



Goats at Sycamore Farms roam around their pen recently. Watsonville residents Brian and Johanna Dodds have started a business using the goats to clear brush from land. Daniel Hindin/Register-Pajaronian

# Bring on the goats

Watsonville couple offers creative alternative for land clearing

*Animals*  
**DANIEL S. HINDIN**  
 OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Goats have long been known for their willingness to eat anything and everything they can fit their jaws around. They are often looked down upon for their voracious appetites and their knack for ruining gardens or anything else of value that is left in their path. But Watsonville residents Brian and Johanna Dodds of Sycamore Farms have found a productive way to take advantage of these hyperactive characteristics.

In the midst of the most devastating fire season in recent memory, with thousands of acres being consumed in such places as Sequoia National Park and throughout Arizona, Colorado and California, people all across the West are becoming more conscious of ways to prevent such disasters.

Of the three factors that contribute to wildland fires — topography, fuel loads and weather — fuel load is the only variable humans have even the least bit of control over. Clearing low-lying brush is one of the most productive ways people can cut down on the potential for quick-spreading fires.

There are many ways to clear brush. Using chemical defoliants or hiring workers for hours of tough labor are two of the most common ways to do so. But chemicals have the potential to contaminate ground water, and much of the most tangled and hard to get brush in the West is poison oak. "You can get workers to do it, but I guarantee they'll be calling in sick (because of poison oak) by the third day," Brian Dodds said.



Sycamore Farms goats clear brush from Ed Clinsky's Trembly Lane property. Daniel Hindin/Register-Pajaronian

Dodds' solution to this problem: goats. No creature on earth is happier to do a land-clearing job. No training is necessary. Just plop them down on a brush-entangled piece of land and they know just what to do. "They're constantly eating themselves out of

jobs," Dodds said.

Upon receiving an order for service, the Dodds set up an electric fence to keep the goats within the designated area, haul the animals to the site in a trailer and let them go to

See GOATS, page 2

## GOATS

From page 1

work. "They just come flying out of (the trailer)," said customer Claudette Goularte of the goats. "It's like a cartoon when you see a gust of wind go by and then all you see is a bunch of bare branches."

Though Goularte's metaphor is a bit exaggerated — the goats could take up to a week or two to work through several acres — their efficiency is something to be admired. Not only can they clear the thickest of low-lying brush, but they also use teamwork to get to otherwise unreachable tree branches by climbing up on top of each other.

While fire prevention is a terrific reason to take advantage of these fervent feeders, Dodd often gets requests for basic land-clearing jobs from people or organizations who need to be able to comfortably walk through their land without having to do some major bushwhacking.

The Santa Cruz City Water Department has used the Sycamore Farm goats for two separate jobs. The most significant job — the clearing of land around the 30-million gallon Bay Street Reservoir — was done in May with the work of 50 goats.

"There were a lot of large rocks that made it very difficult for most types of brush removal," Deputy Water Director Terry Tompkins said. "And with the drinking water nearby and our policy of trying to eliminate the city's use of chemical pesticides and herbicides, we were prompted to use the goats."

Because the reservoir is located in a heavily populated area, Tompkins said he was concerned about potential noise and smell complaints heading into the job. "But there were no complaints," he said. "People actually missed them when the job was done."

Goularte, who, with her husband, has turned her property, Rooster Point, into a beautifully landscaped facility for weddings and corporate events, brought the goats in to clear a two-acre patch of land that she one day hopes to use as an area to keep several ponies.

"It was so thick, we didn't know how we would clear it," Goularte said of the brush that consumed her land. "My husband's brother saw an ad for Sycamore Farms and we figured we'd try it. We had no idea what the terrain looked like, it was so thick. And it was way too thick for people to go in. Even spraying it, you can't get rid of the poison oak."

"It turned out really well. (The goats) were actually entertaining. I wouldn't say there were any drawbacks."

One possible drawback for some jobs is the price of the goats. Some alternative methods can be cheaper, but most customers feel that the price is well worth it.

"Price-wise, it's expensive," Tompkins said. "But weigh that against chemicals and putting employees in compromising situations, and it's the obvious choice. We're satisfied, and we'll use them as often as possible."

Sycamore Farms is located at 107 Paulsen Rd. in Watsonville. The Dodds can be reached at 768-0928. They can be found on the Web at [www.sycamorefarms.net](http://www.sycamorefarms.net).