

2010 Mini Grant Report: Does' Leap Farm

by George van Vlaanderen, Does' Leap Farm, Bakersfield, VT

In the winter of 2010 we cleared 10 acres of land in order to increase the amount of pasture for our herd of goats. My wife and I own and operate Does' Leap LLC – a goat dairy in Bakersfield, VT which produces 10,000 lbs of cheese yearly from the milk of 50 goats. Our goats are on pasture or browse May – October and are moved to fresh paddocks every 12 hours. After clearing 3-4 acres myself over the 12 year tenure of our farm, I decided I was not up to the task and contracted a feller/buncher (also known as a shearer) and a grapple skidder to complete the job.

The job was completed in just over a week and was managed by Charlie Hancock, a professional forester, working in conjunction with Burlington Electric. Frozen ground reduced the impact of the immense machinery and the operators did an excellent job minimizing damage to shade trees that I had marked ahead of time. The land that was cleared consisted mainly of 30 – 40 year old poplar, hemlock, spruce, and some mixed hardwood, with very little marketable timber. In addition to clearing land, we also cleared the edges of most of our 15 acres of hayland to facilitate better hay drying. All of the trees were skidded whole to a large, truck accessible landing. Trees destined for woodchips and any marketable logs were piled by the use of a slasher. After the cutting was complete, a chipper was moved on to the site and chipped over 1,000 tons of chips onto waiting semi-trucks. We made just over a \$1000 on the job – a good deal in my opinion as I would have been happy to pay someone to do the clearing given the amount of work required.



George and goats check out the scenery. (photo provided)

In the spring, we took a handful of soil samples on the cleared land accounting for changing topography and soil type. Results from the soil tests highlighted that pH would be our biggest challenge (ranging from 4.6 to 5.1). Since we decided to leave the stumps in the ground in order to minimize soil disturbance, we would not be able to spread lime with



A Does' Leap Farm goat browsing. (photo provided)

machinery. After spreading a ton of lime by hand with a shoulder-supported broadcast spreader, I decided to hold off on spreading lime! Despite low pH on the land we have cleared in the past, we have been able to establish healthy stands of orchard grass and white clover.

In May I broadcast a mixture of legumes (3#/acre), perennial rye grass (8#/acre), and forage oats (15#/acre). The forage oats were to serve as a nurse crop as the perennials got established. In general the forage oats came up well while the grass / legume establishment was variable. Past experience indicates that it takes up to 3 years to establish a decent stand.

Despite these variable results, goats grazed all of the cleared land at least once. I estimate that our herd (roughly 7000 lbs live weight or 7 animal units) was on the cleared land the equivalent of two weeks. Stump sprouts provided excellent browse and the goats relished the forage oats. As with seedling establishment, forage productivity varied greatly. Wetter areas predominantly comprised of poplar and mixed hardwoods provided the best forage while pure softwood stands were poor. Small ruminants (goats or sheep) are a must for controlling tree saplings during the first few years if the goal is to establish pasture.

The project has been well worthwhile – minimal cash outlay with the potential for years of quality grazing ahead.

To learn more about the VGFA mini grant program, visit www.uvm.edu/pasture or contact Jenn Colby at (802) 656-0858 or jcolby@uvm.edu. Grant applications are due in the spring, and generally range from \$500 to \$1,000.