SHEEP SHEET

The Return to Dibe' Ni'tsaa, Sacred Peak of the North to the Navajo

Sheepdex G-7

by Dr. Lyle G. McNeal, Executive Director, Sheep & Wool Specialist

A unique grazing study was undertaken at Colorado State University's San Juan Basin Research Center (SJBRC) during the summer of 1995. A collaborative effort between Colorado State University (CSU), Utah State University (USU), and a group of Navajo families determined the effect of grazing sheep and goats in SJBRC native range pastures after utilization by cattle. It was anticipated that sheep and goats would provide a biological control instead of chemical herbicides, mechanical methods or fire to reduce the encroachment of oakbrush (Gambel oak, Quercus gambelii). The decrease of oakbrush opened the ground areas for growth of more desirable grasses, forbs and Ponderosa Pine seedlings. Increases in water yields from the watershed resulted.

This demonstration study marked the first time, since the boundaries were established in 1868 for the Navajo Reservation, that Navajo flocks returned to this part of Colorado. Historically the Navajos (or Dine as they call themselves) brought their flocks to graze in the mountains every summer. This ancestral practice rested the land at family homesites and allowed seasonal "monsoonal" rains to renew plants and grasses needed for feed during winter months.

The snowcapped Hesperus Peak that overshadows the SJBRC is called ***Dibe' Ni'tsaa (Big Sheep)*** by the Dine. It is revered as one of four sacred peaks that define traditional Dine territory. Most sheep used in this grazing study are descendants of Spanish Churro sheep brought to America by Conquistadors in the late 1500's. Large flocks of Churros became the food and fiber mainstay of Hispanic colonists who developed the Rio Grande weaving style. These sheep were acquired by the Dine and became the center focus of their economy, their culture and their arts. This was the beginning of the renown Navajo weaving tradition.

The Dine resisted white settlers who came into Navajo territory, and in 1863 Colonel Christopher 'Kit' Carson and his detachment of troops were sent "to subjugate the Indians" by burning their orchards and slaughtering their sheep. Attempts to teach Anglo farming practices to Navajo prisoners were unsuccessful during the 5 year incarceration at Bosque Redondo, NM. After the infamous 'Long Walk' of 1868 back to Fort Defiance, AZ, federal agents gave 2 sheep to every man, woman and child. The Dine took their greatly reduced sheep flocks to various parts of the Reservation.

Sadly, in years to come, these Navajo-Churro sheep faced extinction because federal agents imposed other 'improved' breeds of sheep. Then federal policies during the 1930's and 1940's demanded the reduction of almost 75% of Navajo flocks. By the mid 1970's less than 450 Navajo-Churros were left among the Reservation sheep and goat population, numbering over 500,000. In 1977, Dr. Lyle G. McNeal, professor of sheep and wool science at USU, founded The Navajo Sheep Project (NSP) to rescue the Navajo-Churro Sheep from extinction. USU provided a site to locate the nucleus flock, but operational funds for this effort were made possible by contributions and grants from individuals and foundations. When the nucleus flock numbers increased he began to systematically return breeding stock and shorn wool to Navajo and Hispanic producers and weavers in the southwest.

Dr. McNeal discovered there were no government programs to assist Navajo agro-pastoralists with the education and improvement of their sheep and wool industry. The NSP began seeking grants and donations from foundations, corporations and individuals to provide outreach education in sheep management. A recent grant from the Western Region USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program (SARE) has enabled a team of scientists from USU and CSU to assist Navajo families from four reservation communities, Two Grey Hills, NM, Ganado, Jeddito and Pinon, AZ. The scientists are providing expertise in helping to

develop the sustainability of Navajo agriculture, and improvement of the quality of life within the context of cultural sensitivity. This unique project is holisitic and the priorities and goals originate from the Navajo family cooperators. In addition to innovative sheep and goat husbandry skills, water development, environmentally compatible grazing management systems, enhanced traditional gardening and dye plants, home based business and value-added practices, and alternative marketing options have been identified by the participating Navajo families.

The 1995 grazing study at the SJBRC enabled many Navajo families to bring their flocks to pastures at Hesperus for the summer season, as their ancestors once did. Preliminary results are successful and it is anticipated that other mountain areas infested with oakbrush can be improved through involvement of more reservation families. In addition, this demonstration study included the introduction and use of llamas as eco-friendly guard animals to prevent sheep and goat losses by predators such as coyotes, domestic dogs, lions and bears. The llamas were donated to the NSP and were placed with each of the Navajo cooperator families when the flocks returned to their respective homesites on the reservation in the fall.

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