore. Bunten set up a grazing plan with the Idaho Resource Conservation District and other government agencies. The new technique he was pioneering worked—the goats stayed in their herd, they ate the leafy spurge and, within three years of return visits, had almost cleared the canyon of the noxious weeds.

In addition, the goat's digestive system kills the seeds of the plants that are eaten, so the germination from seed is greatly reduced. "We go back each year, but now we need only a handful of goats. They have become addicted to the leafy spurge. When turned loose, they mount a regular search and destroy attack on the few remaining noxious plants," Bunten said.

The Walker River Tribe is counting on this same success for their land. About 600 goats were brought in and temporary fences were put up to keep the goats in a confined area about 3 acres in size. Once the goats have done their job attacking the tamarisk in that area, they are moved to another area. About 3,000 acres of tamarisk will be treated. So far, they have done a remarkable job stripping the leaves off of the tamarisk and gnawing at the trunks.

The goats will be brought back next summer for the next treatment. Before that, however, the area will be seeded with native grasses and forbs. Then, the goats will trample the seed into the ground and fertilize it while they are attacking the tamarisk.

If everything goes as hoped, a third treatment won't be needed.