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Grazing goats a green alternative to weed control

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Some eco-friendly El Dorado Hills visitors are back for seconds.

For the second year in a row, a herd of goats is chowing down on overgrown foothill turf. The El Dorado Hills Community Services District has re-hired the Goat Grazers, a company that provides the animals for weed abatement, to maintain vegetation and reduce fire danger in EDH parks and open space this summer.



El Dorado County goat rancher Lloyd Kelley's Boar Goats take on the task of devouring the foothill's tall grass. As a result, they reduce the risk of summer wildfires in parks and open spaces. Philip Wood/The Telegraph

"Last year was a success. They do a darn good job," said CSD park supervisor Phil Stamborsky.

So what's the logic behind the livestock? No pesticides, no chemicals, and no weed-eater emissions, explained Goat Grazers owner and herdsman Jesse Smith.

"Goats are more nature-friendly," Smith said.

In addition, "they don't leave a mess, they fertilize the ground, and their hoof action breaks up the soil so that water can more easily permeate," he added.

Besides, the goats can tread places that may not be so comfortable for humans. The first plant they downed upon arrival in EDH was poison oak. "They love that stuff," said Smith.

Smith worked on a similar operation in Wyoming before perfecting his own business at home. Goat Grazers currently manages a herd of 100, which it hopes to eventually triple.

While at work, the nibbling animals are contained with low voltage electric fences (equipped with warning signs for human park-goers). "Once they're shocked, they learn to stay away. But if you leave the fence off and they don't hear the snapping (electrical) sounds, they'll sneak off," Smith said.

For protection, Anatolian Shepherd guard dogs stay with the goats day and night.

The herd is also provided with fresh water and protein supplements.

When the vegetation is cleared and it's time to move on, Smith fashions the fence into a chute and uses dogs to herd the goats into a trailer. The company plans to keep the animals moving through EDH parks all season.

At Wild Oaks Park, where a herd of about 30 are presently grazing, the animals commonly elicit resident reactions.

"We get a lot of 'oohs' and 'aahs' and a lot of questions from people passing by," said Stamborsky. "They think the goats are pretty cool."

The goats will also spend time in Fairchild Park, Bass Lake, and Four Corners. For more information, visit www.goatgrazers.com.

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