

## Learning from Experience

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In mid-July, after spending every minute of my spare time for 30 days with Michelle Wendell of GOATS Company and her 500 “kids”, the PRIDE grant with NRCS (“Intensive Grazing on The Upper Niobrara River”) has concluded. The sixth and final grazing is complete. Landowners have given their comments in a survey. Biological control insects have been added to two properties. Grass seed has been scattered over every landowner’s project area. The final bills are being paid, reports are being written...and PRIDE knows one thing...this has been a learning experience.

When we barely met the grant application deadline, we assumed that participants would be contiguous with enough invasive weed problems to warrant grazing. Then the goats could easily be walked from site to site. Wrong. Upon hearing that we successfully got the grant funds, we were off to find the landowners that were willing to have the grazing and pay a cost share to be part of the project. In a perfect world, these landowners would have all been neighbors, and all of them would have been on board for all six grazings. Wrong. The first two years of the project involved drought, which meant there was not enough weeds, or any plant growth, to sustain grazing by 500 goats! Not good. Another challenge was moving between landowners. PRIDE members work five days a week, and we assumed goats could be moved Monday through Friday. Wrong. The goats don't care what the calendar says when they are ready to move. It might be Saturday or a holiday, but they still needed to be loaded and hauled to the next smorgasbord to do their job of gobbling up tasty forbs such as Canada thistle, houndstongue, poison hemlock and wild licorice, and leaving the grass species behind for someone else to enjoy.

PRIDE members rose to the challenge, and even though county weed superintendents changed and NRD employees changed, we stayed on task. As a result, the landowners who did participate have been pleased with the project and its results. One landowner requested that the project be extended. However, PRIDE works on new and different projects with each grant, so the completion of the grazing project will lead us to something new and different!

All projects that PRIDE members work on have an educational component, and the grazing project will soon be highlighted on a DVD produced for us by Chris Kelly. In addition to watching the goats in action, viewers can see PRIDE members and read landowner quotes.

Following are my top seven reasons why this has been a great experience for me:

1. Landowners receive great benefits from grant funds.
2. PRIDE members and the intern have made new friendships with the landowners.
3. I saw noxious and invasive weeds disappear right before my eyes.
4. The goats can graze in areas that have fallen timber and branches, and they consume weeds in what is usually considered inaccessible areas.
5. Fertilizing happens naturally.
6. Competitive grasses are growing to compete with the noxious invaders.
7. The “kids” are so darn cute.

As the intern that PRIDE chose to work on this project, I would like to thank the landowners, PRIDE, Upper Niobrara White NRD, and NRCS for providing the funds for this successful grant project. It was a great pleasure to work with Michelle, Angie and Jerry – the graziers. Scientist’s call it research...we call it learning from experience.