

February 2006 Update

Hello to everyone who attended or heard about the November presentation in Nicasio by Kathy Voth on training cows to eat weeds!

We wanted you all to know that this idea hasn't been dropped. In fact, Kathy just spent a week in Marin (01/29/06 - 02/04/06) meeting with us, with Mike Swezy and Janet Klein of Marin Municipal Water District, Nancy Scolari and Jeff Creque of Marin RCD, Helge Hellberg at Marin Organic and Mike and Sally Gale from Chileno Valley Beef to help her prepare for working with folks to train cows to eat weeds. She is also coordinating via phone and email with Stacy Carlsen and Fred Crowder at the Ag Commissioners office and with Ellie Rilla and Steve Quirt.

Based on the results of her trip, Kathy is currently planning to work with us here at Nicasio Cattle Company on training cows to eat distaff thistle, and with Mike and Sally Gale on distaff, purple star and yellow star thistle. Marin Municipal Water District has expressed their willingness to participate in a small pilot project targeting teasel or scotch broom. So Kathy is talking to Stan Loar, whose property borders Nicasio Reservoir, about working with his cows on that kind of project. Whether or not the pilot project goes forward depends on mapping the locations of the endangered lily that grows in the area so that it can be protected, determining whether or not cows can safely eat teasel and scotch broom, and choosing grazing practices and fencing that make it viable for the rancher while still protecting water quality and vegetation. We'll let you know how that progresses.

We've also been working with Kathy to gather more information about our local weeds. Before Kathy's first visit in November we had gathered a late growing sample of distaff thistle and sent it to Utah State University for nutritional analysis. It came back as similar to alfalfa in nutritional value. While she was here in November, we gathered samples of purple star thistle, gorse, scotch broom and coyote bush and had their nutritional value analyzed as well. While the nutritional value may change depending on the time of year the plant is analyzed, we found that all contain good nutrition for our animals. Kathy is now looking into what kinds of toxins the plants might contain so we can understand what animals might encounter when eating them. Kathy has also gathered research on these plants— how they grow and how others have attempted to control them with grazing. She found a very interesting article in "California Agriculture" describing a research project showing that cows can be successfully used to control yellow star thistle. She has also found information out of Australia and New Zealand on using livestock grazing to control distaff, gorse and even bracken fern. Kathy will be putting this information up on her web site in the near future so check there if you'd like to read more. (<http://www.livestockforlandscapes.com>)

We are currently setting up a "school" area for the 30 bred heifers Kathy will be working with at our ranch. It is a dry lot located at our main gate. We'll be holding the cows there for about two weeks while we accustom them to trying lots of nutritious but unfamiliar foods and then train them to eat distaff thistle. We originally scheduled with Kathy to begin training on March 16, however that date might be adjusted depending on the growth of the thistles. We want to time the training to coincide with the thistle bolting so that the cows can go immediately from their training in dry lot to working on eating them in pasture.

So that we can keep track of our progress, Kathy will be coordinating with our local extension folks, Marin RCD and the Ag Commissioner on the kinds of monitoring we can do to measure changes in vegetation. The idea is to set up a system that is easy for any of us to do, but also useful for future reference by agencies and academic institutions.

Since Kathy is going to be in Marin anyway, she has agreed to work with other folks who are interested in getting started on training their cows this spring. If you're one of those interested folks, check out the attached "Recipe for Training Cows to Eat Weeds." It describes the ingredients you'll need to have ready when she arrives and how to contact her so she can put you on her list of people to work with. Kathy's salary, travel and room and board are completely covered for this training trip so the only cost to you is the feed supplements and the time you'll spend with Kathy and your livestock. If you have questions about the "Recipe" or the training process, feel free to give Kathy a call.