

Vallie M. Szymanski – Northwoods Humane Society Board Member

I first learned about the benefits of goats and sheep in 2013 when I lived in the Chicago area. As a long time airline employee (Pan Am + United Airlines), I was fascinated with anything to do with aviation and especially Chicago O'Hare Airport. When I worked at United I had the opportunity to work closely with Chicago's Department of Aviation on many interesting projects. I was intrigued with their decision to "hire" goats and sheep and a donkey named Joseph to manage the vegetation on O'Hare property. The "Grazing Herd" last reported for work at O'Hare in June of 2019. Take a moment to read the article that was published on the Fly Chicago website.

Grazing Herd

Starting in 2013, the CDA (Chicago Department of Aviation) hired a herd of goats and sheep to clear dense scrub vegetation on O'Hare property. The grazing sites include hilly areas along Willow-Higgins Creek that are difficult to maintain with traditional landscaping equipment.

All of the sites are located in areas away from or separated from the airfield by security fencing. To assist in the Sustainable Vegetation Management initiative at O'Hare, the grazing herd returned for the 2020 season with 55-145 animals including goats and sheep. Their grazing helps to eliminate habitat for birds and other wildlife that can pose safety hazards for the airport.

The initiative, originally conceived as a pilot program, just completed its seventh season grazing season. It is another example of an aviation industry-leading effort that highlights the CDA's commitment to sustainability. The 2020 herd has demobilized for the season and is expected to return for its eighth season in spring 2021.

Benefits of the O'Hare Grazing Herd

The grazing program helps the CDA achieve many economic, operational and environmental benefits including:

- Provides a more efficient way of removing vegetation along steep embankments and rocky areas that are difficult to maintain with traditional mowing or spraying
- Reduces habitat for wildlife that may be hazardous to airport operations
- Reduces the use of herbicides
- Reduces soil erosion from the use of heavy equipment
- Reduces air pollution from gasoline-powered equipment
- Reduces landscaping waste sent to landfills and the air pollution from trucks hauling the waste
- Clears poison ivy, poison oak and other noxious weeds and invasive species

This initiative really interested me so I decided to do a little research regarding the goat population found across the United States and learned that Wisconsin leads the nation in goat herds! What I learned from the September 2019 article in the Wisconsin Farmer is this: Wisconsin's self-proclaimed moniker as "America's Dairyland" is taking on fresh meaning in the 21st century thanks to a growing market for milk from an animal that bleats rather than moos. While the state's traditional dairy cattle industry continues to hemorrhage producers at a record pace,

Wisconsin's dairy goat industry is in the midst of a long-term, and accelerating, growth spurt. Indeed, in 2019 Wisconsin can reasonably claim to be America's dairy (goat) land.

Data from the United States Department of Agriculture, which counts livestock across the United States every 5 years, show just how much Wisconsin dominates the nation's dairy goat industry. In 2017, the most recent year the USDA surveyed producers, the size of Wisconsin's dairy goat herd easily topped the nation at more than 83,000-head. California came in a distant second, with some 43,000 dairy goats, while Iowa, Texas and Missouri rounded out the top five.

But what about goats as pets? We looked at information found on the Hobby Farms website and this is what we learned:

Goats can make **great** pals for people and animals. **Goats** have charming personalities, and because of this they can make **good** companions for people as well as pals for other animals. ... Just about any breed of **goat** can make a **good pet**, though the smaller breeds are more popular as backyard companion **goats**.

Of course you must consider whether or not they make a good house pet, the cost of maintenance but there is no denying the “cuteness” of the playful dwarf or pygmy varieties. With any decision to bring a pet into your home, it is vitally important to do your homework.

Special Note: Kudos to Sawyer County Animal Control officer, Sherrie Shelton, for her extra efforts to help two area goats who were in need this past week.