

4 of 4 DOCUMENTS

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Weeding out new theories

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Loveland Connection

Cows don't eat weeds, according to conventional thinking.

That's one dilemma behind a noxious weed problem in the United States, where millions of acres are being overrun by non-edible, exotic plants that kill native grasses.

Government agencies and private ranches throughout the nation implement extensive weed management programs to improve grazing areas and wildlife habitat, which usually require expensive herbicide sprays.

But one Loveland woman is turning the conventional thinking in this field upside down.

Kathy Voth is teaching cattle to eat weeds.

She has traveled across the country demonstrating how it works for her company Livestock for Landscape LLC.

"I'm the only one of my kind so far," said Voth, who has worked on 12 projects throughout the United States teaching cattle - and in one case a small herd of buffalo on a Ted Turner-owned ranch - to eat weeds the animals usually avoid.

Voth has taught cattle to eat nine varieties of weeds so far, including Canadian thistle, several varieties of knapweed and black mustard, she said.

Before teaching the cattle to eat the weed, she tests to ensure the plant isn't harmful.

Then, in about a week, Voth introduces the cattle to the new foods, first something more conventional, like alfalfa pellets, and then slowly integrates the weed into their diets.

Once grazing freely, the animals choose to eat whatever weed she has introduced along with their regular forage.

In the broad field of range management, Voth's service may appear like pure fantasy to some people.

She admitted it can be difficult to convince people that cattle can actually eat nuisance plants.

Rob Alexander, agricultural land manager for Boulder County, admitted he was a little skeptical when Voth trained 50 cows to eat late-season diffuse knapweed and then turned them loose in a large pasture.

She received a Boulder County grant last year to apply her work on some of the county-owned open space leased for grazing.

Alexander said, sure, cattle might eat the weed while enclosed in a small area, but would they choose such a meal when given the opportunity to gorge on native grasses?

"They ate the knapweed pretty heavily and that was a surprise," Alexander said.

He said the grazing knocked back the weed substantially and won Voth a second grant to teach the same cattle to eat Dalmatian toadflax this year, as well as to see if the animals pass the learned behavior on to their calves.

"There are some weeds, like diffuse knapweed or Dalmatian toadflax, you just look at them and they are not nutritious and you think that no livestock is going to eat them," Alexander said. "It turns out we are wrong about that."

Voth began using livestock as a land management tool with the Bureau of Land Management.

She first worked on projects using goats to eat fire breaks to help control wildfire.

Then, she began pursuing the practice to stop weeds using cattle, because, largely, many ranchers don't want to keep goats.

"It was easier to teach cows to eat weeds than to teach ranchers to like goats," Voth said.

Though Voth is likely the only person doing such work with cattle, she's actually applying theories by one of her former colleagues and professors, Professor Fred Provenza, at **Utah State University**, who focuses on animal behavior.

The idea is to train animals to forage in a way that better benefits the landscape, such as reducing weeds, supporting biodiversity, and improving habitat for certain species, such as grouse, Voth said.

It also could save ranchers money on weed control.

"I'd really like people to better understand how easy it is to use animal behavior to help us," she said.

Voth began her private company in 2004 when she moved to Loveland.

This year, she began gaining more attention for her work.

She's also planning a way for ranchers and land managers to train cattle using her techniques, so the practice can be more widely available - and so she doesn't have to travel so much.

"I could help them put together their own plan using the computer and phones," Voth said.

Alexander hopes to use Voth's work in a similar way for Boulder County ranchers.

"I think she is going to get real busy, but I hope we are going to do more work with her in the future," he said.

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